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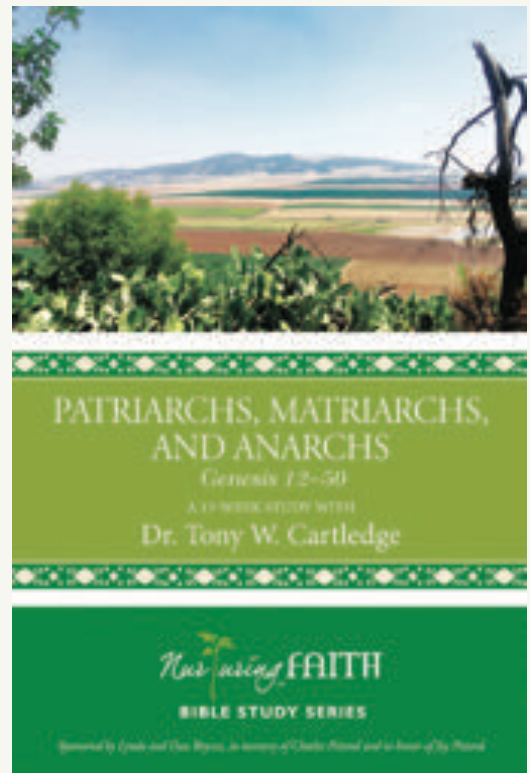
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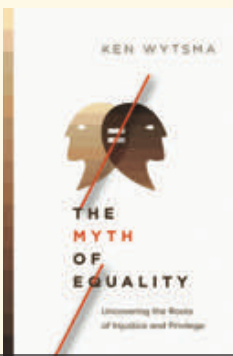
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BY FISHER HUMPHREYS

# OLD RUGGED CROSS

Pondering a central Christian question: *Why did Jesus die?*

Many Christians never ask questions about the fact that Jesus died to “take away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). In some churches it would be considered irreverent to ask questions about that.

**H**owever, in other churches, sincere questions are always welcome, and today many thoughtful Christians are asking: “Why was it necessary for Jesus to die in order for God to forgive us?”

## THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

Questions like this have been around for a long time, and across the centuries the

church has answered them in different ways. These three answers have been especially influential:

**Christus Victor** — Throughout his public ministry Jesus engaged in a battle against evil in the form of the devil, demons, death and other dark forces. At the cross Jesus defeated evil and thereby freed humans from being enslaved to and tormented by evil.

Some theologians believe that for about a thousand years this was the church’s principal understanding of Jesus’ death. Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén argued for this in his widely influential book, *Christus Victor* (1930).



**Penal Substitution** — At the cross Jesus voluntarily took upon himself the sins of the world, and he experienced the divine punishment for those sins. As a result, sinners have been forgiven and will not be punished by God.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant reformer John Calvin expounded this interpretation of Jesus’ sacrifice at great length. Today it is known as penal substitution; it is penal because what Jesus experienced was punishment, and it is substitutionary because Jesus experienced punishment not only for our benefit but also in our place, as our substitute.

Today this is an immensely popular understanding of Jesus’ sacrifice. In fact, some evangelical Christians believe that it is an indispensable component of orthodox Christian faith.

*Today many Christians are asking not only what the apostles preached  
but also what Jesus himself thought about his death.*

This is an innovation; the great councils of the church and the great creeds such as the Nicene Creed do not affirm any particular interpretation of Jesus' sacrifice. What they affirm is the fact of atonement, not a particular theory of atonement.

**Transforming Example** — Jesus' example of self-sacrificial love empowers his followers to live the way Jesus taught. This understanding of Jesus' sacrifice became widely influential among Liberal Protestants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today it is attractive to many Christians who have reservations about other understandings.

## THE PREACHING OF THE APOSTLES

As diverse as these three understandings are, they nevertheless have two immensely important things in common.

First, in all three understandings Jesus' suffering and death are taken seriously. What happened on the first Good Friday and Easter Sunday is important in all three.

Second, all three affirm that the reason Jesus' sacrifice is important is that by it he has accomplished salvation of the world. His suffering, death and resurrection are saving acts of God in human history.

I believe it is important for Christians to continue doing both of these things: take the cross seriously and affirm that in Jesus God acted decisively to save the world.

British New Testament scholar C.H. Dodd demonstrated in his book *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (1936) that this is the gospel the earliest Christians preached and Paul spelled out in passages such as 1 Cor. 15:1-7.

To me it is fascinating that each of these three interpretations of Jesus' sacrifice offers a different understanding of the salvation Jesus accomplished.

Christus Victor emphasizes salvation as *redemption*: By defeating evil, Jesus freed us

from the tyranny of evil powers.

Penal Substitution emphasizes salvation as *forgiveness*. By experiencing the punishment due for our sins, Jesus made possible the forgiveness of our sins, as a result of which we will not be punished in hell for our sins.

Transforming Example emphasizes salvation as *moral transformation*: By sacrificing himself, Jesus empowered us to live lives of sacrificial love for others.

I believe salvation includes all three of these things: redemption, forgiveness and moral transformation. (It also includes other things such as, for example, eternal life).

In the New Testament, Jesus' sacrifice is directly associated with all three of these things. For example, Christus Victor is present when the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus shared fully in our human experience "so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb. 2:14-15).

Penal Substitution is present when Paul writes that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'" (Gal. 3:10).

And Transforming Example is present when Peter writes that "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21).

## THE TEACHING OF JESUS

Today many Christians are asking not only what the apostles preached but also what Jesus himself thought about his death. Two companion themes that stand out in the teaching of Jesus are the kingdom of God and a particular way of life.

The kingdom of God is the central image in Jesus' teaching. Mark summarized Jesus' message this way: "Jesus came to

Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14-15).

The kingdom of God is not a political entity such as the nation of Israel or a geographical area such as the Holy Land. It is not a group of people such as Jesus' disciples or the church.

The Kingdom is God ruling as king. It is the gracious reign of God over the people of God. When we pray the Lord's Prayer and say, "Thy kingdom come," we are asking God to extend God's gracious rule over the lives of more and more people.

Jesus' teaching also included instructions about how those who enter God's kingdom should live. The Sermon on the Mount includes many of these instructions.

You should be merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and not hate anyone. You should be faithful to your spouse in your mind as well as in your behavior.

You should let your word be your bond. You should never take revenge on people who hurt you. You should love your enemies and pray for them.

You should be generous to those who are poor. You should never display your generosity in public. You should not pray to impress people but rather pray privately and sincerely.

You should forgive those who wrong you. You should not be anxious about the future. You should make the kingdom of God your priority in life.

You should not be judgmental. You should ask God to provide the things you need in your life. You should treat others the way you want others to treat you.

Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God and its companion way of life are a marvelous, life-giving gospel — and they don't say anything about Jesus' sacrifice.

However, that's not the whole story.

For one thing — and the importance

of this cannot be exaggerated — Jesus went to Jerusalem fully aware that his enemies would kill him. He even carried out provocative acts — entering the city on a donkey in the manner of a king, driving the money changers out of the Temple — that were sure to enrage his enemies.

Why did Jesus do these things?

The four Gospels are clear: Jesus went to Jerusalem and provoked his enemies because he saw religious meaning in his death. He knew God was calling him to do this (Matt. 26:36-46). His death was purposeful, and its objective was salvation.

At the last supper he expressed this to his inner circle of disciples. While instructing them to eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of him, he described the wine as his “blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

Centuries before this, the prophet Jeremiah predicted a coming time when God would make a new covenant with Israel, and he said that once the new covenant was in place God would “forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:31-34).

Since this is the only passage in the Old Testament where the phrase “new covenant” is used, it is probable that Jesus was thinking about it when he referred to his “blood of the new covenant.” Covenants were routinely made by blood.

The bottom line here is that at the last supper Jesus was saying that his blood would be the means by which God would make a new covenant with humans, and once that covenant was in place, sins would be forgiven.

Even before that last week Jesus had begun to prepare his disciples for his approaching death. After Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great sufferings ... and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matt. 16:21).

He then challenged his disciples to follow his example: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24).

In speaking of his suffering and death as benefiting others, Jesus was repeating a theme found in the Old Testament. For example, the prophet Isaiah wrote: “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53:4-5).

Jesus may have been thinking of texts such as this when he told his disciples, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “Son of Man” was a reference to himself, and a ransom was something that has the power to liberate people who are enslaved.

## TAKING SERIOUSLY WHAT JESUS TOOK SERIOUSLY

One can be a good follower of Jesus simply by embracing his message about God’s gracious kingdom and then trying to live according to his moral teachings. We know this is true because during Jesus’ lifetime many Jews and some Gentiles became Jesus’ followers in just this way. Jesus welcomed them as his “little flock” and told them that God was giving them the kingdom (Luke 12:32).

Across the centuries many people have continued to do just what those early followers of Jesus did. They have accepted his gospel of the kingdom of God and tried to live according to his moral teachings. It is, I believe, a mistake to deprecate this way of following Jesus.

H. Richard Niebuhr did that when he criticized forms of Christian faith in which “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross” (*The Kingdom of God in America*, 1938).

It’s a clever sentence, but by allowing for only one way of following Jesus, it disinherits people whom Jesus said would inherit the kingdom of God. Surely this is a mistake.

On the other hand, it is natural for those who follow Jesus to try to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, as Walter B. Shurden has said so beautifully. And it is clear that Jesus took seriously not only the

kingdom of God and a particular way of life that he proclaimed to wide audiences but also the idea — which he seems to have taught principally to his inner circle of disciples — that his suffering and death were filled with religious, salvific meaning.

He took that so seriously that he went to Jerusalem knowing it would provoke his enemies to violence against him.

When we try to take seriously what Jesus thought about his suffering and death, we may proceed in either or both of two ways.

## SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS

The first way is to study carefully the 20 or so New Testament interpretations of the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection. This is difficult work because the context for all these interpretations is first-century Palestinian Judaism.

To do this work well, we must not only acquire a great deal of historical information about Judaism in that long-ago era but also employ our imaginations to feel our way back into what those biblical interpretations of Jesus’ sacrifice must have meant to the people who first wrote about them.

Let me give an example. The New Testament includes interpretations of Jesus’ death that have been drawn from at least six different Jewish animal sacrifices, namely:

- Passover sacrifices (see John 1:29, 1 Cor. 5:7)
- Day of Atonement sacrifices (Heb. 9:1-14)
- Covenant-making sacrifices (Matt. 26:28)
- Sin offerings (1 John 1:7, 2:1-2)
- Thank offerings (Mark 15:34 together with Psalms 22)
- Gift offerings (Eph. 5:2)

First-century Jews were familiar with all these different sacrifices and their varied meanings, and when they were in Jerusalem they took animals to the Temple for the priests to offer up to God.

Repeated participation in the sacrificial ceremonies made it natural for faithful Jews to assume that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins”



(Heb. 9:22). Our situation is quite different from theirs:

We are not thoroughly familiar with the Jewish sacrificial practices. We don't take animals to be sacrificed to God as part of our worship services.

The idea that there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood is for those who believe it is today a concept they have intentionally accepted rather than an assumption they have unselfconsciously made because they have repeatedly and routinely offered animal sacrifices to God.

To understand the New Testament interpretations of Jesus' death that have been taken from the Jewish sacrificial system, we must first acquire historical information about that very complex system and then try to imagine our way back into the first-century situation. This is important work, and the church should always be carrying it out.

## COSTLY FORGIVENESS

There is a second way we may take seriously what Jesus thought about his suffering and death, and that is to understand it in light of modern experiences that are already familiar to us.

This kind of understanding won't carry the same authority as the understandings found in the New Testament, but it can help us to answer our questions about Jesus' suffering and death.

Here's an example: Most people have had the experience of being mistreated and hurt by others. When someone hurts us unfairly, we naturally become angry and want to retaliate.

In our hearts we know it is better to forgive than to retaliate, but we nevertheless feel reluctant to forgive, and if we do decide to forgive, we discover that it's a very hard thing to do. To forgive, we must accept the pain others have caused us and also accept the frustration of not doing what we want — which is to get revenge. Then, we must live with and live through all that pain until we come to a place where we no longer want to take revenge.

This, of course, is not fair: the other person hurt us and should have to suffer,

but instead we have to suffer because in the real world of moral relationships, it is only the one who has been wronged who can forgive. In the real world, forgiveness is always costly. I suspect that any adult who does not understand this probably has never tried to do it.

Many Christians today find it helpful to think of Jesus' sufferings as his experience of the costliness of forgiveness. By going to Jerusalem, he became vulnerable to the violence of his enemies. He suffered the most outrageous consequences of human sinning — you can't do much worse to a man than crucify him — as his way of forgiving the sins of the world.

For God as for us, forgiveness is costly. At the cross we see what it cost for God in Christ to forgive us all.

This modern understanding of Jesus' sacrifice doesn't appeal to everyone, and of course it doesn't have the authority that the biblical understandings of Jesus' sacrifice do. But it does help to answer a question that troubles some thoughtful Christians today: Why was it necessary for Jesus to suffer and die in order to forgive?

The answer is: Because forgiveness is costly to God just as it is to us.

I sometimes think about the costliness of God's forgiveness when I see a cross on a church steeple or share in the Lord's Supper or sing about the old rugged cross. I remember that Jesus made his sacrifice for the best of all possible reasons: "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph. 5:2).

I also remember that this is the good news we all need, namely, that God has acted decisively in human history for the salvation of the world. It is this that makes it possible for us to say with all our hearts: "We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10). **NFJ**

—*Fisher Humphreys of Birmingham, Ala., is Professor of Divinity, Emeritus, of Samford University. He is the author of numerous books including Thinking About God: An Introduction to Christian Theology. You may write him at [fisherhumphreys@gmail.com](mailto:fisherhumphreys@gmail.com).*

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# Worth Repeating

“God hears any voice that preaches Jesus. It’s not about testosterone; it’s about grace.”

Church historian Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University (BNG)

“Linus, a member of the *Peanuts* gang, once said, ‘Life is like a 10-speed bicycle. Most of us have gears we never use.’ Too many of us limit the scope of our lives and use only a fraction of our potential.”

Guy Sayles, in the spring commencement address at Mars Hill University where he is assistant professor of religion (fromtheintersection.org)

“When you say you work for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, they want to know, what kind of religious liberty? It is more difficult to get a broad coalition on religious freedom efforts now. People have a bad taste in their mouth about what they think the other side thinks of religious freedom.”

Holly Hollman, BJC general counsel (NPR)

“We know that the God we worship is not a shiny-toothed motivational speaker churning out cheerful memes in times of suffering. We know that the God we worship is a crucified and risen God ... not unfamiliar with darkness.”

Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber at the funeral of author Rachel Held Evans (YouTube)

“Virtues are not the stuff of saints and heroes; they are tools for the art of living.”

NPR host Krista Tippett, speaking to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

“Almost every struggling church I know has at least one dysfunctional bully who goes out of his or her way to be a big fish in a small pond... The sad thing is that most of the leaders know this person or group is a stumbling block to the church’s future and they will not do anything about it.”

Don Harvey, Center for Healthy Churches consultant

“I was never able to figure out the hatred.”

Carolyn McKinstry, speaking to a Baptist Women in Ministry gathering at 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham where four of her friends were killed in a 1963 racially motivated bombing

“It’s easier and probably better for you.”

Pastor Scott Dickison on how two neighboring but racially different First Baptist churches in Macon, Ga., have shared more potato salad than pulpit swaps during their recent growing relationship

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# Internal evangelism: A ripe but resistant field

By John D. Pierce

Evangelism has long been the defining mark of evangelicalism. The gospel is not just something one hears and experiences but is to be shared with all others.

**T**racts, training and testimonies abound as tools for becoming more successful witnesses. Scores are sometimes kept and guilt widely assigned to those who aren't aggressive enough in this area of Christian faithfulness.

The concept many of us had reinforced throughout our church lives was simply this: Everybody needs to confess Jesus as savior and lord, and then continually grow in faith while telling all others about this great need in their lives.

Along with the witnessing motivation and tools came a warning to expect hardened hearts and minds. However, no one warned or prepared us for the reality we face today — that American evangelicalism would become a most fertile field in need of evangelism.

Studies continually show that white (not just white-unto-harvest) evangelicals favor political positions that are discriminatory, less compassionate and more self-serving than the general population. Evidence of the life and teachings of Jesus having any significant impact is largely missing.

And talk about “hardened” minds and hearts. Try telling those who claim to be Christian that Jesus may be missing and they haven't noticed.

But is that not evangelism as well?

One thing is for sure: the message

that Jesus is both savior and lord is not well received by those who contend that Jesus has saved them and that God is on the side of their “biblically-approved” beliefs even if they don't align with the life and teachings of Jesus. This is especially the case when there are religious authorities telling them, “No, that's the gospel. Trust me, it's biblical.”

Tragically, the very segment of American Christianity that has pushed evangelism as their hallmark has also become a major obstacle to conveying the Christian gospel to those outside the faith.

The resurfacing racism, limited compassion and embrace of authoritarianism send a clear message that goodhearted, thoughtful persons who don't consider themselves Christian would have no interest in embracing. What is appealing about a “gospel” that demeans and degrades the very people for whom so many feel compassion?

Jesus didn't always receive a warm reception. Neither will we when calling for a higher priority of following Jesus than an allegiance to favored ideologies of favoritism for our types and the fearful exclusion of those unlike us — even if it gets branded as “biblical” and/or “Christian.”

But aren't we to be faithful witnesses — wherever Jesus is missing?

Pointing out the growing absence of Jesus in American evangelicalism — which is largely unnoticed or at least unacknowledged from within — tends to draw strong denials, defensiveness and deflections.

Denials come quickly when being

“Christian” has been generally defined as professing faith in Jesus and holding political positions deemed “biblical” — namely, opposition to equal access to abortion and equal rights for LGBTQ persons.

One common act of defensiveness is to roll out the command “Judge not” — as if one should be able to fashion the “Christian” label into any preferred ideology and not be called out if in direct contrast to what Jesus called his followers to be and do.

Deflections usually begin with “But what about...?” It is a way of avoiding the subject at hand.

Pastors face these challenges weekly, when so many pew-sitters expect the sermon to align with what they've absorbed all week from radio and TV agitators rather than those media voices and political messages to align with the gospel.

Where there's a desire for control, harbored fear of others and a lack of compassion it is fair to assume an absence of Jesus. We should look for that in our own lives — and perhaps take the risk of sharing that possibility with others. That is, if being faithful witnesses is still valued.

How did we get here? Church historian Walter B. Shurden, writing in response to my previous editorial, may have put his finger on it.

“I am convinced that we have used the wrong verb, *believe*, the wrong participle, *believing*, and the wrong noun, *belief*,” he said. “We have talked about ‘a believers' church’ when we should have been proclaiming ‘a followers' church.’”

Therefore, the call to make following Jesus the highest priority in one's life needs a hearing in the highways and byways — as well as in the pews. **NFJ**



# Vanier is gone, but his Christian model for living alongside the disabled takes root

BY YONAT SHIMROM  
*Religion News Service*

**F**AYETTEVILLE, N.C. — At the evening prayer service at a new residential complex here, a dozen young people took turns reading a passage from the Gospel of Luke, reciting a psalm and singing some prayers.

They paid no mind as one woman tripped over the words “rebuke,” “unrighteous” and “snare” that appeared in the liturgy. They congratulated another person who, at the end of the Lord’s Prayer, blurted out, “What does ‘amen’ mean?”

“Good question!” some exclaimed in unison. It means “truly,” offered one; “so be it,” offered another.

These kinds of moments are common at the weekly service where a mix of graduate students and a handful of adults with developmental disabilities share living quarters in three new buildings in the city’s Haymount neighborhood.

Friendship House, as they call their co-housing space, is in many ways an outgrowth of the thinking of Jean Vanier, the Catholic theologian and humanitarian who died in Paris in May, and who changed the way many Christians view disability.

Insisting on the humanity of all, Vanier worked to tear down the separation between the able and disabled and between those helping and those being helped.

His signature creation was L’Arche, a worldwide network of homes where people with and without disabilities live and work as peers. The influence of L’Arche can be found in Friendship Houses, which have adopted Vanier’s core principle of “Eat together, pray together, celebrate together.”

There are seven Friendship Houses in the U.S. and one in Scotland. The Fayetteville Friendship House, which opened late last year, is the newest and most novel. While other Friendship Houses are affiliated with seminaries or Christian universities,



Jean Vanier was the founder of L’Arche, an international network of communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities live and work together. (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

Fayetteville’s is intended to allow students in health care professions the opportunity to learn from disabled people.

It is the brainchild of Scott Cameron, a physician and a graduate of Duke Divinity School, who realized he needed to change his own attitude about some of the diagnoses he delivers to parents of babies he cares for in the neonatal intensive care unit at Cape Fear Valley Medical Center.

With Friendship House, Cameron aims to extend that insight into a larger group of health care students.

“I think it will help them change the way they view disabilities, not as something that is broken, but something that can be celebrated,” he said.

Cameron and his family — his wife is a public school teacher — moved into a newly constructed house next to Friendship House last year. The Camerons often lead joint activities there.

The campus, with three buildings, a barn and a garden, cost about \$1.5 million to build. Much of that was raised through partnerships with businesses and non-profits. The land was given by Highland Presbyterian Church, which is located across the street.

The house is meant to attract those studying to be nurses, doctors, physician assistants, physical therapists and occupational therapists at four nearby universities and a community college. At full capacity, it will house 18 students and six people with developmental disabilities.

Each resident pays a monthly rent of \$450, including utilities, and is provided a bedroom on a single-sex unit. Each unit includes a disabled person and three students.

But the students are not caretakers or babysitters. They are there mostly to offer social support.

“My job is to be a friend,” said Victor Long, 30, who graduated from Campbell University’s School of Osteopathic Medicine recently and shares a Friendship House apartment with Michael Brown, a 24-year-old man with autism.

“I go about my daily living. If I go grocery shopping or out to eat with friends, I try to get Michael involved, to be social,” said Long, who is now doing his residency at Cape Fear Valley Medical Center.

That help with socialization is a key part of what draws people with disabilities to the house.

“Our son loves Friendship House and I think this is the first time in his life where he’s felt like he has a network of friends,” said Brenda Brown, Michael’s mother. “That’s probably the biggest thing he’s gotten so far.”

The first Friendship House opened in 2007 at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Mich. Matthew Floding, then dean of students, said a couple approached him at church and told him they wanted their disabled son to live independently but couldn’t find a safe place for him.

At the time, the seminary was looking to provide more housing for its students, and the idea of pairing students with people with disabilities was born.

Floding, now director of ministerial formation at Duke Divinity School, said the need for housing may have sparked the project, but theological considerations also played a role. A co-housing arrangement would provide students entering ministry the opportunity to live among marginalized people — people like those Jesus ministered to.

“How can you train people to serve all

people if you don’t address it in your curriculum or experientially?” he asked.

An estimated 4.6 million Americans have an intellectual or developmental disability, according to The Arc, a national organization that advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Developmental disabilities may include cerebral palsy, epilepsy, developmental delay, autism and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Intellectual disability generally means an IQ test score of approximately 70 or below.

Unlike L’Arche homes, which welcome people with profound disabilities (and also receive federal and state support), the adults with disabilities living in Friendship Houses typically have mild delays such as autism or Down syndrome. Most have high school diplomas and some hold driver’s licenses.

Like at the L’Arche homes, faith binds the residents together. While no one has to profess a Christian faith, or any faith, residents are expected to participate in the weekly prayer service.

That was something Chasity Sullivan, 26, welcomed.

“I’m a Christian and had been looking for a church — and hadn’t found the right one — and this offered a faith community,” said Sullivan, who is studying at Methodist University to be a physician’s assistant.

Floding said he is interested in developing an interfaith Friendship House, perhaps on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. But for now, most of the interest has come from Christian seminaries: Princeton Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Luther Seminary are all considering opening their own Friendship Houses, he said.

For Cameron, who took his Friendship House residents on a hayride around town after prayer services one evening, it’s a worthy effort.

“We need to be in community with folks who have disabilities more than they need to be with us,” said Cameron. “There’s something that they bring. It’s a leveling effect, where ambition and the career ladder and your bank account balance, they become silly.” **NFJ**

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# Working together

By Mitch Randall

The church is at its best when working together for common causes. Whether it's evangelism, discipleship or social justice, the church makes a more significant impact when we discover commonalities and foster collaboration.

**P**arker Palmer, in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, offered: "We are exploring together. We are cultivating a garden together, backs to the sun."

Indeed, with hoes in hand, we toil and water the fields together as we wait for the Spirit to provide growth for a bountiful harvest.

The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian church of this notion when he wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but it was God who gave the increase" (1 Cor. 3:6).

Paul continued by stressing, "For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field" (3:9).

In that same letter Paul stated later: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many" (12:12-14).

EthicsDaily is excited to be cultivating common fields with Nurturing Faith. With both organizations having such rich and

productive histories, it made perfect sense when we were approached about developing an ongoing, ethics-focused series in this journal.

Each of our organizations offers specific ministries, but we share a collected value and mission. We want people to experience the radical love of Jesus.

Nurturing Faith's stellar journalistic standards, commitment to publishing thought-provoking books, and providing retreats and resources based on a Jesus worldview convinced EthicsDaily to enter into this exciting partnership.

This series will be published in each issue of the journal with EthicsDaily also cultivating authors, recruiting participants for the Jesus Worldview experiences, developing joint video projects and sharing content over social media platforms.

In a world that seems to value competition over collaboration, it is nice to know that organizations such as Nurturing Faith and EthicsDaily are diligently cooperating to prophetically proclaim a gospel of love, grace, mercy, inclusion and freedom.

If the Christian movement is to be relevant in the future, then we must find more ways to work together on common causes. This does not mean we must agree on every issue, but it means we are willing to set aside secondary differences to further a common good.

Organizational and denominational

collaboration will be the future of the Christian movement. With resources dwindling, organizations and denominations need to cultivate partnerships that are mutually beneficial and advance shared goals.

Unfortunately, there are barriers to cooperation with the potential to stifle cooperative efforts. For those reasons, leaders and ministers need to concentrate on strategies that focus on creating a healthy environment for collegiality. Here are some ways for doing that:

**First, collaboration must be proactive rather than reactive.** When a partnership exists primarily for reactionary reasons, it has a difficult time getting started. There very well might be genuine reactionary reasons to explore potential connections, but future collaboration should concentrate on the creative potential for a shared mission.

**Second, collaboration that doesn't place the common good and shared mission over individual accolades is doomed.** It's always nice to get credit for a job well done, but the broader vision must come first.

For example, we are proud of the work we have achieved at EthicsDaily, but we also understand that we exist within a larger Christian movement. The overarching vision is more important than being acknowledged.

**Third, collaboration must be based on honesty and trust.** Being honest sets the tone for the entire work. Disingenuous motives can destroy cooperation before it gets off the ground.

Organizations must mutually trust one



*Editor's note: This new series is part of an ongoing collaboration between EthicsDaily and Nurturing Faith in order to advance the clear Christian calling to put faith into action.*

*The future of the church will look more and more like a collaborative effort. Ecumenism will be the norm for those seeking to reach the masses with their message more effectively and efficiently.*

another by extending respect and decency to each other. Remember, there are many members of the body, each one being utilized by the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, collaboration must agree on a shared vision and mission. If either organization has an opposing view for the cooperation, then the work will be adrift from the beginning. Establishing a shared vision and joint mission to achieve that vision will start both parties on the same path leading to productivity and success.

Fifth, collaboration means concessions and compromise. Getting everything signals an acquisition, not collaboration. Collaborative partners enter into the work in humility and a mutual desire for joint success.

Both organizations must find ways to make concessions by establishing coopera-

tion, leading to compromise. When both organizations practice compromise, then the focus remains on the shared vision and mission.

Finally, collaboration creates an opportunity for shared resources and outcomes. Whether personnel or financial assets, shared resourcing can be mutually beneficial for all organizations.

With such gifted and talented people, vision and mission can be enhanced when organizations work collectively. Reducing overhead is also a significant benefit in an era of reduced revenues for nonprofits.

The future of the church will look more and more like a collaborative effort. Ecumenism will be the norm for those seeking to reach the masses with their message more effectively and efficiently.

Moreover, the church of the future

will look increasingly like the church of the past — an interdependent network of faithful disciples collaborating to follow their callings.

As Nurturing Faith and EthicsDaily begin plowing some fields together, we celebrate the diverse and bright future we see before us. Jesus was so right when he said, “the harvest is plentiful, but the (collaborators) are few” (Matt. 9:37).

There is much work to be accomplished, thus having partners like Nurturing Faith inspires us to move forward with enthusiasm. **NFJ**

*—Mitch Randall is executive director of EthicsDaily. He previously served as pastor of NorthHaven Baptist Church in Norman, Okla.*

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# From Philistines to the Irony Age

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Bible scholars have long speculated about the origins of the Philistines, who showed up in southern Palestine during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age I, somewhere around 1200 BCE and the years that followed.

**A**fter failing to conquer Egypt in a sea battle that cost the Egyptians sorely, the Philistines moved up the coast and settled in an area between modern-day Gaza and Tel Aviv.

The Philistines occupied five major cities sometimes known as the “Philistine Pentapolis”: Ashkelon, Gath, Gaza, Ekron and Ashdod.

Only Ashdod and Gath were large in the early period and up until the 10<sup>th</sup>-century time of David and Solomon. During the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries Ashkelon expanded to become an important seaport, and Ekron became a major producer and exporter of olive oil.

But where did the Philistines come from? It's likely that they were among several population groups within a larger migration of “Sea Peoples” who came from the northern part of the Mediterranean. Their material culture suggested connections with Aegean culture.

But did they come from Cyprus? From Crete? From the southern Greek mainland? From western Turkey?

New findings based on a genetic analysis of DNA recovered from skeletons found in Ashkelon now offer evidence that the Philistines were definitely from southern Europe, though it still does not pinpoint a specific location.



The ancient, arched Ashkelon Gate in the southern coastal region of Israel was built by the Canaanites who were later conquered by the Philistines. Photo by Tony W. Cartledge.

The findings, announced in the July 3 issue of the journal *Science Advances*, were based on an analysis of DNA from 10 skeletal fragments. Some were dated to the Middle Bronze Age (around 1700–1500 BCE), some to the Early Iron Age (about 1300–1100 BCE) and some to the Iron II period, in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

A comparison of DNA between the three groups and other samples known from the Mediterranean basin showed that the older skeletons from Ashkelon bore the local Levantine genes, but the Iron Age I skeletons bore an admixture of genes associated with southern Europe, the time of the Philistines' arrival.

The Philistine cities retained elements

of a distinctive Philistine culture for hundreds of years. For example, they ate both pigs and dogs and used distinctive pottery.

Surprisingly, however, the genetic signature of their southern European origin had disappeared in samples from the later skeletons, indicating sufficient intermarriage with the local populations to dilute the Philistine DNA beyond recognition.

From then on, the study suggests, if someone identified as a Philistine, it was based on culture — not genes.

That brings us to the Irony Age, for in modern English we may use the word “Philistine” to describe a boor who has *no* culture. **NFJ**



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“BEING  
CHURCH IN  
CHANGING  
TIMES”



This column is provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches ([chchurches.org](http://chchurches.org))

# Joining the Re-missioning Movement

BY JOSH HAYDEN

It is tempting to focus on all of the problems established churches must tackle (e.g., organizational ruts, historical barriers, institutional mistrust, mission drift) and then start throwing quick fixes in hopes of simply surviving. In reality, the Spirit is waking up established churches to do much more than barely exist.

The Spirit is helping existing churches learn to thrive and make disciples again. The invitation is to re-calibrate the congregation's existence around missional presence and the flourishing of neighborhoods. The church needs some re-missioners.

Re-missioners are people called by the Spirit to embrace movemental ecclesiology and reproducible discipleship. Re-missioners help churches to wake up from their theological, spiritual and emotional slumber into a new day. Re-missioners help established churches learn how to lose their lives so they may find them again.

## THE CHALLENGE

Re-missioning established churches from the inside out is not an easy road. It relies on leaders who learn to cultivate a spirituality of humility while learning to steward resources instead of owning them.

Re-missioning involves creative destruction — the intentional disruption, pruning and death of programs, resources and activities — to make room for new life. While developing a clearer sense of purpose, re-missioning churches also practice traditioned innovation — remembering the best of where they have come from and using the

healthiest parts of that past for a new future.

At the heart of practicing creative destruction and traditioned innovation is the hope of better discipleship pathways to develop citizens of the kingdom instead of consumers of religious goods and services. To do this depends upon a shift to adaptive leadership — which meets people where they are and invites them into a new future through intentional habits, conflict and shared power.

Perhaps the hardest part is the shift to new healthy metrics. Established churches love to count — people, money, attendance, programs, activities — but often struggle to measure whether any real transformation is taking place or if their work is making a sustainable impact in the community.

The hard road is learning to keep the end in mind and then make the necessary shifts in activities and resourcing to make meaningful progress toward that end. Hard roads aren't bad or wrong, but they are challenging.

They require attention, and will require one's own transformation as a leader while inviting others to transform. Re-missioning an established church will cause leaders to examine their insecurities, fears, brokenness, anger and habits so they might also grow closer to Jesus while inviting others to grow closer to Jesus with them.

## THE INVITATION

There is a saying in many intentional communities that “Everybody wants a revolution, but nobody wants to do the dishes.” Re-missioning an established church isn't flashy. It isn't the next pathway to becoming the next celebrity pastor. It is a

slow, steady work.

Re-missioning leadership recognizes that while your church may pine for change, proclaim it wants young families and declare its openness to new ways of being church, it is very important for one's leadership to demonstrate a calming self-awareness in recognizing that many people want the change to happen without doing the work (sitting in a new pew, including multiple generations and different learning styles, navigating conflict, being a good neighbor, etc.).

Those interested in this kind of work might join a re-missioning cohort and begin to answer questions such as:

- How can we re-calibrate our church around missional presence?
- What do we do with old policies and outdated procedures that prevent new life?
- How can we honor the past while innovating toward the future?
- How can our established church experience rebirth?
- Is it possible to gain clarity in our mission again?

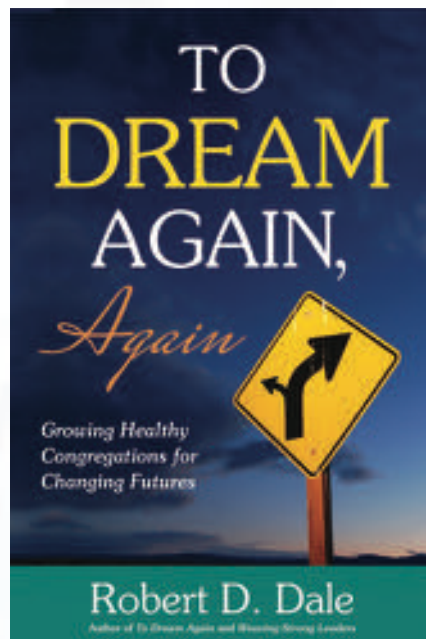
Those joining a re-missioning cohort will benefit from a community of peers, experienced coaching, holistic training, connection to a network of re-missioning leaders and missional thinking translated for established church contexts. **NFJ**

—Josh Hayden is pastor of First Baptist Church of Ashland, Va., and Director of Re-missioning with the V3 Movement. For more information, visit [thev3movement.org](http://thev3movement.org) ReMissioning and fill out the interest form.



# HEALTHY CHURCH

RESOURCES



Healthy Church Resources are a collaborative effort of the Center for Healthy Churches, the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation, and Nurturing Faith Publishing.

# Jesus the Word

By John R. Franke

**A**t its core the gospel is good news about a man named Jesus. The early followers of Jesus were so convinced of his significance, they radically altered the course of their lives to travel far and wide telling the story of Jesus and his teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Throughout their travels they surely faced a common question, “Who is this Jesus you follow, and why should *we* follow him?”

Responding to such a question was as challenging in the ancient world as it is today because of the need to use language that is comprehensible to those who are listening — a common framework of language, experience and shared assumptions.

Something unknown can only be introduced by starting with the assumptions of the listeners in order to communicate meaningfully with them. But what if the phenomenon being described is so radically different that it calls into question all previous axioms and assumptions? What if it fundamentally calls us beyond our language and experience?

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the aftermath of World War I, theologian Karl Barth likened the situation of bearing witness to the coming of Jesus to that of trying to explain a massive crater in one’s backyard to those who had no knowledge of recently developed modern weaponry. Because of the result of a bomb explosion, you know something happened, but you had no basis in knowledge or experience to explain it.

This was the situation of the ancient Christian witnesses. They had an amazing experience with Jesus that changed their lives and had been tasked with explaining it to those who had not shared the experience. The four Gospels represent different

approaches to this challenge.

Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, begins the story of Jesus by mentioning that it was foreshadowed in the words of the ancient prophets. Matthew pushes the story back further, beginning with Abraham, while Luke starts even further back with Adam. John, the last of the Gospels to be written, concludes that none of these starting points are sufficient to fully communicate who Jesus is.

Before the prophets were, before Abraham was, before Adam was, even before creation, the Word was: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”

To call Jesus “the Word” would have evoked many different images in the minds of early readers: the creative word of Genesis, the word of God in the mouths of the prophets, the *logos* of Greek philosophers denoting wisdom and truth.

Indeed, all of these images are connected to Jesus in the pages of scripture and in the history of Christian reflection of Jesus. These opening words cannot by themselves communicate all there is to say and know about Jesus.

This opening, however, does alert the readers and listeners that the story about to be told will radically redefine that most basic of all words in the ancient world, the word “God.”

In light of Jesus it will need to be rethought, reimagined and redefined. The coming of Jesus means that God is not a

distant, passionless deity. Nor is God vengeful, jealous and capricious. It means not only that God loves us, but everyone else as well.

It means that God has moved into our neighborhood and taken up residence with us to share our lives; to be with us and for us; to invite us to experience life in fellowship with God and others.

It means that the dichotomies that dominated the ancient world, and still dominate much of the present world, are rendered null and void. There is no ultimate division of people by race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexual orientation with the suggestion that some are more valuable than others; no ultimate division of things into material and spiritual, important and unimportant.

Jesus is the Word of God, the light and life of the world, who comes that we may experience life more fully than we ever have before.

But the human experience is not just a story of life and light. Tragically evil, hatred, destruction and death are all too common in our world. The prevalence of these forces can lead us to wonder if they will in fact have the last word. The Resurrection is God’s declaration of the ultimate triumph of love.

The followers of Jesus and the worldview he lived and proclaimed are called to be the light of God’s love for all people; trusting in the promise of Jesus the Word that, in spite of so much evidence to the contrary, the darkness will not overcome it. **NFJ**

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



# What do they see when they look at me?

BY GINGER HUGHES

There have been times in my life when I found Sunday school or other church experiences to be intimidating. Perhaps it is my introverted ways.

**B**ut I can remember feeling nervous about walking into a new church or a new Sunday school classroom filled with people who already knew one another — who probably had history together and solid friendships.

Even for someone like me who “grew up” in church, and knows the language and the way of doing things, it can be unnerving. I can easily feel like an “outsider,” even though I’m very much “in” Christ.

Some days I wonder how nonbelievers view the Christian community. I wonder if they see the Christian community as a whole to be receptive and welcoming, kind and loving.

I wonder if they would feel like an outsider if they graced the doors of the church.

And what about individual Christians? What would nonbelievers see when they look at me and at you?

Do they see someone who is pious or someone who recognizes our own sinfulness?

Do they see someone puffed up with knowledge or someone with a humble spirit?

Do they see someone who has all the answers, or one whose only answer is Jesus Christ — dead, buried and resurrected?

Do they see someone who is all about self, or one who is all about others?

Do they see someone whose speech is



filled with discord, vile language and hate, or do they see someone who speaks unity, kindness and love?

What do they see?

You know, I’m far from holy. I lose myself in frustrations and irritations. I forget gratitude.

I speak unkind things to my husband and snap at my children. I lose my temper. I seek forgiveness daily, and sometimes even ask how in the world God can possibly love a sinner like me.

Yet, God does. And God loves you too.

Although I get so much wrong in this walk with Christ, one thing I hope to get right is sharing God’s amazing love for people.

I want each person I meet to know of God’s love for them, to know that God’s

arms are open wide. I want them to know of God’s holiness, but also grace.

I want them to know God’s righteousness, but also forgiveness. I want them to know Jesus, and I don’t want to ever get in the way of that knowing.

We each meet nonbelievers every day in our jobs, in our schools and in our communities. If their only view of God is seen through the lens of their interactions with us, what would they see?

Would they see a God who loves, who forgives, who extends grace? Or would they walk away feeling like an outsider, with no desire of ever becoming a Christ follower? **NFJ**



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

Blogs, daily news, events, social media connections and more  
may be found at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net) 

# The gospel according to *Field of Dreams*

By Brett Younger

Someone suggested there are two kinds of people: those who love *Field of Dreams* and those who have no souls. This is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Field of Dreams*. Theaters are offering screenings so that old men can reach for their hankies while pretending it is a baseball movie.

*Field of Dreams* is a little Norman Rockwell and a little *Twilight Zone*. Ray Kinsella, a veteran of Berkeley in the '60s and now a farmer in Iowa, is standing in his cornfield when he hears the voice say, "If you build it, he will come."

Ray obeys the voice and an accompanying vision and builds a baseball diamond. The first *he* who comes is Shoeless Joe Jackson, the late great left fielder who was barred from baseball for throwing the 1919 World Series. Players long dead begin coming and going through the cornfield. (Unfortunately, none of the players are African American.) The voice sends Ray on an odyssey from Iowa to Boston to Minnesota to the past. *Field of Dreams* celebrates fatherhood, baseball and wonder.

One of the most intriguing elements is the voice. The film begins with a long soliloquy in which Ray discusses his heritage, father, college, wife, daughter and farm. He closes by saying: "I'm 36 years old. I love my family. I love baseball and I'm about to become a farmer, but until I heard the voice, I'd never done a crazy thing in my whole life."

When Ray plows up valuable corn it looks as sensible as Noah's decision to build an ark, but like Noah, Ray feels compelled to follow the voice. Moviegoers have to decide if they would pursue a crazy dream at the command of a voice only they can hear. Christians, like Ray, are normal people to



whom something unusual is happening.

The voice of God leads Christians to do things that are not sensible.

The second message from the voice is "Ease his pain." When Ray says he needs to go to Boston to visit Terence Mann, a reclusive writer, Ray's wife Annie recommends he ask Shirley MacLaine to go instead. Annie is worried about the cost of the baseball field and the possible loss of the farm, but she chooses to believe. Terence Mann is dragged back into belief. The voice leads them to reacquaint themselves with their capacity to dream.

The voice of God calls God's people to dream dreams, see visions and open themselves to possibilities.

The third message from the voice is "Go the distance." Terence and Ray interpret this as an invitation to visit a former ballplayer and small-town doctor in Minnesota. "Moonlight" Graham died several years earlier, but Ray gets to talk to the doctor anyway. Graham had gotten to play one inning in the major leagues, making it only to the on-deck circle. He knew he would be sent back to the minors, so he went to medical school instead. Graham spent his life caring for the people in his small town. Ray laments, "But to be that close to a dream and then lose it. Most would consider it a tragedy." Graham answers: "If I'd only been a doctor for five

minutes, that would be a tragedy."

We do not always recognize the best moments. Failure can lead to something better.

The movie ends with Ray reconciling with his dead father, whom he never forgave for growing old and giving up. In the final scene John Kinsella, a one-time minor league ballplayer, plays on his son's diamond:

Ray's father: Is this heaven?

Ray: It's Iowa . . . Is there a heaven?

Ray's father: Oh, yeah, it's the place where dreams come true.

(Ray looks at his father, wife and daughter.)

Ray: Maybe this is heaven.

*Field of Dreams* dares to hint that life is not confined to a one-dimensional realm. If we break out of the confines of modern skepticism, we experience Truth bigger than we have imagined. Jesus talks about those who "seeing, they do not see" (Matt. 13:13). The gospel contains an element of beauty that only those with open eyes will see.

My son Caleb and I recently sat in a theater watching *Field of Dreams*. When Ray asks his dad if he would like to "have a catch," we looked straight ahead, and wept quietly at the mystery of love. **NFJ**

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



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

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

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# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 1, 2019

Luke 14:1-14

## A Way to the Top

Conversations can take unexpected turns. Have you ever been involved in a conversation that ended up in a totally different place than you expected? I can remember a time back in 1998, when the internet was in its infancy, poky dial-up modems were the rule, and Wifi was a dream, even in the city.

While visiting my parents in rural Georgia, my father and I were hanging around a local gas station while getting a tire repaired. My dad, who always kept an eye on local pastures, was talking to an elderly neighbor who raised chickens and cattle.

“Looks like you must’ve sold some of your calves.”

“Yep ... sold ’bout a hundred head.”

“Which auction did you take ’em to – Washington or Thompson?”

Pause ... “Sold ’em on the internet.”

I almost choked on my Diet Coke. That wasn’t what I expected to hear.

Today’s text involves one of many stories in which Jesus led a conversation in a completely unexpected direction.

### A word for walkers (vv. 1-6)

This week marks the last lesson in a three-month “journey with Jesus” on

*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 14:11)*

his last trip to Jerusalem, a long section that Luke uses as a framework for some of Jesus’ most significant teachings. ↓

As noted in the previous study, Luke 13:10-35 and 14:1-35 include several similar stories along parallel themes, and in the same order. Both begin with Jesus healing on a sabbath, followed by two parables about the Kingdom of God. ↓

Last week we considered a story in which Jesus was teaching in the synagogue when he stopped to heal a woman who had suffered from a severely bent back for many years (13:10-17). This week’s text also takes place on a sabbath, but not in the synagogue: Jesus had been invited to dinner in the home of a local Pharisee. ↓

Holding different opinions didn’t keep the Pharisees from being very curious about Jesus – and a prime way to spark conversation was to invite him to dinner.

The Jewish sabbath begins at sundown on Friday, so much of the day was devoted to cleaning the house and preparing an elaborate meal before “Shabbat” began, bringing a halt to work and often beginning with a synagogue service. Afterward, dinner could begin.

Jesus was one of a number who had been invited to dinner with a “leader of the Pharisees,” and the others “were watching him closely” (v. 1). Was it a trap?

They didn’t have to wait long. Even before arriving at the house, Jesus noticed a man on the path ahead who suffered from dropsy (v. 2). “Dropsy” is an old-fashioned term for edema or swelling of the arms and legs, often associated with congestive heart failure.

Knowing that they were watching, Jesus challenged the Pharisees and experts in the law who were in the party: “Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?” (v. 3). Despite knowing the law backward and forward, they didn’t answer.

Jesus didn’t wait long for a response before he “took him and healed him, and sent him away” (v. 4). ↓

Jesus then turned to a domestic situation to make his point, as he had done in the previous chapter. There Jesus had pointed out that those who criticized his sabbath healing did the work of untying their oxen or donkeys and taking them to water on the same day (13:15).

Here he asked: “If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?” (v. 5).

Of course they would have, but they were unwilling to admit it: “And they could not reply to this” (v. 6). They could not reply without admitting to their own inconsistency.

### A word for guests (vv. 7-11)

At dinner, Jesus took notice of how the guests sorted themselves. At such occasions, first-century folk didn’t sit in chairs, but reclined on cushions around one or more low tables arranged so that diners could prop themselves on one elbow with their heads near the table

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and feet pointing away. Servers could then work from the inside.

Jesus noticed how people jockeyed for positions nearest the host, indicating higher status. He then began to teach the party a lesson in table manners, and what he had to say turned all their treasured customs upside down.

Jesus spoke first to the gathered guests (vv. 7-11), and then to the hosts (vv. 12-14), using their present situation as an object lesson. People tended to sort themselves out based on their levels of self-confidence or ambition, with social climbers striving for the best seats. Occasionally a more honored guest might come in, however, and the host would have to usher the upstart further back so the new guest could take the more prestigious place.

Jesus made the sensible observation that it's better for guests to choose an unobtrusive place near the back. Then, if the host asked them to come up higher, they would gain honor rather than disgrace (vv. 8-10).

This was common-sense advice for savvy socializing, but Jesus was not simply offering clever counsel for getting to the head table. His point was that getting to the head table is not the point.

Those who concern themselves with being number one are focused on the wrong goal. In Jesus' kingdom, such values are inverted: the goal is not to be number one, but to be numbered among those who are humble and willing to serve others.

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled," Jesus said, "and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 11). Humility in heart and action draws us near to the master, but pride of heart that seeks pride of place separates us from God. 🇺🇸

We recall that Jesus made this point more than once. When the disciples asked Jesus who would be

greatest, he pointed to a little child and said "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:4). Another time, when Jesus saw the disciples arguing about their relative positions, "He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'" (Mark 9:35).

### A word for hosts (vv. 12-14)

After speaking to the guests, Jesus also had a word for the hosts. He knew that first-century social life revolved around a circuit of dinner parties. When a person invited someone else to a dinner, it was assumed that the favor would soon be returned. That was normal, accepted, customary. It was the way life was supposed to be.

But Jesus threw a curve ball at his hosts. He told them they should make a point *not* to invite relatives and friends who were obligated to return the favor, but to invite the kind of people who could never pay them back.

What kind of people were these? The poor. The crippled. The lame. The blind. The kind of people who, in Jesus' day, struggled mightily because there were no government programs to provide for them. The Old Testament law taught that Israelite society was responsible for providing care to persons such as these, but that didn't always happen, and when it did, it was often in a demeaning way.

Don't just put a few shekels into the poor box, Jesus was saying. Invite them to your house! Let them sit at your table and eat from your fine china and use your silver. Don't just pray for the poor or contribute to a social outreach program – share your own life with them. Share your house. Share your food.

And do this with no expectation of

return. Do it for people who can't pay you back. They can't bring you any honor. But you will be blessed, Jesus said. "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (v. 17).

Again, we must understand that Jesus was not just teaching a different way to get eternal rewards. The point is that we don't do these things to get rewarded. We do these things because that is what the righteous do. That is what people who understand and who follow Jesus' ethics do. They love other people as they love themselves, and they show it by unselfishly helping others. This story is not about getting to the top: it's about being like Jesus. 🇺🇸

Jesus did not call us to lord it over one another, to climb the ladder of status, or seek to be number one. He called us to serve one another, and in his own life he demonstrated what that was all about.

When none of the disciples would humble themselves to get out the bowl and towel that was customarily used to wash the feet of guests from the road, Jesus did it himself. He took bread and broke it and served it to his friends, saying "This is my body that is broken for you." He took a cup and poured it and served it, saying "This is my blood that is shed for you." And then he went out and allowed his body to be broken and his blood to be shed, not just for those disciples, but for every person who puts their faith and trust in him.

So it is that when we come to the Lord's table, we serve each other. When we come to the Lord's table, we come humbly, aware of our sins and shortcomings, aware that we have not earned our place at the table by virtue of our social status or career accomplishments or even points earned for goodness. We are welcome because we have trusted in Christ, who says to the most humble of us "Friend, come up higher."

How are our table manners? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 8, 2019

## Deuteronomy 30:15-20

### Make the Right Choice!

If you've ever seen the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, you will no doubt remember Tevye, the father, singing and dancing to celebrate his daughter's engagement. Over and over he sang "To life, to life, *l'chayim*; *l'chayim*, *l'chayim*, to life ..."

*Chayim*, beginning with a rough "h" sound, is the Hebrew word for life, and it plays a starring role in today's text, which portrays Moses as challenging Israel to choose life by choosing faithfulness to God, known to the Israelites as Yahweh.

### A big switch

After three months in Luke, we're turning to the Old Testament, beginning with a lesson from Deuteronomy followed by several others from the prophets, mostly Jeremiah. Along the way, we'll learn that Jeremiah and Deuteronomy have a lot in common.

Deuteronomy is the last book of the Pentateuch, or the Torah. "Pentateuch" is from Greek and means "Five books," namely the first five in the Bible. "Torah" is the Hebrew word for law. The five books contain much more than legal material, but Israel's written laws are found there.

The book is written in the form of speeches or sermons proclaimed by the

*Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him. (Deut. 30:19b-20a)*


law-giver Moses as the Israelites came to the end of their journey from Egypt and camped just across the Jordan from the Promised Land. While preserving Mosaic traditions, it most likely was first written many years later, just before or during the exile, when Israel had both come into the land of promise and lost it. [See "The Hardest Question" online for more on this.]

As written, the stern warnings given by Moses to the nascent Israelites provided a theological explanation for the Hebrews' loss of their land to the Assyrians and Babylonians, but also offered hope that God would redeem them from exile and return them to the land if they could prove more faithful than their ancestors.


The book is set on the verge of Israel's initial entry to Canaan, a time of sharp transition. The people were about to end their wandering ways and enter the Promised Land – if they could be faithful enough to have God's aid in subduing it. Just as importantly, however, they were about to lose Moses as the only spiritual leader they had ever known. God had told him he could not enter the land: they would have to learn to live without him.


On more than one occasion, the people had proven faithless even when traveling together and with Moses' stern leadership. Now they would be scattered throughout the land in their tribal allotments. Being obedient and

faithful to God would prove even more difficult when the people were dispersed in the land with no central authority to keep them accountable.

Canaan was already populated by many people who worshiped other gods, and the Israelites would be tempted to follow their example. Even a cursory reading of 2 Kings and the prophets reveals that many Israelites adopted other gods in addition to Yahweh from their entry into Canaan right up to the time of the exile – a primary reason why the phrase "until this day" appears so frequently in Deuteronomy. 

### Options and consequences (vv. 15-18)

Calling for Israel to stay on the straight and narrow, the author has Moses call the people to pledge their loyalty to God – or else. His lengthy speech occupies two chapters, beginning at 29:1 with the marker "These are the words of the covenant that the LORD commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land of Moab." This was not to be just a renewal ceremony, but a second covenant, "in addition to the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb." 

The speech begins with a reminder of how God had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, brought them through the wilderness, and helped them defeat King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan, taking their land for themselves (29:2-9). 

Covenants typically name the parties involved, and Moses made it clear that all the Israelite people were included, from the elders to the children, men and women, even the servants who chopped their wood and

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drew their water – which describes a settled life long after Moses (29:10-15). The phrase “this day” occurs twice as a call for an immediate decision.

The anticipated problem is spelled out in 29:16. Some of the people might have been attracted to other gods by the idols they had seen among other peoples, and already were planning to serve other gods when they came into the land. That would bring disaster, Moses declared, inciting the devastating curses that are spelled out in 29:20-29 – the same sort of disasters that had taken place prior to the exile.

The speech then called the people to remember, when they went into captivity, that Moses had warned them and called them to return to God and to “obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today” (30:1-2).

Repentance would elicit divine compassion and God would “restore your fortunes . . . gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you.” Even “to the ends of the world” God would return them to “the land that your ancestors possessed” (30:3-5).

There God would “circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (30:6-10).

The narrator has Moses insist that the commandment “is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away.” It did not require an ascent to heaven or a voyage across the sea: “the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (30:11-14). 📖

### A challenge to choose (vv. 19-20)

Finally we come to the climax of the story: the moment of decision. As the people entered the promised land, they

would have to make a choice about their allegiance to Yahweh.

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity” (v. 15), Moses declared. 📖 Observing the commandment by “loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances” would lead to life and prosperity in the land, while those who turned to other gods would perish (vv. 16-18).

For the Deuteronomist, theology was a simple transaction.

“Choose,” Moses insisted. “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (vv. 19-20).

Ancient covenants typically called on the gods of both parties as witnesses, but Israel had just one god, so “heaven and earth” served as metaphorical stand-ins.

Note how repetitive the challenges are. Love God. Obey God. Hold fast to God. Avoid other gods. Do that and live long and happy lives. Turn away from God and meet the bad end of a short life.

*Choose.*

What does this text mean when we read it today? As an interpretive principle, it is essential to remember that *this is Israel’s covenant, not ours.*

Christians who read this text as a promise that God will grant long life and prosperity to the obedient but stir up trouble for the disobedient are not only misreading the text, but also are failing to take notice of the world around.

Have you ever noticed how many faithful Christians suffer poverty and hardship, or die young of cruel diseases? And have you noticed how many liars and cheaters and self-worshippers make out like bandits or achieve high office?

Proclaimers of the misguided “prosperity gospel” pick and choose verses such as these to make false promises to people who are urged to prove their faithfulness, in part, by donating money to the shysters who pass as preachers.

Christians may read the verses in all sincerity but mistakenly take them as a promise to modern believers. Jesus never promised financial success or good health or long life to his followers. He promised *abundant* life, life in the kingdom of God, life that has meaning and purpose beyond selfish goals.

Protestants sometimes update the challenge to choose by tying it to Jesus and making it a call for conversion, a choice between eternal life in heaven or eternal death in hell, but it is never as simple as that. Some evangelists sell the gospel as if it were fire insurance, but the question we should really ask is this: Do I serve God only for what I think I can get out of it, or because I believe being faithful to God makes me a better person, doing my part to build up the kingdom, reflecting God’s love in the world?

In other words, if there were no clear tangible rewards for serving God – even if we were to one day discover that life after death isn’t what we think it is – would we *still* want to follow Jesus?

Choosing to serve God is always better than serving self, or power, or money. We also have choices to make, but the option of gaining rich rewards through serving God is not one of them. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 15, 2019

Jeremiah 4:11-28

## *Delay and You'll Pay*

If you have read the text for today, you may have cringed and wondered why we would choose to study such a heated and unpleasant prophecy. The Bible contains many positive and encouraging texts, you may think. Why dwell on something so negative?

Why indeed?

Because sometimes the most valuable lessons are the most painful ones.

Corporal punishment for children isn't as common as it used to be, when some of us learned hard lessons at the business end of a switch. Discipline can also take other forms.

But sometimes lessons come too late. You may have known someone who developed lung cancer, throat cancer, or COPD after years of heavy smoking. The disease would have brought sharp reminders of warnings they had heard but ignored. Sufferers may have wanted to go back and change their behavior, but it was too late.

That's a gloomy thought, but precisely the kind of point Jeremiah was making in today's text as he walked the streets of Jerusalem and preached warnings to people who didn't want to hear what he had to say.

Imagine the situation. It was a time when empires rose and fell. More powerful kingdoms routinely ravaged

*O Jerusalem, wash your heart clean of wickedness so that you may be saved. How long shall your evil schemes lodge within you? (Jer. 4:14)*

neighboring lands to expand their territory with no international organization to censure them.

The country of Judah was a very minor player in world affairs when Jeremiah's preaching ministry began around 627 BCE (Jer. 1:1-3). The northern kingdom of Israel had been defeated by the Assyrians more than a century earlier (722 BCE). Many Israelites had fled south to Judah, while others were deported to other lands.

Eighth-century prophets like Amos and Micah and Isaiah had insisted that Israel's fall was due to divine punishment for the people's persistent idolatry. Jeremiah was convinced that Judah was about to suffer the same fate, and for the same reasons.

The southern kingdom had survived the Assyrian onslaught by agreeing to pay annual tribute, serving as a vassal to the Assyrians for many years.

In Jeremiah's day, however, a new power was rising in the east. A Neo-Babylonian empire led by Nabopolassar had come to rival the Assyrians, who grew less stable after the powerful king Ashurbanipal died in 627 BCE.

Judah's young king Josiah – probably encouraged by the prophets Zephaniah and Jeremiah – had instigated a series of religious reforms designed to eliminate pervasive idolatry, but when he tried to prevent an Egyptian force from joining the Assyrians in heading off the Babylonian

threat, he was killed in a battle at Megiddo (609 BCE), and Judah fell under Egyptian domination.

Today's text arises from a period when the Babylonian threat was growing clear and strong. Jeremiah was convinced that Judah's defeat was not only inevitable, but also deserved.

### **The hot wind of judgment (vv. 11-12)**

The first 24 chapters of Jeremiah are largely focused on prophecies against Judah and the city of Jerusalem, with 4:5–6:30 concerned mainly with prophecies predicting an invasion from the north.

Babylon was more east than north of Judah, but its armies could not cross the intervening desert: an expeditionary force would have to travel north and west around the desert, then turn south toward Palestine, approaching Judah from the north.

Jeremiah's prophecies are mainly in the form of poetic oracles. His friend and supporter, a scribe named Baruch, was responsible for compiling the oracles and writing them down. The first part of the book had to be written twice: when it was read as a warning to King Jehoiakim, the king cut up the scroll and burned it (Jeremiah 36).

The prophet had observed too many Israelites participating in the cults of other gods while also worshipping at the temple. He had heard priests and prophets associated with the temple insist that Yahweh would always protect Jerusalem because the temple was there. Jeremiah did not see protection for Judah and Jerusalem, but rather punishment.

Speaking for Yahweh, he declared:

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“At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse – a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them” (vv. 11-12).

Jeremiah’s hearers would be familiar with the hot desert wind that could bring with it both heat and blinding sand, making it difficult to see or to breathe. A good breeze could be a useful tool, blowing away the chaff when winnowing grain, or cleaning accumulated dust from outdoor surfaces, but this wind would be too strong for anything good.

It would bring destruction to “my poor people” (NRSV). A literal reading is “daughter of my people” (KJV), but some modern translations interpret “daughter” to indicate endearment or sympathy, such as “my dear people” (NET, HCSB).<sup>U</sup>

God’s affection for the people, weak and vulnerable to temptation as they were, did not make them less responsible for their sins or more likely to escape discipline. As Stephen Breck Reid has noted, “Vulnerability does not go bail for culpability” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C*, vol. 4 of Accordance electronic ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], par. 19243).

### The reason for judgment (vv. 13-22)

The prose introduction of vv. 11-12 is followed by a poetic description of – and lament over – the coming judgment. Jeremiah described a vision of God coming in the clouds, and cries “Woe to us, for we are ruined!” (v. 13).

He appealed for the residents of Jerusalem to “wash your hearts clean of wickedness so that you may be saved,” suggesting that disaster might be averted, but with little confidence that his words would have any effect:

“How long shall your evil schemes lodge within you?” (v. 14).

Jeremiah heard “a voice from Dan,” formerly the northernmost city of Israel. The voice proclaimed “disaster from Mount Ephraim” – further south in the central hill country – an image of besiegers marching toward Judah (vv. 15-16).

The prophet envisioned the besieging army surrounding the city. Why? “Because she has rebelled against me, says the LORD. Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom: how bitter it is! It has reached your very heart” (vv. 16-18).

Jeremiah shared with God a sharp sense of distress over the fate of the people, crying “My anguish! My anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart!” (v. 19a). The deep sorrow Jeremiah felt came from the pit of his stomach: a literal translation would be “My bowels! My bowels!”

We have known that gut-wrenching feeling, the rush of adrenaline followed by a racing heartbeat. “Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war” (v. 19b).

In his vision, Jeremiah saw one disaster after another as the land was laid waste and dwellings destroyed (v. 20) before the enemy’s battle flags and trumpets of war (v. 21).

Again he appealed to the people, using language common to Israel’s wisdom teachers: “For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good” (v. 22).

Jeremiah was not criticizing the people’s intelligence, but rather their choices. Smart people can do very stupid things: they can also prove willfully ignorant of truths they should

know, turning from God and convincing themselves that their evil actions are right.

But that can’t last forever. At some point, bad behavior will catch up with us.

### The totality of judgment (vv. 23-28)

Jeremiah’s grief grew from a vision of destruction so complete that it seemed even creation had been reversed: “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light” (v. 23).

The phrase “waste and void” translates *tohu va-bohu*, which appears elsewhere only in Gen. 1:2, which says the earth was “without form and void.” Jeremiah foresaw the hills and mountains shifting and quaking in a lifeless world marked only by the ruined remains of empty cities (vv. 24-26).

Most translations find a bit of hope in v. 27, a short oracle that interrupts the flow of vv. 23-28 and is widely regarded as a later insertion. The NRSV renders it “For thus says the LORD: ‘The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.’” The NET has a similar translation: “The whole land will be desolate; however, I will not completely destroy it.” (For an alternate translation, see “The Hardest Question” online.)

Jeremiah would eventually come to a place of hope. The vision of extreme desolation he saw here is not uncommon in prophetic/apocalyptic imagery that imagines the whole earth being destroyed before the advent of a new era. Jeremiah did not see the new heaven and new earth of his contemporary Ezekiel’s prophecies, but would later predict that God would gather the scattered people and establish a new covenant that would not be written in a book of law, but on the people’s hearts (Jer. 31:31-34).

All was not lost. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 22, 2019

Jeremiah 8:18–9:3

## Go on and Grieve

**H**ave you ever cried so hard and long that you felt drained of tears, but knew you weren't finished weeping? That kind of pain can come from a sense of loss or betrayal or unexpected devastation.

The loss of a loved one through death, the unfaithfulness of a marriage partner, the travails of a child in trouble, the crumbling of a business, the havoc wrought by a fire or storm – any of those can bring tears that are a long time ceasing.

But have you ever wept like that for the fate of people you don't even know? Do we weep for children who are starving, people who are economically enslaved, populations who live under brutal dictatorships or religious persecution?

The prophet Jeremiah suffered frequent harassment and tragedies in his personal life, but the weeping he speaks of in today's text was for the fate of his people, the Hebrew residents of Judah that he believed were doomed to defeat and destruction.

Jeremiah is often described as the "weeping prophet," and he often speaks of how deeply God feels the pain of the same people who have betrayed their covenant relationship. Grief is not God's only emotion, according

*O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! (Jer. 9:1)*

to Jeremiah: he also credits God with expressing anger, heartache, regret, and even hate.

The divine pathos and deep emotions are often displayed in the words or the actions of the prophet as well: Jeremiah resonates with the heart of God that hurts for the foolish people but also resents their rebellious and often callous behavior.

The picture of an angry God is not an attractive one for contemporary believers, but the image of divine vexation is not a perpetual attribute so much as a temporal response. Jeremiah believed God's anger was provoked by human sin but accompanied by grief as God mourned for those who suffer the consequences of their sin.

Jeremiah's beliefs were grounded in the conviction, taught in Deuteronomy, that God and the Hebrews had entered a special covenant. The covenant, similar to ancient treaties between conquering kings and their new vassals, promised abundant blessings as long as the people remained faithful. On the flip side, the covenant promised severe punishment if they should turn to other gods. 🇺🇸

Jeremiah saw abundant evidence of idolatry, and believed trouble was coming. The travails would not come through a divinely directed storm or fire or plague, but through the medium of an earthly enemy. Jeremiah saw the looming threat of Nebuchadnezzar and the conquering Babylonians as

unwitting agents of God's judgment, even as Cyrus the Persian would later become a means of salvation.

For years, Jeremiah had preached faithfully and called for repentance that might lead to deliverance. As the people stubbornly persisted in worshipping other gods while the Babylonian threat grew stronger, the prophet became convinced that it was too late: the people were lost (8:8-17), and all that was left was to mourn. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

### Heartsick sorrow (8:18-21)

"My joy is gone," he cried; "grief is upon me, my heart is sick" (8:18).

The same people who had refused to repent blindly claimed that it was Yahweh who had failed them: "Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: 'Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?'" (8:19a). 🇺🇸

Jeremiah's response has long puzzled readers because it can be hard to determine who is speaking. Is Jeremiah expressing his grief alone? Is he speaking for God? Or is he speaking for the people, personified as Jerusalem crying out for her people?

All of these could be true in some sense, for Jeremiah identified both with God's righteous anger and the misguided people who persisted in folly. His own grief emerged from the tension of hurting for both God and people as well as his own uncertain fate when the enemy arrived.

While the people complained, God was having none of it. Why should the people question Yahweh's fidelity when they were the unfaithful ones? "Why have they provoked me to anger

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with their images, with their foreign idols?” (8:19b).<sup>U</sup>

Unfazed, the people continued to grumble. Some commentators imagine that this interchange could have taken place during the Hebrew New Year’s festival, which was held in the fall and celebrated Yahweh’s enthronement in Jerusalem.

The people seemed to think God had missed several good opportunities to save them from trial: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” (8:20). Despite recognizing the people’s failures, Jeremiah felt their pain: “For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me” (8:21).

Can you identify with Jeremiah? We may find it easy to condemn people who don’t behave as we think they should. It may be helpful to try and put ourselves in their shoes. What kind of childhood did they have? What traumas have they faced? What misinformation have they been fed by authority figures?<sup>U</sup>

Our attempt at understanding may not change the outcome of the trouble they may find themselves in, but it increases the chance that we will show compassion to them.

### Grief upon grief (8:22–9:1)

Jeremiah’s sorrow did not let up. “Is there no balm in Gilead?” he asked. “Is there no physician there? Why then has the hurt of my poor people not been restored?” (8:22).

Jeremiah’s negative metaphor later found positive expression in a familiar African-American spiritual that imagines Jesus as the balm in times of discouragement and trouble: “*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*” (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on “the balm of Gilead.”)

Israel’s doom was so certain that Jeremiah saw the people as already wounded. Indeed, they might have been. We don’t know when this oracle was written. Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian armies defeated Jerusalem in 597 BCE and carried many of the royal, wealthy, educated, and skilled residents into exile, but did not destroy the city.

The Babylonians took king Jehoiachin prisoner and installed his uncle Mattaniah in his place, changing his name to Zedekiah (1 Kgs. 24:17). Zedekiah ruled as a vassal, paying tribute for some time, but in the tenth year he refused to pay tribute, leading the Babylonians not only to defeat the city, but also to sack and burn it completely, taking even more people into exile.

This time Nebuchadnezzar appointed a man named Gedaliah to rule as governor from Mizpah. During his tenure, Jeremiah was forcibly carried to Egypt by a group of defectors but continued to prophesy and communicate with the exiles in Babylon.

At any of these times, Jeremiah could have spoken of the people as wounded, with no healing balm in sight. Ancient armies typically treated their victims cruelly, raping women and killing both old and young to instill even greater terror than the pillage and burning and slaughter of fallen soldiers.

In pondering the people’s fate, whether present or imminent, all Jeremiah could do was cry: “O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!” (9:1).

### The price of deceit (9:2-3)

Jeremiah’s grief was not just for the people’s suffering, however, but for the betrayal that led to it. He hurt for them, but found it hard to remain near them,

wishing for a hideaway in the desert where he could get away, “For they are all adulterers, a band of traitors” (9:2).

The base of their wickedness was a complete disrespect for truth that led from one wrongdoing to another: “They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the LORD” (9:3).

Jeremiah’s tirade against falsehood continues through three more verses. “No one speaks the truth,” the prophet complained. “They have taught their tongues to speak lies . . . deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me, says the LORD” (from 9:5-6).

Jeremiah understood that people who have no respect for truth can convince themselves that any behavior is permissible. In the previous chapter, Jeremiah had railed against priests and false prophets who insisted that the presence of the temple guaranteed that God would never allow Jerusalem to be defeated. It was a lie, but those who repeated it often enough came to believe it.<sup>U</sup>

“Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD,’” Jeremiah had said. Instead, he called them to “amend your ways and your doings” and “act justly one with another.” That meant not oppressing immigrants, orphans, and widows; not shedding innocent blood; and not trusting in other gods. Only then could they expect God to dwell with them (Jer. 7:3-7).

What things have we come to trust like little gods that dominate our living? What lies have we swallowed, or told to others?

Jeremiah calls us to trust in God, discern what is true, and do what is right. People who do not respect the truth are people who are lost. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Sept. 29, 2019

Jeremiah 32:1-15

## Never Give Up

**H**ope. Now that's a beautiful word. Little in our vocabulary does as much for the heart and the outlook as the word "hope," and in this text Jeremiah promises hope for a brighter future.

You might think it's about time. After lessons in which the old prophet predicted a bone-crushing defeat for Israel (September 15) and then wept inconsolably about it (September 22), we finally get to see a glimmer of hope. 🇺🇸

We know what that is like. In what is often the coldest part of winter, a burst of February daffodils brings the promise of spring.

The first garden seed to break the ground in April offers the hope of a coming harvest.

A relatively ordinary day at some point after a traumatic loss breathes hope that life may yet return to "normal."

In today's text, Jeremiah does something that would hardly be noticed in ordinary times, but in a city under siege, it became a harbinger of hope.

### A bad time (vv. 1-3a)

Modern Americans have no idea what it is like to live under a months-long

*For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. (Jer. 32:15)*

siege, with an enemy's military forces cutting off access to supplies and starving the residents while building siege ramps designed to break down the city walls. 🇺🇸

That's what was happening in Jerusalem sometime around 588 BCE. The Babylonians had defeated the city in 597 but didn't destroy it. They took King Jehoiachin and a large number of elite citizens captive but left the city intact, with Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah installed as a vassal king.

Zedekiah did as ordered for nearly a decade, but then rebelled and withheld the tribute money. It wasn't long before the Babylonian troops once again surrounded Jerusalem with blood in their eyes, putting the city under siege.

Trying to carry on with no food on the table but many enemies at the gate would have been a torturous experience for everyone, including the king and those who advised him. Should the city surrender and hope for mercy, or fight to the death despite the odds?

King Zedekiah, a stubborn man strongly influenced by priests and temple prophets who believed God would not allow Jerusalem to fall, was determined to hold fast and fight.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, boldly proclaimed that the city was doomed. On several occasions, Jeremiah told Zedekiah that his best hope was to surrender to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. This did not sit well with Zedekiah. 🇺🇸

Zedekiah did not want the prophet

to be going through the streets questioning his judgment, so he kept him close by putting him under house arrest in the "court of the guard," which was part of the king's palace (vv. 1-3a).

We don't know the precise layout of the palace, but the "court of the guard" probably faced an interior courtyard, so it would have been open to the air. This would have been an improvement over Jeremiah's previous situation, in which a royal official named Jonathan had accused him of desertion, beaten him, and locked him into an underground cistern that had been turned into a cell.

Things were bad for the prophet, but they could be worse – and would soon get a lot worse for the king.

### An angry king (vv. 3b-5)

At some point, according to the narrative, Zedekiah summoned Jeremiah and asked why Jeremiah had predicted that Yahweh would give Jerusalem over to Nebuchadnezzar, and why Jeremiah had insisted that he (Zedekiah) would not escape, but "be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye" before being taken to Babylon where God would "attend to him." 🇺🇸

The king's version of Jeremiah's prophecy echoes predictions found in several other texts, including 34:2-3, which also speaks of the kings meeting "face to face and eye to eye," as well as 21:1-7; 37:1-10, 17; and 38:14-28.

The narrative account of Israel's defeat in 2 Kings says that when the city walls were breached, Zedekiah fled south toward the Arabah, but was captured and taken before Nebuchadnezzar, where he would have seen him

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face to face and eye to eye.

Nebuchadnezzar's eyes were among the last things Zedekiah would see. The story says that after Nebuchadnezzar passed sentence, his men slaughtered Zedekiah's sons before his eyes, then put out his own eyes before marching him in chains to Babylon (2 Kgs. 25:3-7, repeated in Jer. 39:2-7).

But we get ahead of ourselves. The king had asked Jeremiah a question. "Why do you prophesy and say these things?"

Jeremiah's answer – if it is an answer – is puzzling. One might expect him to say: "Because that's what Yahweh told me to say, you ninny," or "Because it's obvious that your troops don't have a chance before the mighty Babylonian army."

Jeremiah's response, as it turns out, says nothing at all about why he had prophesied doom on Zedekiah, the city of Jerusalem, and the remaining Israelites.

The prophet apparently took those predictions as so certain that he no longer needed to defend them. Instead, Jeremiah looked beyond the defeat and beyond the exile (which had begun some ten years earlier) to speak of what lay beyond.

Hope.

### A good buy (vv. 6-15)

The prophecy came, not as a direct word, but in the form of a sign. If we take these verses as Jeremiah's response to the king, he recounted how God had told him that his cousin Hanamel would come and tell him that his relatives in Anathoth, his hometown, were in financial trouble. They needed to sell some land, but wanted to keep it in the family, so they were asking Jeremiah to "redeem" it by purchasing the land. As the nearest kin, he had the first right of refusal (vv. 6-7).

The rules for such transactions

were apparently based on Lev. 25:23-28. A similar arrangement is found in Ruth 4, where Boaz "redeemed" land belonging to Naomi's late husband after a closer kinsman declined to do it.

For readers familiar with the larger book of Jeremiah, the request seems odd, because an earlier story says that his relatives in Anathoth had once plotted to kill Jeremiah if he didn't stop prophesying (11:18-23).

Why would the same kinfolk who had sought to silence Jeremiah now come to him as a potential financial savior? It seems highly unlikely.

Perhaps that is why, when Hanamel showed up in the court of the guard as Yahweh had predicted, asking him to redeem the land, that Jeremiah would respond "*Then I knew* that this was the word of the LORD" (vv. 8-9). Only with God's intervention could the prior animosity between them be overcome.

Jeremiah agreed to make the purchase, paying 17 shekels of silver. Coins would not be minted in the area for another hundred years, so Jeremiah weighed out the silver using a set of scales and had his friend Baruch draw up two copies of an official deed attesting to the sale. 📄

The text does not say how the price was determined (about \$100 at today's silver prices), or how Jeremiah happened to have that much silver available to him.

The prophet put considerable emphasis on the business of the deed, instructing that it be publicly drawn up in the court of the guard and signed by witnesses in duplicate, with one copy sealed and the other open so all could read. Baruch was to put the documents in an earthen jar for safekeeping, so they would last for a long time (vv. 10-14). 📄

Why was it so important for the deed to be preserved?

As a testimony.

But to what? To foolishness? Why

would Jeremiah pay good money for land that would soon belong to the Babylonians? The whole idea makes no sense, as Jeremiah himself attested in a prayer that follows this text. With siege ramps set up and the city facing famine, pestilence, and the sword as a background (v. 24), Jeremiah said "Yet you, O Lord GOD, have said to me, 'Buy the field for money and get witnesses' – though the city has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans" (v. 25).

With v. 15 the interchange finally begins to make sense: "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

Jeremiah's purchase in the face of looming disaster was the promise of a day beyond the exile when the people would return, when fields and houses around Jerusalem would once again be bought and sold. As God was bringing disaster upon Judah, God would also bring a better day:

"Fields shall be bought for money, and deeds shall be signed and sealed and witnessed, in the land of Benjamin, in the places around Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, of the hill country, of the Shephelah, and of the Negeb; for I will restore their fortunes, says the LORD" (v. 44).

Hope.

When have you needed hope, and in what areas have you seen it? When we face deep traumas such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a job or the betrayal of someone close, it can be hard to see beyond the tears and the darkness, but we can have hope that God still has a good future for us. With that anchor of hope, our emotions will eventually level out and we will be able to see and enjoy new possibilities for life.

That hope may be found in very ordinary things.

Look for the signs: there is hope. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 6, 2019

Habakkuk 1:1–2:4

## Faith for Hard Days

Have you ever been so dissatisfied with life that you took your complaints to God and demanded that God do something about it? Many of us may feel that we have been treated unjustly or suffered unfairly, and it's not unusual for us to blame our misfortunes on God. Surely, we think, God should see to it that believers get better treatment.

Sometimes, we may be just bold enough to “let God have it” with our complaints, knowing that God can take it.

Our text for the day is a similar complaint, though on behalf of an entire nation, the small country of Judah. The man railing at God was a little-known prophet named Habakkuk, who probably lived during the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE. It was a time when the resurgent Babylonians had conquered the ruling Assyrians and begun extending their reach to the smaller nations of the Levant, including Judah. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

### How long, Lord? (1:1-11)

We know nothing about Habakkuk except for the superscriptions of 1:1 and 3:1, both of which describe him as a prophet. His parentage is not

*Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith. (Hab. 2:4)*

given, and even the meaning of his unusual name is a mystery. Habakkuk's frequent references to the temple along with the hymn suitable for temple use in chapter 3 lead some to think he may have been a temple functionary as well as a prophet. 🇺🇸

Habakkuk was not hesitant to tell God exactly what he was thinking, and much of his short book is structured around two cycles of complaint and response. 🇺🇸

Habakkuk's opening words are a plaintive lament reflecting Judah's oppression by foreign powers: “Oh LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” (1:2).

Habakkuk fully felt the burden of his prophetic office, and apparently did not enjoy it. 🇺🇸 Longing for some good news, he pleaded: “Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?” (1:3a). He seemed afraid that the violence and strife that dominated the land had resulted from God's abandoning the people (1:3b). Foreign invaders threatened from without, and economic corruption threatened from within. The end result, Habakkuk said, was that “the law becomes slack and justice never prevails” (1:4a).

Habakkuk's complaint would have been appropriate for Judah late in the seventh century. Prophets had expressed great hope that religious reforms under young king Josiah would have lasting effect, but Josiah

was killed in an ill-conceived battle with Pharaoh Neco in 609 BCE, and the reforms had lapsed. 🇺🇸

Central to the law was the importance of showing compassion and care to one another – especially to other Hebrews – but when the law became numb or paralyzed (the literal meaning of the word translated as “slack”), the wealthy and powerful were free to run roughshod over the poor, exploiting them and taking their land. This was a common concern of the prophets (Isa. 5:8-10, for example).

Habakkuk brashly asked if God had any plans to address the current situation in which “judgment comes forth perverted” (1:4b).

God's initial response to Habakkuk's complaint is found in 1:5-11. There God challenged Habakkuk to look beyond Judah and see what was happening in other nations, where the Chaldeans (an alternate name for the neo-Babylonians) were wreaking destruction across the landscape (1:5-6).

Like the lawless people of Habakkuk's own country, the Babylonians had become their own law: “their justice and dignity (or “exaltation”) proceed from themselves” (1:7).

The Babylonians scoffed at other countries and trusted their own power to the point that “their own might is their god” (1:8-11). But was their success really all their own doing? God told Habakkuk: “I am rousing the Chaldeans . . .” (1:6). God intended to use the fierce Chaldean army as an instrument of divine discipline: those who ignored true justice would experience the remorseless “justice” of the Babylonians.

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## Why, Lord? (1:12–2:1)

Habakkuk's second complaint begins in 1:12-17 and concludes with 2:1. The prophet could not understand why God, the ancient and holy one who does not die, had not yet judged the Babylonians, though they were marked for it (1:12).

"Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing," Habakkuk charged – so "why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?" (1:13).

Habakkuk perceived a disconnect between what he believed about God's actions and God's nature, and he was cheeky enough to point out the contradiction.

Do you ever pray with such boldness?

Though well aware of the Hebrews' shortcomings, Habakkuk still regarded his countrymen as more righteous than the marauding Babylonians. He complained that God was allowing their armies to collect victims like fishermen using hooks and nets, showing no mercy (1:14-17).

Like Job, who persistently questioned the lack of justice in his misfortune, Habakkuk was plagued with the question of theodicy, wondering if God was truly just after all. As Job dared to challenge God with words such as "Answer me!" (Job 31:35), Habakkuk announced that he would "stand at my watchpost and station myself on the rampart" while waiting for an answer to his complaints (2:1)

Whether Habakkuk spoke metaphorically or had in mind a literal observation post on the outer wall of the temple complex, he was standing by and waiting for an answer.

## When, Lord? (2:2-4)

Suspense builds for the reader. As

Habakkuk stubbornly waited for God to respond, we also wait to see what explanation God would offer. Habakkuk wanted God to judge the wicked, deliver the righteous, and do it right then. God insisted that judgment on evil would be sure, but could not be rushed or demanded by humans, even prophets. It would happen in God's own time.

God first put Habakkuk on alert that he would indeed receive a message, and he was to "write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it" (2:2, NRSV).

This verse is subject to multiple translations and difficult to interpret. The NRSV seems to understand that Habakkuk was to inscribe the message on something so large that someone running by would be able to read it.

"Make it plain," though, does not require the sense of writing in large letters. Elsewhere in scripture, it deals with explaining or writing a clear message that people can understand (Deut. 1:5 and 27:8).

Some translations assume that the writing would be of normal size but written so clearly that a reader's eyes could quickly "run" across the text: "so one may easily read it" (HCSB).

An alternate translation is "That the one who reads it may run" (NAS95, similar to the KJV). On the surface, this may suggest that readers take warning and run away, but it could also be understood as "that one who reads it may run" or live in accordance with God's way.

A final approach is to regard the verb "run" as a reference to a messenger or runner who is sent to proclaim a message through the land. Understood this way, God would be instructing Habakkuk to write the vision plainly so a messenger could easily read it, then run to deliver the message. The NIV, for example, has "make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it."

Whatever nuance we apply to the verse, the main intent is clear: Habakkuk was to publicize the message so that others could understand it and respond to it.

The suspense continues through the next verse, which speaks of the revelation as something yet to come. When it finally arrived, it spoke of two options. "Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right within them" (2:4a). Wrong-spirited people would eventually fall, for "wealth is treacherous, the arrogant will not endure" (2:5).

Unlike those guided by self alone, the righteous should live in faithfulness to God's way, with a right spirit. These few words – literally, "the righteous in/by their faith shall live" (2:4b) – are the most remembered part of Habakkuk's prophecy, as Paul picked up the Greek translation of the verse and made it a cornerstone of his doctrine of salvation by faith. (See "The Hardest Question" online for more on this.)

In Habakkuk's prophecy, however, the emphasis was not on faith as a system of belief, but a call to live in faithfulness to God. 📌 God's challenge was not for the Hebrews "to have faith" in the sense of believing that God exists or agreeing that God's way is best. The call was for the righteous to live faithfully, in keeping with God's teachings.

"To live," then, is both a command and a promise. The righteous are called to live with faithful integrity that honors God despite the negative circumstances that surround them. Arrogant folk who oppress others are bound to fall, but those who live faithfully are on the path to enduring life.

As we bemoan the state of the world or suffer painful days, are we able to trust in God and remain faithful through it all, doing justice and trusting in God's future, even when we can't see it? 📌

Habakkuk would hope so. **N.F.J**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 13, 2019

Jeremiah 29:1-9

## *An Unlikely Garden*

**H**ave you ever tried wishing your life away? We don't try to eliminate our whole lives, of course, but how often do we think "I can't wait to get out of school," "I'd like to just skip over winter," or even "I can't wait for this sermon to end." We're ready to get on with something more pleasurable or exciting.

When we yearn for the next thing, though, we may be missing out on opportunities for meaning and joy in the present, however dull or unpleasant it may seem. Can it be good to wish even small parts of our lives away?

### *A sad people (vv. 1-3)*

In today's text, Jeremiah sends surprising and encouraging words to his fellow Israelites who had been taken from their homes in Judah and resettled in various parts of Babylon, not unlike modern Palestinians forced from their homes and land, pushed into overcrowded settlements in the West Bank, Jordan, or Lebanon. ↓

Jeremiah appears to be addressing persons in the first wave of exiles, forcibly relocated after Jerusalem's initial defeat in 597 BCE. These included most of the royal family, along with "the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem,

*Build houses and live in them;  
plant gardens and eat what they  
produce. (Jer. 29:5)*

the artisans, and the smiths" (vv. 1-2).

The Babylonians had no interest in depopulating the entire country, but deported elite and educated people, leaders, and skilled craftsmen. Their intent was to rob the country of effective leadership so the remaining population would be more docile, while availing themselves of skilled artisans who could contribute to Nebuchadnezzar's many building projects.

Jeremiah had counseled surrender rather than fighting the Babylonians, so he was allowed to remain in Jerusalem. Our passage is the text of a letter he sent to the exiles. ↓

At first, as we might guess, the exiles were set on getting back to Judah, back to their homes and their fields and their favorite foods. The Israelites were granted a great deal of freedom within Babylon, but they could not return home. Adapting to Babylonian culture — or finding the strength *not* to adapt — required much time and effort. Many people didn't even try to adjust. They just sat around wishing the exile would be over so they could go home.

Several prophets encouraged the people in this wishful thinking. They included Hananiah, who remained in Jerusalem and claimed that the captives would be freed within two years (28:1-11), and Shemaiah the Nehelite, who was with the exiles in Babylon (29:29-32). Their prophesies — grounded in what they knew the people wanted to hear — raised false hopes of an early return. With these hopeful prophesies

in their ears, many people weren't sure whether to settle down or just keep waiting to go home.

Jeremiah was a different kind of prophet. The text implies that he, unlike Hananiah and Shemaiah, was a *true* prophet, one who understood current events and who rightly perceived divine revelation. Jeremiah sought to inject a note of reality by sending a letter to the captives. It was delivered by Elaseh and Gemariah, two officials that King Zedekiah had commissioned (29:3). They may have been traveling to pay Judah's yearly tribute taxes or to carry official reports to their overlords.

Jeremiah's letter contained both advice for the present and hope for the future. What he had to say is as relevant as today's newspaper. This is an eternally applicable epistle.

### *A stern message (vv. 4-6)*

Jeremiah's advice was based on his belief that the exile would last for a long time. Thus, he encouraged the captives to stop sitting around waiting for deliverance, and to get busy improving their quality of life where they were. In other words, he told his readers to quit griping and to bloom where they were planted.

"Build houses," he said, "and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease" (vv. 5-6).

Jeremiah wanted the Judean exiles to make the most of their stay in Babylon. It wasn't a time for them to

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sit and mope in squatters' tents while subsisting on handouts, but to build permanent houses and plant gardens and raise cattle and get on with life.

They might not be in the promised land, but they were still children of the promise, called to be fruitful and multiply and make God's way of life evident where they were.

Time is too precious to waste, but how easy it is for us to squander the present by wishing for the future, anxious to get on with the next stage of life, whether it's graduation or marriage or getting the kids through college or retirement. We can wish our entire lives away.

Jeremiah wanted us to understand that life does not begin at the next stage. If we are wise, we will make the most of where we are in the present. That includes striving toward future hopes and goals. We don't resign ourselves to fate and just mark time, but accept where we are in life and then creatively work to make it better. We build houses, plant gardens, work hard, and share our lives with others. As individuals and as a community of faith, we are called to grow and not fade away.

Every stage of our pilgrimage is not a prelude to life, but a crucial part of life itself. Think of a period in your life that you stumbled through, wishing it was over. How could you have gotten more from that piece of your life? How can you make your life better now?

### A surprising challenge (vv. 7-9)

The Jewish exiles were inclined to cheer every failure of their captors. Encouraged by the prophecies of those who predicted an early return, they may have practiced underground resistance while in Babylon. Yet, Jeremiah urged his friends to see

through the false hopes being served up by the popularizing prophets. As a word from the Lord, he said, "Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD" (vv. 8-9).

Instead, Jeremiah offered them this surprising advice: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (v. 7). The word translated as "welfare" is *shalôm*, a term that is rich with meaning. While often translated as "peace," its basic meaning describes a state of wholeness or well-being.

Who wants to pray for the people who are oppressing them? Yet Jeremiah enjoined his readers to pray for their new homeland and to actively seek its welfare, using a strong form of the verb to emphasize that they be intentional about working for the good of the land in which they now lived. As their new homeland prospered, they would prosper, too. 🇺

Jeremiah knew that when we are dissatisfied, we tend to strike out at those around us, to our own detriment. Unhappy teenagers bring heartache to their parents. Frustrated husbands and wives lash out at their spouses. Disgruntled church members sabotage their own community of faith with explosive attacks on fellow believers.

Jeremiah's advice suggests that teenagers who cooperate with their parents might find greater understanding and more freedom. Spouses who work to build each other up will find more warmth and fewer cold shoulders. Christians who act out of love and forgiveness will find compassion and grace returned to them, for the benefit of all.

Try to remember a time when you took out your personal unhappiness on someone else. Did it help? How could you have handled the situation better?

Our text ends with v. 9, but Jeremiah's prophecy grew even more specific in the following few verses. He predicted that the exile would last for 70 years.

The exiles needed to learn that they didn't have to live in the promised land to experience the promises of God. It was essential that the people remain faithful where they were, trusting that God could continue to bless them in Babylon, believing that the Lord had an even better future in store for them.

Many believers find comfort in v. 11, which I translate this way: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not harm, to give you a future and a hope."

Jeremiah would have us understand that God is with us as, even when life is hard, even when we feel lonely or exiled. The world may bring evil to our door, but God's plans for us are for our good.

Christians believe in an eternal hope of fellowship with God and with other believers. None of us can comprehend what eternity will be like, and none of us can describe our concept of heaven without relying heavily on our imaginations. Still, if God has planned it for us, we can trust that it will be beyond our wildest expectations.

But we don't live in heaven now. We live, as Carlyle Marney liked to say, *in the meantime*. In the meantime, we are called to make the most of who we are and where we are and what we have. Thus, we live toward the future with hope, building and sowing grace and growth along the way. 🇺 NFJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 20, 2019

Jeremiah 31:27-34

## A Surprising New Start

**H**ave you ever been the recipient of underserved and unexpected grace? As children, youth, and adults, most of us have known the sinking feeling of getting caught in some transgression. We fear what the repercussions will be and steel ourselves for a heated scolding or a cold shoulder – but it doesn't come.

For some reason, the teacher or friend or spouse we have offended chooses not to yell or turn away, but to forgive. We know where we went wrong and the other person knows it, too, yet they give us another chance. If we have a single wise bone in our bodies, we will be not only relieved and grateful, but determined to do better in the future.

### Individual accountability (vv. 27-30)

Our lessons for the past several weeks have been concerned with Israel in exile, a people who had been forced from their homes in Judah and resettled in Babylon. Their northern neighbors had been conquered by the Assyrians and scattered many years before, around 722 BCE. The exile to Babylon took place in waves, mainly in 597 and 587 BCE.

The prophets Isaiah and Amos and

*But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer. 31:33)*

Micah had warned that Israel would fall because of the people's poor ethics and idolatrous worship, and it did. Jeremiah predicted the same fate for the people of Judah, and he was right, too. Even though king Josiah had promoted a time of reform and revival, it was too little and too late. 📌

Many among the exiles believed that they were paying for the sins of their ancestors, and this helps to explain the first portion of our text for today. Verses 27-30 may not seem to fit very well with the verses that follow, largely because both texts are salvation oracles that would have been spoken at different times. When they were written down and compiled into a scroll, the writer – probably Baruch – apparently saw a connection.

The oracle begins with good news: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals” (v. 27).

The odd image of sowing was Jeremiah's way of promising that the exile would come to an end: God would return the people to their homeland and prosper them so that both people and animals would flourish.

Note that Jeremiah's hope extended beyond the recently-exiled people of Judah to include the “house

of Israel,” who had been scattered more than a century earlier. Ezekiel, Jeremiah's contemporary, offered a similar promise that God would multiply the population and rebuild their towns (Ezek. 36:10-11).

Jeremiah's call had included a divine appointment “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” by making God's intentions known (Jer. 1:10).

Now he declares that the overthrow and destruction had taken place, and the time had come for God to “watch over them to build and to plant” (v. 28).

In that day, the people would still be subject to judgment, but for their own sins alone. No longer could they blame their suffering on the sins of the ancestors by citing the old proverb “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge” (v. 29).

Rather, individual accountability would be the rule: people would taste the effects of their own choices (v. 30).

Fortunately, Jeremiah had more to say. The future would hold more than judgment: it would be awash in grace. 📌

### Amazing grace (vv. 31-34)

The heart of Jeremiah's hope, and perhaps the most beautiful passage in the Old Testament, is found in vv. 31-34. 📌 📌 The promise seems too good to be true, as it offers amazing grace to a people who had blown their chance time and again.

Jeremiah saw a coming day when people could have an entirely new kind of relationship with God (v. 31). Something had gone badly wrong with Israel's understanding of the old

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covenant, which had grown out of their exodus from Egypt. The people had come to regard the law of God and the rituals of temple worship as unconnected to daily life, Jeremiah believed. The law was something *external*, written on stone tablets, taught by the priests, used in the courts, but not followed faithfully (v. 32). 📖

That was not God's intent: the ideal was that the law should be internalized and lived out (Deut. 30:6, 14). The new covenant, Jeremiah declared, would be more definitively engraved on people's hearts: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (v. 33).

Everyone could know God, Jeremiah said, from the inside out. God's law would be accompanied by an internal assurance that God would "forgive their sin and remember their iniquity no more" (v. 34).

When Jeremiah proclaimed these oracles, along with the following affirmations that God would never abandon Israel (vv. 35-37) and that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and never conquered again (vv. 39-40), he visualized both Israel and Judah returning to the whole land and living happily and faithfully.

That didn't happen.

When the people of Judah were allowed to return to Jerusalem after 538 BCE, they occupied only a small portion of the land as a small sub-province of Persia. The Jews regained some measure of independence for about a century after the Hasmonean revolt in 167–160 BCE, but then came under Roman control. The second temple, so beautifully and painstakingly expanded by Herod, was destroyed in 70 CE and replaced with a temple to Jupiter Capitolinus.

Does that mean Jeremiah's words were empty? They certainly were not fulfilled within his lifetime or shortly

thereafter. Some Orthodox Jews and conservative Christians argue that the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 fulfilled the prophecy, but that is hardly the case. (See "The Hardest Question" online for more on this.)

Though many Jews still hold to the hope of a messiah who will inspire the sort of return to both land and God that Jeremiah envisioned, many Christians believe the new covenant Jeremiah prophesied was fulfilled in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, when we speak of the "New Testament," we're really talking about a "New Covenant." Because we can examine Jeremiah's prophecy through the lens of Christ's coming, we can appreciate it in a way that the prophet himself could not.

It may seem strange to think of God's law being written on our hearts, but isn't that what happens when God's presence is also living and working within us? In some way beyond our understanding, through the work of Christ, the very Spirit of God lives within those who entrust their lives to him. Paul spoke of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

It is hard to comprehend what this means. Our typical language is in the concrete thought of a child, as we speak of "inviting Jesus to live in our hearts." 📖 Adults are capable of thinking more abstractly, but we can't understand the full meaning of God's indwelling any more than a child does. There is something mystical about the way God lives and works within us. Fortunately, we don't have to understand God's promise in order to trust in it.

We see evidence of God's indwelling Spirit when we see a change in our attitudes and actions. We discover a sense of compassion that leads us to react to harm with forgiveness and to be proactive in showing tangible love toward others. God has written the law

of love upon our hearts through the gift of the Spirit who dwells in all believers.

Jesus made it very clear that Christians were to follow a new law, a law of love that is not written in a book, but in our hearts. The decisions we make, the actions we take, are not determined by a manual of rules, but by a heart that is ruled by God.

We love God because God first loved us. When we come to understand Christ's love and to experience the Spirit's presence, it changes our lives.

Jeremiah looked to a day when God would say "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more." That is what happens when we trust in Christ. We are forgiven. The grace of God purifies our past and sets us on a new road with a new heart.

But there are some who cannot deal with grace on that level. They are people of law. They are people who can't get out of the Old Testament, out of the old covenant. They cannot get out of the rulebook and into a relationship. 📖

Jeremiah looked beyond a religion based on rules to the covenant based on relationship that God always intended. The great promise he foresaw has now been offered to every person. Jesus Christ stands ready to forgive us completely, to set us free from sin and death, if only we will accept the amazing grace he offers.

We may choose to hold on to our old way of thinking, but our end will be the same. We will live dark and bitter lives and die a dark and bitter death when there is light for the asking. On the other hand, we may choose the path of grace. We are sinners and we know it, but when confronted with the amazing grace of God's love, we can look past our sin and be changed from the heart-side out.

We can, in short, become *new*. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 27, 2019

Joel 2:23-32

## *A Harvest to Remember*

**P**icture yourself as an ancient subsistence farmer whose fields of wheat and barley provide grain for the simple bread your family relies on for survival. Imagine the hard work that goes into removing rocks and tilling the soil, perhaps with the help of an ox or donkey, then sowing the seed by hand, raking the field, and praying for rain.

Let's say it's a good year for rain, and the grain grows tall. As it ripens, you and the family smile with anticipation in knowing there will be grain enough to grind into flour for each day's bread until the next harvest. Life is good.

But then.

Then the horizon grows dark with a massive and noisy cloud of locusts. The cloud is thick and wide and hungry. The locusts swarm over your homes and your fields and every field for many miles around. They eat with abandon and move on only when nothing remains.

You are devastated, and so is everyone else in the small country in which you live. There is no international relief organization to help. Hunger becomes rampant. Tensions rise. Neighbors steal grain that others have carefully preserved to sow the next crop. Bodies grow thin. Children starve.

*Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2: 28-29)*

Would you be in a mood to pray for a better day?

### **Days of trial**

Something like this scenario apparently lay behind the hopeful preaching of Joel, a little-known prophet who lived in and about Jerusalem at some desperate time in Judah's history. The superscription of the book names only Joel and his father, giving no clue as to the date of his preaching. We cannot be certain, but some evidence suggests that he lived in the neighborhood of 400 BCE, more than a century after exiles were allowed to return from Babylon and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. (For more, see "The Hardest Question" in the online resources.)

The locust plague was apparently accompanied by a drought so severe that it would become legendary (1:2-12), and Joel interpreted the hard times as divine punishment for the people's shortcomings. So, he called on the elders and priests to proclaim a fast and a solemn assembly, leading the people in a time of mourning and repentance (1:8-14), to which he added his own lament (1:19-20).

While predicting further trials (2:1-11), Joel spoke for Yahweh in calling the people to "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with

weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing" (2:12).

Basing his sermons on the covenant theology in which God promised blessings to the faithful and showed grace to the penitent, Joel quoted from Exod. 34:6 as he pleaded: "Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."

"Who knows whether he will not turn and relent?" Joel asked, "... and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God?" (2:13-14).

The call to lament continues in 2:15-17, a plea for God to spare the people lest they become a derisive byword among other peoples, who might taunt: "Where is their God?"

### **Days of plenty (vv. 23-27)**

The ardent plea would bring a response, Joel believed. He proclaimed that Yahweh would take pity on the people and restore the fertility of the land so they could eat and be satisfied without fear of either armies or drought (2:18-22).

This brings us to our text for the day, which is reminiscent of many psalms of lament in which a plaintive cry is followed by an outburst of praise. "O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God," Joel declared, "for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil" (vv. 23-24).

God would "repay" Israel for

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what the army of locusts had stolen, Joel said. He used the same four-fold terminology for the ravaging insects he had employed in 1:4, speaking of the “cutting locust,” “swarming locust,” “hopping locust,” and “destroying locust.”<sup>U</sup> With God’s blessing, the locusts would depart, the rains would come, and the people would have more than enough to eat and drink. Soon their coming prosperity would wipe away the shame of their former penury (v. 26).

The promised demonstration of divine favor had a purpose beyond the provision of food, however. The people would learn an important spiritual lesson: “You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other” (v. 27a).<sup>U</sup>

Just as certainly as the people needed food, they needed God – and the same is true for us. Few of us know what it is like to face real hunger. We live in a land of abundance where food is plentiful and much of it is cheap. If anything, we suffer from having too much food too easily available.

But spiritual hunger is another matter. We may be surrounded by churches, own several Bibles, have many Christian friends, and still live in spiritual poverty. Joel’s call for lamentation and repentance is ever pertinent to those who have let the lure of materialism or the pressures of power or the appeal of self-centered desires take over like a cloud of locusts, leaving little room in their lives for God.

Joel reminds us that God is in our midst and available to us. How available are we to God?

### Days to come (vv. 28-32)

If vv. 23-27 brought good news, vv. 28-32 are even better. Joel looked further ahead, and spoke these memorable words in behalf of Yahweh:

“Then afterward, I will pour out

my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

“I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls” (vv. 28-32: the Hebrew Bible numbers the verses differently, with 2:28-32 set apart in a new chapter, appearing as 3:1-5).

Joel’s prophecy looked to a time when there would be no distinction between men and women, old and young, slave and free. In that day God’s Spirit would no longer be available to rare prophets alone, but to everyone: sons and daughters would prophesy, old and young would have spiritual dreams and visions, even slaves would have full access to God’s Spirit.<sup>U</sup>

Using typical “day of the LORD” terminology, Joel spoke of cosmic portents visible in the heavens before God’s awesome inbreaking, when “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

If these verses sound familiar, it’s because Peter quoted them almost verbatim as the text of the first Christian sermon known to us (the sermon is found in Acts 2:14-35; the citation from Joel is in vv. 16-21). On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended on the gathered believers and they began to speak in various tongues, Peter defended their unusual behavior by arguing that Joel’s prophecy had come to pass.

The believers spoke not only in

new tongues, but with power, which Peter saw as unmistakable evidence of the Spirit’s presence. Given that he included the prediction of cosmic portents in his citation, Peter must have concluded that the darkening of the sun and earthquakes reported on the afternoon of Jesus’ crucifixion (Matt. 27:50-54, Luke 23:44-48) had fulfilled Joel’s promise of heavenly signs marking the coming of a new age.

Things had looked dark for a long time. The deliverance Israel had long hoped for had not come. But now, there was Jesus. But now, there was the Spirit. But now, something new and different and vital and growing was happening. But now, God was at work in the world in a tangible way, and anyone could see it working in the lives of the disciples, and anyone who denied it was wearing blinders.

Death no longer reigned. Despair was no longer in command. The dark plague of doom no longer hung over the future because Christ had come, and had overcome, and had brought light and life into the world.

The new life and spiritual endowment that Joel prophesied and that Peter proclaimed was available to everyone: “everyone who calls upon the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

That was good news, and it still is. Christ desires to dwell in our midst – in our very lives – and to give us power to live and to love and to overcome even the darkest of days.

When we face bleak times in our lives, times that drive us to desperate prayer, we may be confident that God is still gracious and compassionate and willing to pour out the Spirit of Christ upon us.

Because of this, we may join Joel’s chorus in singing “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God” (v. 23a).

Have you done any singing lately? **NFJ**

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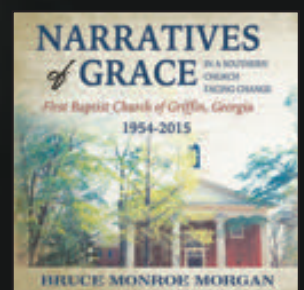
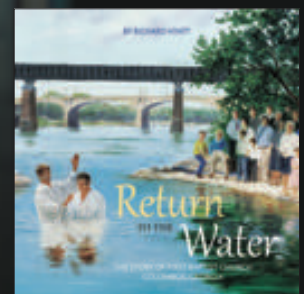
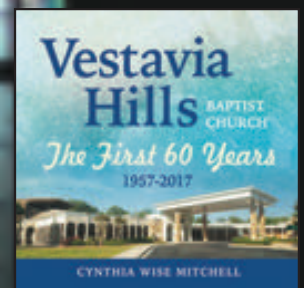
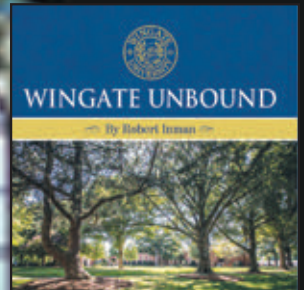
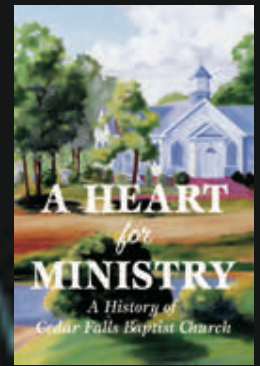
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# CONTEXT

## and controversy

A brief history of abortion

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Rob Schenck, evangelical minister and former anti-abortion activist and movement leader, recently reflected upon his past life in a piece in the *New York Times* titled “I Was an Anti-Abortion Crusader. Now I Support *Roe v. Wade*” (May 30, 2019).

“I have witnessed firsthand,” Schenck wrote, “and now appreciate the full significance of the terrible poverty, social marginalization and bald-faced racism that persists in many of the states whose legislators are now essentially banning abortion.”

### ACTIVISM

Frequently arrested and jailed for his anti-abortion activism over the course of three decades, Schenck, a leader of Operation Rescue, spent time in prison with many of the very people anti-abortion activists often target: minorities and poor whites.

“I’d like to think,” Schenck says of women forced to have children for whom they cannot adequately provide care, “that the churches and pro-life organizations I worked with for those 30 years would provide the necessary tens of millions of dollars, thousands of volunteer hours, extensive social services, medical and dental care, educational support, food, clothing and spiritual assistance. But I suspect — frankly, I know — that they cannot or will not.”

Chastised by New Testament commands to provide for the physical needs of the poor, marginalized and oppressed, the former anti-abortion crusader confesses: “I can no longer pretend that telling poor pregnant women they have just one option — give birth and try your luck raising a child, even though the odds are stacked against you — is ‘pro-life’ in any meaningful sense. And when this message is delivered to poor women by overwhelmingly middle- or upper-class white men (as most of the legislators passing these laws are), it adds insult to injury.”

Though no longer an anti-abortion crusader, Rob Schenck considers himself a pro-life activist.

### PRO-LIFE?

Schenck’s story is the story of America, a story of a nation that has never truly valued all life, and one thread of a larger story of how many white Christians for some 400 years have justified hatred, persecution and even terrorism against persons whose lives they deem less worthy.

From the beginning in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Jamestown Colony, dominant white Christians in what is now America divided human beings into distinct camps: those worthy of life, and persons whose lives lacked such worth.

White males, especially of Anglo-Saxon heritage, resided at the top of the hierarchy

of humanity. White women lived below, submissive to white males, their bodies valued primarily as vessels for childbearing.

Among the white population, the wealthy reigned at the top with poor whites far below.

Below poor whites fell people of other color, undesirable as mates, unworthy of sympathy, and sometimes not even considered human. Destined to serve the superior white race, their lives were often deemed expendable.

### DIVINE CLAIMS

From the upper reaches white supremacist Christianity focused on an exclusive, stern God. Dismissive of Jesus’ earthly social justice teachings, their God reinforced the hierarchy, selectively appropriating the Bible to maintain at any cost a proper social and cultural order.

The historical white Christian supremacist, anti-life culture in America has taken many forms including the denial of rights to women, the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of black peoples.

Legislative efforts to right some of those wrongs didn’t stop the abuse and discrimination. Jim Crow laws, racial apartheid, white Christian terrorism against African Americans, resistance to equality and civil rights for minorities and continuing legal, judicial and economic discrimination against non-whites followed.



Rob Schenck prays in a church during a scene from “The Armor of Light.” Photo by Jeff Hutchens, courtesy of Fork Films

Remaining are resistance to living wages for poor people of all color, the stigmatization of social services assistance, opposition to immigrants of color and the denial of equal abortion access to impoverished women.

In each instance throughout American history, white Christian males selectively deployed the Bible in claiming God’s mandate for their oppression of others.

## BIG QUESTION

Abortion is nearly as old as humanity and intersects a pivotal question that still lacks a fully agreed-upon answer: When does human life begin?

Religious thought has never offered clarity on the beginning of human life. Within all three major world religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — foundational, ancient holy texts are ambiguous and religious leaders have never been in complete agreement regarding the beginning of human life.

In similar fashion, consensus cannot be found within the scientific community, past or present. Individual scientists across

disciplines related to human development generally identify some point on a spectrum from fertilization to viability, the latter being the ability of the fetus to live outside of the womb.

Current prenatal care technology and procedures have significantly lowered the point of viability. Hospitals with leading prenatal facilities can now provide life-saving care as early as 22 to 26 weeks of pregnancy, or sixth month of pregnancy, albeit with significant developmental risk.

Many scientists prefer to leave the question of when life begins — and hence the debate over abortion — to philosophy, politics, psychology, religion or emotional responses.

Modern technology allowing one to peer into the womb, including ultrasound-produced sonograms and abdominal fetal ECGs, may influence public opinion about abortion. However, studies indicate that pregnant women who view a sonogram of their fetus rarely change their minds regarding abortion, whether for or against.

Nonetheless, anti-abortion activists often use images of fetuses to try and change the minds of women seeking abortions.

## EVOLVING

Throughout the course of some two centuries of Christian history there have been various and changing positions on abortion. In early Christian history and in the face of biblical uncertainty, many Christian thinkers did not equate conception with life.

Rather, they identified the beginning of human life at the point of the infusion of a soul within a fetus, the event marked by the unborn baby’s first kick within the womb.

Known as “ensoulment,” the theological concept of soul married to a baby’s identifiable movement in the womb typically took place in the second trimester of pregnancy.

This understanding of human life beginning late in pregnancy spans most of Christian history. To the present day, abortions prior to the third trimester are commonplace.

In early colonial America, Native peoples and Puritans alike used certain herbs, whether wild or cultivated, to induce abortions prior to the third trimester of pregnancy. The practice was widespread and legal. Many medical manuals, including one penned by physician Benjamin Rush, a

signer of the Declaration of Independence, offered women advice on how to induce an abortion.

By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century many women turned to commercial preparations to induce abortions, known as “taking the trade.” But abortion drugs in an era of limited medical knowledge and an unregulated marketplace suffered from the same drawback as did many other medical concoctions: they were often poisonous.

So many women died from taking abortion-inducing drugs that in the 1820s and 1830s some states enacted anti-poison laws outlawing the sale of commercial abortifacients, rather than abortion itself.

The laws, however, were largely ignored. Typically used by middle and upper-class married white women, abortion, whether induced by herbs or medical concoctions, remained common, accessible and legal.

Meanwhile, an emerging women’s movement turned against abortion for feminist reasons. Husbands often demanded sex at any time, resulting in seemingly constant pregnancy and repeated abortions, both dangerous to women.

For reasons of safety, control of their

procedures. At the same time, dwindling white Protestants increasingly worried about surging Catholic immigrants.

Although abortion remained readily available to white Protestant women, from the context of a desire to increase birth rates some states placed new restrictions on abortion.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Pope Pius IX had an epiphany regarding the subject of conception. In 1854 he decreed as dogma the Immaculate Conception, a belief that Mary the mother of Jesus was conceived without original sin, thus allowing Jesus to have been born of a sinless woman.

Fifteen years later, in 1869, Pius IX discarded more than a thousand years of Church tradition by decreeing personhood at the moment of conception and mandating excommunication from the Church of women having an abortion at any stage of pregnancy.

## CURRENTS

In the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the combined currents of medical professionalization, Protestant angst and evolving Catholic theology contributed

life” in America of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, the Great Depression witnessed a surge in the abortion rate as employed middle-class women, fearful of losing their jobs if they married or had a child, created their own networks.

Joining “birth-control clubs,” they quietly obtained abortions at specialized clinics.

The first real crackdown on abortion, Reagan documents, took place in the 1940s and 1950s as the medical community and the law began enforcing state laws against the procedure.

Fearful women turned to risky self-induced abortions. Many suffered great physical harm from botched efforts. Some 5,000 died annually, primarily black and Hispanic women.

## REACTIONS

In response, many states prohibiting abortion partially backtracked, allowing exceptions in such instances as rape, incest, danger to physical or mental health, or fetal defect. As Reagan notes, however, most women sought abortions for social, economic or personal reasons.

*“I have witnessed firsthand and now appreciate the full significance of the terrible poverty, social marginalization and bald-faced racism that persists in many of the states whose legislators are now essentially banning abortion.”*

—ROB SCHENCK

own bodies and to reduce the size of families, some women voiced opposition to abortion, in its place asserting the right to control the frequency and timing of intercourse, thus preventing conception.

## CONFLUENCE

Here matters stood until a confluence of events in the 1860s in the form of the emerging professionalization of medical practice, a decline of white native-born Protestants, an influx of Catholic immigrants, and a theological decree by the pope.

Disparaging of midwives and homeopaths, doctors of the American Medical Association sought control over abortion

to a growing stigmatization of abortion. New state laws, passed as always by white men, restricted and partially criminalized the procedure as a way of shaming women.

To obtain an abortion, doctors often required that women first confess their sexual sins. Afraid of doing so, many pregnant women sought help through less safe means. Complicating their plight, the 1873 federal Comstock Law prohibited the distribution of contraceptives and abortion-inducing drugs by U.S. mail. Nonetheless, during this time few women were actually prosecuted for having abortions.

Leslie J. Reagan, in *When Abortion Was a Crime*, notes that despite prohibitive state laws abortion remained a “part of

Amid the revolutionary 1960s, sympathetic civil-liberties lawyers and grassroots activists joined forces to make abortion medically safe for and accessible by women. Their efforts contributed to the passage of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, legalizing abortion in the U.S.

*Roe v. Wade* distinguished between the three trimesters of pregnancy. During the first trimester women can freely end a pregnancy. Second trimester pregnancies can be regulated, but not banned, in order to protect the mother’s health. In the second trimester states can prohibit abortion to protect a fetus capable of surviving on its own, excepting endangerment to a woman’s health.

Although white evangelical male fingerprints had long been on anti-abortion laws, organized denominational opposition to *Roe v. Wade* remained absent.

Primarily occupied with maintaining white supremacy over African Americans during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras, evangelicals failed to coalesce around the issue of abortion. Historian Randall Balmer points to a 1971 Supreme Court Case, *Green v. Connally*, that paved the way for white evangelical opposition to *Roe v. Wade*.

## RACE FIRST

An earlier Supreme Court Decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, outlawed segregated schools and mandated racial integration. Throughout the former Confederate States of America, many white evangelicals created their own private segregation academies to avoid sending their white children to school with black children.

As religious schools, the segregation academies were not required to pay taxes. However, *Green v. Connally* stripped away the tax-exempt status of any organization operating a private school with admission policies discriminatory on the basis of race.

Suddenly, white evangelicals who needed tax breaks to operate their schools apart from church sanctuaries lost the financial wherewithal to maintain their last remaining space of racial separation. From church-operated grade schools to Christian universities such as Liberty (Virginia) and Bob Jones (South Carolina), evangelicals could no longer easily restrict black students.

In the late 1970s evangelicals, angry at what they perceived to be government overreach in the implementation of racial integration, were primed for a political battle. At the same time, Republican strategist Paul Weyrich, seeking votes to curb the power of the federal government, understood the potential political power of these white evangelical voters.

Overt calls to racist sentiments would no longer work, so Weyrich searched for a new issue to mobilize white evangelicals. In 1978, according to Balmer's research of Weyrich's papers, the political strategist found his issue: abortion.



By the late '70s, as abortions climbed in number, some evangelicals had become concerned about *Roe v. Wade*. Weyrich and anti-abortion advocates, working with Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan, stoked the fears and racial resentments of white evangelicals, convincing prominent leaders such as Liberty's Jerry Falwell to rally around abortion and support Reagan.

## WEDGE ISSUE

Abortion thus became the political wedge issue for white evangelicals, and remains so to this day. Declaring themselves "pro-life" and allied with mostly white male politicians, anti-abortion evangelicals, over the course of four decades, have worked to restrict access to abortion — impacting primarily minorities and poor whites.

As the historical record reveals and former anti-abortion activist and movement leader Rob Schenck now acknowledges, the so-called "pro-life" movement is in reality a political agenda led by state legislators and evangelicals with a very limited definition of "life."

Since leaving the movement a decade ago, Schenck notes: "I have changed my view on *Roe*. I've come to believe that overturning *Roe* would not be 'pro-life'; rather, it would be destructive of life."

"If *Roe* is overturned," he contin-

ues, "middle- and upper-class women will still secure access to abortions by traveling to states where abortion is not banned, but members of minorities and poor whites will too often find themselves forced to bear children for whom they cannot adequately care."

## COMPLEXITIES

Schenck's story highlights the complexities and emotional reactions surrounding the issue of abortion today.

"No doubt, many of my former allies will call me a turncoat," he admits. "I don't see it that way. I still believe that every abortion is a tragedy and that when a woman is pregnant, bringing the child into the world is always ideal."

"Reality, though, is different from fantasy," he continued. "I wish every child could be fully nurtured and cared for, and could experience all the wonderful possibilities that life can offer. But that is not how things turn out for every mother and child."

The intertwined question of when life begins may never be definitely answered, and few anywhere on the political spectrum believe abortion should be allowed unrestricted. Yet, most Americans, Christians included, recognize the complexities of abortion and do not want *Roe v. Wade* overturned.

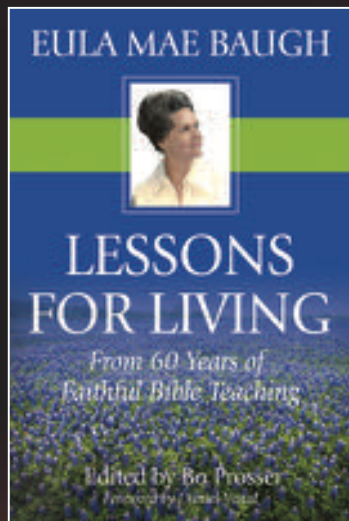
Within this framework Schenck's focus is on how Christians should treat all human beings, his words rooted within the teachings of Jesus.

"Put your money where your mouth is," he advises from his experiences in the abortion wars. "Devote yourself and your considerable resources to taking care of poor women and their children before you champion laws that hem them into impossible situations."

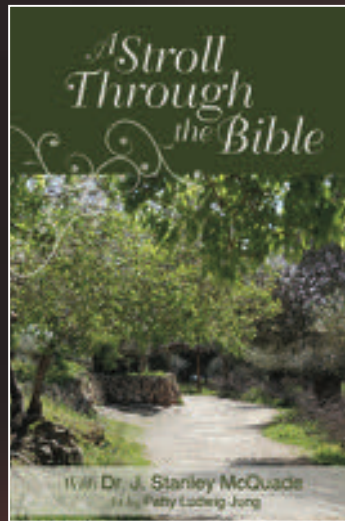
Regretful of his past duplicity in masking his anti-life views with deceptive pro-life language, the former anti-abortion crusader offers a sober assessment of the present:

"Passing extreme anti-abortion laws and overturning *Roe* will leave poor women desperate and the children they bear bereft of what they need to flourish. This should not be anyone's idea of victory." **NFJ**

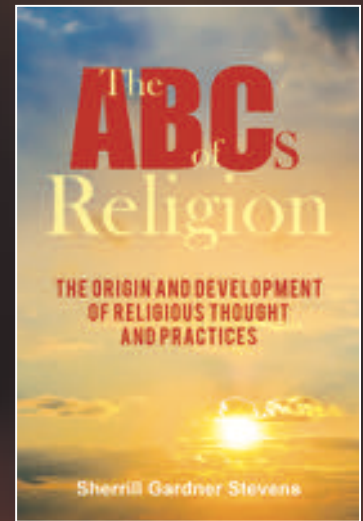
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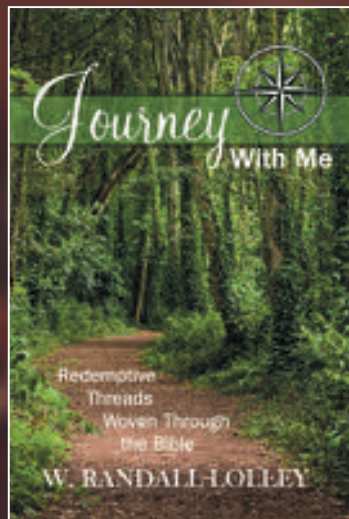
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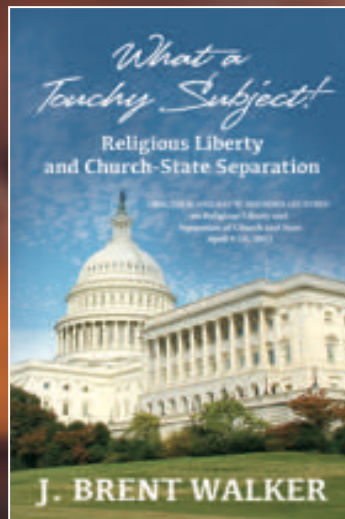
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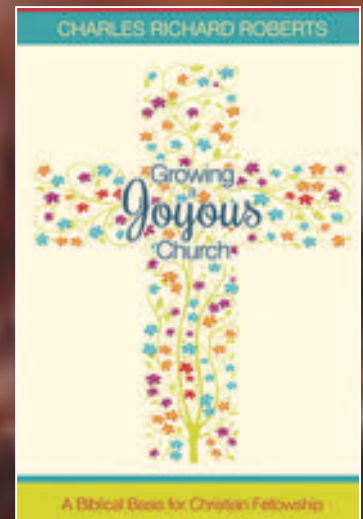
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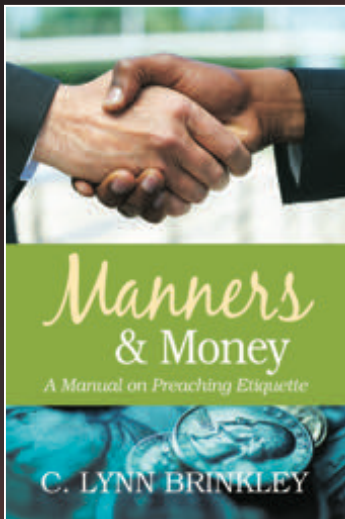
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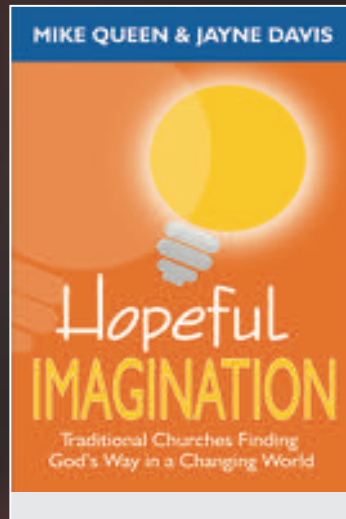




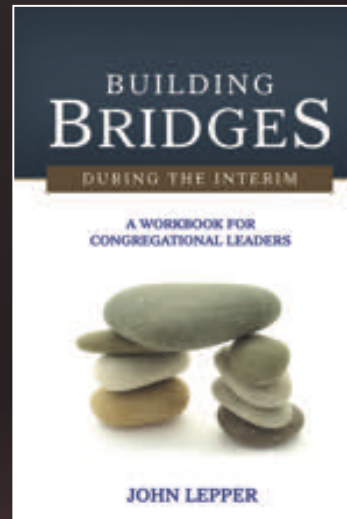
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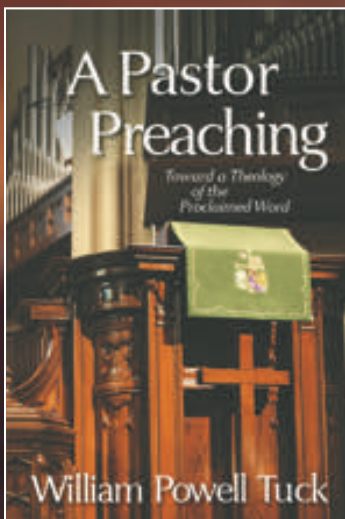
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# ‘Myth of Equality’

*Wytsma offers important, convicting insights for those willing to consider them*

A REVIEW BY JOHN D. PIERCE

This is an important and insightful book for those who dare to read it, and seriously — rather than defensively — consider its implications for one’s ways of thinking. Particularly if one is like the author Ken Wytsma and me: a white male Christian.

First published in 2017, an expanded edition of *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege* is now available from InterVarsity Press. Included is an afterword in which Wytsma, an evangelical pastor, reiterates the purpose of his writing and shares some of the responses received.

In this added material, Wytsma writes that “... for many evangelicals the fear of change is possibly a stronger commitment than the pursuit of truth.” He is being charitable with his use of “possibly” in that statement.

So many professing American Christians embrace a primary political ideology that has been baptized as the gospel although it contrasts the very life and teachings of the one they claim to follow. Having that pointed out, I can attest, is often threatening.

Yet throughout the book Wytsma

is humble and hopeful that: “Maybe, as American Christians, if we are to recapture our force or firmness in truth, it might only come in our acknowledgment of racism and resistance of injustice.”

## FACING FACTS

Wytsma doesn’t yell from the pages of *The Myth of Equality*. Rather he is concise and factual in detailing the history of inequality in America that is so often revised, downplayed or ignored — especially within conservative Christian circles.

I needed to read this book. Perhaps you do as well. While Wytsma doesn’t shame his readers, the revealing of the church’s past and present failures in faithfulness is rightfully convicting.

He challenges those who so easily dismiss, soften or reframe the idea of persistent inequality and injustice — hence the “myth of equality” that many Christians advance.

Wytsma traces “the story of race” through America’s European immigration, Native American abuse,

African slavery, the Great Migration and on into modern forms of segregation.

He carefully notes his inability as a white man to grasp the firsthand experience of those who face racial discrimination, and the ongoing challenge to recognize and admit one’s privilege. Seeking to give up one’s privilege is even more challenging, he adds.

Race is a “costly conversation,” he writes. “The truth is, we all love justice until there’s a cost.”

Wytsma references a Barna survey showing only 56 percent of evangelicals agreeing that people of color are often placed at a social disadvantage — lower than the overall national average. However, 95 percent of evangelicals see the church playing a critical role in racial reconciliation.

That oddity led Wytsma to note: “Taken together, these findings reveal that those who believe they are most equipped to help with reconciliation actually don’t think it is needed as much as other Americans do.”

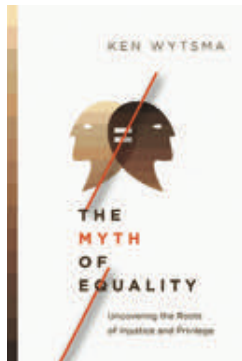
## COSTLY CONVERSATION

“Speaking only to safe topics, where agreement comes easily, can’t be the chief goal of faithful witness,” Wytsma writes. “It wasn’t for Jesus.”

So Wytsma tackles the major themes of privilege and responsibility in this book. He identifies his central thesis as “a misunderstanding of the gospel leads to a false dichotomy: we prioritize the spiritual and personal aspects of faith and devalue or nullify the material and communal dimensions that bind us to God’s creation and to our brothers and sisters made in the image of God.”

Wytsma is straightforward and convincing in stating that “racism in the United States is worse than we thought, its lasting consequences are more significant than we think, and our responsibility is greater than we’ve been taught.”

He affirms that “not all races were



created equal in America's immigration and naturalization policies" and that "slavery and segregation may have been dismantled, but racism remains built into our society, and its effects will last for generations."

He gives clear, historical documentation of those claims.

"Throughout our immigration history you can trace a pattern of how races or ethnicities were demonized and excluded," he writes. "When we fear a certain group, we exclude them — and then, once we feel okay with that ethnic group, we demonize another."

He added: "As Christians we have a responsibility, when we see a pattern like this, to break the cycle of objectifying and marginalizing other people groups and defining ourselves as against and above them."

## WHITE STANDARDS

Wytsma notes how uncomfortable many white persons are with addressing "white supremacy" and "white privilege" — often considering the terms threatening.

White supremacy is a historical fact, he noted, and cannot be simply associated with hate groups such as the KKK. Wytsma distinguishes between "hard" white supremacy — the intentional use of power by those who oppose equality — and "soft" white supremacy that is less overt.

He notes the "white normative standard" emerged from our immigration policies and social structures that means "whiteness became and was ingrained as the bar or canon by which things were evaluated or contrasted."

He adds: "Whiteness became the racial category by which all others were evaluated." For example, even the use of "white" and "non-white" reveals this norm.

Defensiveness about white supremacy obstructs a mature and needed conversation, said Wytsma. And suggesting that this matter concerns only the past is dishonest.

"To be clear, soft white supremacy isn't just that we are riding a wave of consequence of something that predated us," he writes. "It also speaks to a complicity in benefiting from racialized systems ... [that] must be dismantled so our society's foundations and social consciousness are no longer

under the lingering shadow of a racialized white standard."

## PRIVILEGE

Wytsma tells of being invited by the chaplain of a Christian university to speak on biblical justice. The university president, however, had forbidden the use of "white privilege" in chapel services.

"White privilege doesn't mean your life isn't hard. It means that if you are a person of color, simply by virtue of that, your life might be harder," he explained. "... even if you're the unluckiest white person in the United States, you were still born into a fortunate race."

Such privilege, he notes, stems from the creation of a white standard in the world during the age of exploration and the white structural privilege long prevalent in America.

*"Eliminating the traces of racism that remain within our society and ourselves," said Wytsma, "requires that we understand where that racism came from."*

"Eliminating the traces of racism that remain within our society and ourselves," said Wytsma, "requires that we understand where that racism came from."

To that end, Wytsma does an excellent job of tracing how and when racism — "a relative new thing" — came into the world and was used as "a handy way of justifying — in the name of conquest and even of religion — the robbery, subjugation, enslavement and murder of entire people groups."

He adds: "The idea behind racism — that one can differentiate between people based on their 'race' and then assign different values to them on the basis of that judgment — was deliberately fostered with self-serving goals in mind."

Advances in genetics, he noted, show how little diversity exists among all humans. "The concept of humanity's being divisible into different races has no scientific validity."

## ROOTS OF RACISM

Among notable philosophers, it was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that racism was detectable and then not widespread, Wytsma notes. Its usefulness came with exploration of the world and expansion.

"If you want to understand the world in which we live, especially the racial scars and divides that still plague our world, you'll need to wrestle with colonialism," he writes. "It is during the age of exploration and colonization ... that we find the seeds of racism as we know it today."

Wytsma continues tracing racism through the exploitation of Native Americans, African slavery, Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, the Southern Strategy, redlining and beyond. He notes the misuse of biblical texts to justify the most unchristian acts of inhumanity.

However, Wytsma is interested in offering more than a history lesson: "One of the central arguments of this book, as we uncover the roots of injustice and privilege, is that the effects of state-sponsored racism in America are very much present today."

## RESPONSE TIME

Wytsma offers both historical context and a theological basis for tackling the realities of racism today — noting the "simple, radical, biblical idea that you cannot separate God from love, Christ from love, or God's children from the call to love."

But there are many — with an understanding of Christianity manufactured in what Wytsma calls "the salvation industrial complex" — who do not embrace this basic, biblical truth.

It is time to come to the altar. Our conversion is incomplete.

"Instead of putting energy into denying that we're racist, a more transparent and honest response might be to admit our desire to be free from racist thinking," writes Wytsma, "and commit ourselves to searching for latent forms of bias within ourselves and trying to address them."

One might wonder why confession, repentance and restoration are so hard for those of us who once claimed that process as essential to our faith. **NFJ**

# Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–1961)

By Bruce Gourley



Eisenhower (seated, middle) with other U.S. Army officers, 1945. From left to right, the front row includes Simpson, Patton, Spaatz, Eisenhower, Bradley, Hodges, and Gerow.

Fear, patriotism, national prosperity and civil rights converged in 1950s America. Spurred by opposition to ascendant communism in the Soviet Union and Asia, government contracts with corporations produced the world's greatest military arsenal, amassing weapons capable of devastating the planet.

**B**eneath the existential threat of nuclear warfare, domestically America whipsawed between unconstitutional suppression of the rights of suspected communists on the one hand, and a landmark Supreme Court decision challenging longstanding racial apartheid on the other.

Simultaneously a growing military-industrial complex generated a mass exodus of rural Americans to cities home to defense industry corporations in proximity to military installations. A national economic expansion unlike any since the Roaring Twenties spread across America.

Public patriotism rose during an era of American greatness. Well-paying jobs with generous benefits elevated and enlarged the white middle class. Corporate executives earned relatively modest salaries. A top tax rate greater than 90 percent enabled government expenditures for the common good.

## GOD TOO

Amid the excitement God, too, got caught up in the moment. Superstar evangelist Billy Graham, crusading across America, cast aside America's heritage of church-state separation in favor of a new American deity

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*This is the 34<sup>th</sup> 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.*

eager to baptize military power, patriotism and prosperity.

National church attendance soared. American flags appeared in church sanctuaries.

Forgetting the tragic lessons of white German Christian nationalism under Hitler, whose Nazi Army marched under the motto of “*Gott mit uns*” (“God with us”), white American Christian nationalism right and left blanketed the landscape.

With overwhelming bipartisan support, Congress in April 1952 established a National Day of Prayer as advised by Graham. President Harry Truman, declining to run for a second full term as president, signed the bill into law while simultaneously declining to actually designate a day for prayer.

Meanwhile, Black Americans, long a persecuted and terrorized minority, led by Christian clergy and laity and marching under the banner of human dignity and equality embodied by a biblical God of justice and liberation, achieved a great victory in the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling mandating racial integration of public schools.

Indignant and angry, many white Christians of the South refused to send their children to integrated public schools. Some openly marched in white robes and hoods, terrorizing black Americans and their sympathizers with bombs and flaming crosses. Many churches opened their own segregated schools and reaffirmed their commitment to white-only sanctuaries.

## ENTER IKE

Into this charged atmosphere marched a man of personal paradoxes. Born in 1890 in Denison, Texas, to River Brethren parents of Mennonite heritage who later became Jehovah’s Witnesses, Dwight D. Eisenhower was raised in Abilene, Kansas.

Named after the famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody, Eisenhower later recalled: “Everybody I knew went to church.”

Nonetheless, the future president never fully embraced religion and, to his pacifistic mother’s dismay, graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. In 1916, while in the infantry, he married



Eisenhower speaks with U.S. paratroopers of the 502d Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division on the evening of June 5, 1944.

“Mamie” Geneva Doud.

The couple had two sons: Doud Dwight died in infancy, and John became an army officer and military historian.

Rising to the rank of five-star general, Eisenhower commanded the forces at D-Day in June 1944. A large-scale and bold assault on German forces that turned the tide of the war, D-Day paved the way to victory over the Nazis and enshrined the general as a national hero.

An appointment as the Supreme Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) followed. With outgoing Democrat president Harry Truman sitting on the sidelines, in 1952 the Democratic and Republican parties both sought to recruit Eisenhower for a presidential run.

Siding with Republicans, the war hero took to the field against Adlai Stevenson, a liberal Democrat. In a swipe at Truman’s failures and with another future president, Richard M. Nixon, as his vice-presidential running mate, Eisenhower campaigned on “Korea, Communism, and Corruption.”

Promising to clean up “the mess in Washington” and end the war in Korea, Eisenhower forsook the televising of campaign speeches in favor of 20-second

ad spots designed to identify himself with ordinary Americans.

Stevenson ignored Truman’s tarnished record, instead criticizing Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s unconstitutional treatment of suspected American communists and evoking Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies. But a national hero he was not.

Eisenhower won easily. Thereafter he shrewdly yoked his fortunes to the rising tide of white Christian nationalism.

## PRAYER & POLITICS

In January 1953 the new president read an inaugural prayer personally penned. Swept up in the religious fervor of the times and acting on the advice of Billy Graham, Eisenhower, not previously a church member, received baptism and became a member of the National Presbyterian Church in the nation’s capital.

Aided by Graham, Eisenhower’s religious transformation quickly extended to churches far beyond Washington. Evangelical church bulletin inserts praised the president’s example.

“In the World of Religion,” declared a 1953 church bulletin, “President Eisenhower has advised religious leaders that he does

not approve of the consumption of liquor at the White House, and has issued an order banning drinking by members of the White House executive staff during business hours or at any time while at their offices.”

The same year, a church bulletin praised Eisenhower for launching the “Religion in American Life (RIAL) Campaign, stressing the theme, ‘Light Their Life With Faith – Bring Them to Worship This Week.’”

The war hero and president welcomed Graham as a spiritual adviser in the White House, began cabinet meetings with silent prayer, and initiated the first regular, annual National Prayer Breakfast, a gathering of white evangelical political, religious and business leaders.

Themed “Government Under God,” the 1953 Prayer Breakfast represented a refutation of America’s founding as a secular nation. Embracing historical revisionism at the prayer breakfast and offering a stark contrast to atheistic communism, Eisenhower declared: “All free government is firmly founded in a deeply felt religious faith.”

## COMMUNISM

Bringing the Korean War between U.S.-supported South Korea and communist-allied North Korea to a stalemated close in 1953, Eisenhower turned his attention to communism at large.

Pleasing the white Christian community, the president effectively endorsed McCarthy’s Red Scare tactics of accusing, without evidence, suspected American communists of subversion and treason. Alongside McCarthy’s unconstitutional actions, Eisenhower authorized covert CIA anti-communist activities throughout the nation and world.

Tutored by Billy Graham, Eisenhower aligned himself closely with the white evangelical, nationalistic God. Consummating the marriage on Sunday, Feb. 7, 1954 on television and radio, the president effectively announced the death of America’s historical commitment to church-state separation.

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and often with the symbolic backing of White House occupants, the tide of the white nationalist God had been rising, lapping against the

seawall of America’s secular founding.

A steady swell of empowered Protestantism gave way to a surge of Christian capitalism in the 1920s, only to be checked by FDR’s popular and liberal New Deal policies during the Great Depression. Embittered, many conservative Protestants and Catholics embraced isolationism and evidenced an affinity for the white Christian nationalism of Nazism, before finally turning against Hitler and his allies following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

Upon winning World War II, a celebration of triumphant America quickly gave way to fear of communist Soviet aggression abroad and at home. Ideological warfare buffeted the nation. White Christian nationalists held aloft the banner of God as the only defense against insurgent atheistic communism.

A reluctant President Harry Truman, a nontraditional Baptist caught in the middle of the ideological assault and swept along with the gushing torrents of Christian nationalism, publicly endorsed a false history of America’s founding by denying church-state separation.

The seawall breached by the lies of white Christian nationalism, Eisenhower in his February 1954 address to the nation rode atop the religious surge.

“Out of faith in God, and through faith in themselves as God’s children, our forefathers designed and built the Republic,” he declared. Falsely re-imagining the nation’s early leaders as devout Christians, Eisenhower echoed the fake narrative of white Christian nationalism: such belief in God had always defined America first and foremost.

In this construct Jewish Americans remained in the background, despite Eisenhower’s abhorrence of the Holocaust.

## ALLEGIANCE

Now, the time had come to formalize America’s godliness. First, the nation’s Pledge of Allegiance needed changing.

Penned in 1892 by Baptist minister Francis Bellamy, the pledge honored America’s historical commitment to church-state separation: “I pledge allegiance to the flag

of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands; one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

White Christian nationalists found the pledge unacceptable. A compliant Eisenhower and a willing Congress in 1954 legislated a revision that inserted “one nation under God” into the pledge.

Eisenhower described his reasoning in changing the Pledge of Allegiance: “In this way we are reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America’s heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country’s most powerful resource in peace and war.”

Many churches responded to the addition of “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance by purchasing flags for display in sanctuaries. Inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance in defiance of America’s secular founding, the burgeoning alliance between white Christian nationalists and President Eisenhower portrayed God as America’s mascot.

In 1955 Eisenhower signed into law H.R. Bill 619, a measure passed by Congress and mandating the phrase “In God We Trust” be placed on all currency. One year later his signing of a second bill made the phrase the nation’s official motto.



General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chief of Staff of the United States Army by Nicodemus David Hufford III

America's white lawmakers, adopting language similar to that of Hitler's Nazi Army, celebrated the marriage of God and country.

"While the sentiment of trust in God is universal and timeless, these particular four words 'In God We Trust' are indigenous to our country," decreed Rep. Charles E. Bennett of Florida. "In these days when imperialistic and materialistic communism seeks to attack and destroy freedom, we should continually look for ways to strengthen the foundations of our freedom," he said.

## INEQUALITY

Meanwhile, in 1954, as America's white concept of God was inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance, the president refused to embrace the God of minority America, the God of long-marginalized and terrorized African Americans, the God of inclusiveness and equality.

The Supreme Court that same year, in a case ruling against the refusal of Topeka, Kansas, elementary schools to admit a young black girl due to her skin color, outlawed apartheid-like racial segregation of public schools.

In *Brown v. Board of Education* the Court decreed school segregation to be "inherently unequal." To fulfill the constitutional mandate of "equal protection" for Black Americans guaranteed by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the Court ordered the racial integration of public schools.

Within the states of the former Southern Confederacy many white citizens resisted the ruling by refusing to send their children to school with blacks. Some resorted to acts of violence and terrorism against African Americans. Many school districts refused to integrate. White congregations reiterated their own segregationist, anti-black policies.

A white supremacist pamphlet published shortly after the *Brown v. Board* ruling denounced, as had many whites for hundreds of years, black persons as intellectually inferior. Criticizing the Court as defying "these racial differences that God made," the publication chastised the Court

for setting aside "the basic laws of God and of nature."

Eisenhower, while publicly acknowledging he had no choice but to uphold the Court's decision, refused to endorse racial equality and privately voiced disapproval of the ruling. Civil rights leaders criticized the president for not taking a strong stand for racial equality. In response, the president tried to blame communistic influences for black activism.

## CIVIL RIGHTS

Summarizing President Eisenhower's lack of interest in racial justice, Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren in his memoirs recalled that shortly prior to the *Brown v. Board* decision Eisenhower, "speaking of the Southern states in the segregation cases,"

*More often than not, however, [Billy] Graham and Eisenhower appeared to be on the same page. When the Baptist evangelist cautioned the president to "stay out" of civil rights, Eisenhower largely heeded his counselor's warning.*

said: "These are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit alongside some big overgrown Negro."

In a heightened racial atmosphere, *Brown v. Board* hovered over the 1956 presidential election. Eisenhower's uneasy support of the Court decision on legal grounds contrasted sharply with the views of his repeat Democratic opponent Adlai Stevenson.

Although a liberal in many respects — including calls for a treaty with the Soviet Union and more government spending on social programs — candidate Stevenson, departing from earlier Democratic endorsements of civil rights, condemned federal intervention in segregation, declaring: "We

don't need reforms or groping experiments."

From racist sentiments Southern whites voted heavily for Stevenson. Riding a wave of popularity, a centrist Eisenhower easily won reelection, attracting nearly 40 percent of black votes. No subsequent Republican presidential candidate has attracted as large a percentage of the black vote.

The struggle between the two American concepts of God framed Eisenhower's two terms in the White House, a battle between white supremacy and minority rights, a contest characterized by white nationalism's condemnation of communism and civil rights as instruments of evil.

## 'STAY OUT'

"Either Communism must die, or Christianity must die, because it is actually a battle between Christ and anti-Christ," Billy Graham, an enthusiastic supporter of demagogue Sen. Joseph McCarthy, said in 1954.

Eisenhower seemingly agreed with Graham's sentiment, yet at the same time quietly opposed McCarthy's overreach in investigating communist influences within the U.S. Army, for which McCarthy was condemned by the Senate for conduct "contrary to senatorial traditions."

An enraged Graham condemned the Senate for condemning McCarthy. Eisenhower quietly approved of the downfall of the Wisconsin senator. McCarthy, disgraced, faded from the spotlight, dying of alcoholism in 1957.

Although overt repression of suspected communists faded, fears of communism continued to influence the political landscape into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

More often than not, however, Graham and Eisenhower appeared to be on the same page. When the Baptist evangelist cautioned the president to "stay out" of civil rights, Eisenhower largely heeded his counselor's warning.

Nothing seemed to change the president's reticence about racial justice, including the 1955 murder in Mississippi of 14-year-old Emmett Till, falsely accused of harassing a white woman; growing public knowledge of discriminatory sentencing policies in the South; the

1955–56 Montgomery, Ala. bus boycotts, triggered by the arrest of Rosa Parks for her refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man and ending with a Supreme Court ruling integrating Montgomery’s buses; and widespread white southern resistance to school integration.

Racial issues were “matters of the heart not of legislation,” Eisenhower insisted amid racial terrorism and discrimination.

## WATERSHED

Within this heated atmosphere some southern schools heeded the Court and peacefully enacted integration. At the same time, many schools resisted a second, May 1955 Supreme Court order mandating the end of segregation “with all deliberate speed.”

March 12, 1956 marked a watershed as congressmen from southern states issued the Southern Manifesto, a call for massive resistance to the Supreme Court rulings on desegregation. Formally titled the “Declaration of Constitutional Principles” and invoking states’ rights’ language of the former slave-based Southern Confederacy, the document netted signatures from 82 representatives and 19 senators in Congress, all from states that had once comprised the Confederate States of America.

Newspapers, domestic and international, headlined daily discrimination and violence in the southern states. The clash of white and black came to a head, commanding the attention of the world through coverage in newspapers, on radio and on television of the September 1957 mass resistance to school integration in Little Rock, Ark.

For three weeks the world watched in horror as National Guard troops, deployed by Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus, encircled Little Rock’s Central High School in an effort to prevent integration. Alongside the troops a white mob hundreds strong hurled violent words, including threats of lynching, at black students daily trying to enter the school building.

Simultaneously and in contrast to the events of Little Rock, President Eisenhower, hoping to stave off further civil rights reforms, signed congressional legislation designed to increase protection for African

Americans’ voting rights. A watered-down, halfhearted and limited measure, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 made but little progress in accomplishing its alleged goals.

Largely ignoring Eisenhower’s legislative feint, the press remained focused on the racial violence in Little Rock. Finally forced to withdraw following a federal ruling, National Guard troops handed the tense situation to the Little Rock Police Department. Growing to more than 1,000 in number, the white mob became increasingly violent, forcing the police to evacuate the undeterred black students.

Facing mounting criticism, Eisenhower finally sent federal troops to protect black students and escort them to class. In an address to the nation on Sept. 24, 1957, the president made clear his belief in the “rule of law.” At the same time he failed to endorse the Civil Rights movement.

## COMPLIANCE

“Our personal opinions about the decision have no bearing on the matter of enforcement; the responsibility and authority of the Supreme Court to interpret the Constitution are very clear,” said Eisenhower. “Local Federal Courts were instructed by the Supreme Court to issue such orders and decrees as might be necessary to achieve admission to public schools without regard to race — and with all deliberate speed.”

He continued: “During the past several years, many communities in our Southern States have instituted public school plans for gradual progress in the enrollment and attendance of school children of all races in order to bring themselves into compliance with the law of the land. They thus demonstrated to the world that we are a nation in which laws, not men, are supreme.”

Eisenhower also voiced his agitation at the publicity over the Little Rock incident: “At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that Communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety, of our nation and the world.”

Imploring white Arkansans to stand down while simultaneously ignoring

America’s long heritage of racial injustice and terrorism, Eisenhower declared that by observing *Brown v. Board* “thus will be restored the image of America and of all its parts as one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Despite Eisenhower’s plea for liberty for all, in 1960 the president, in the face of continued white supremacist discrimination and violence against African Americans, felt compelled to sign a second Civil Rights Act designed to protect voting rights for blacks. Again, the legislation did little in the way of substance, reflective of the president’s personal uneasiness with civil rights.

Failing to acknowledge the realities of America’s racial history and refusing to wholeheartedly champion racial justice, President Dwight D. Eisenhower nonetheless stamped his approval upon a number of progressive domestic policies.

## PROGRESS

Occupying the White House during an era of ample taxation, Eisenhower expanded and strengthened Social Security, thereby improving the lives of retirees. Legislation raising the minimum wage benefited working Americans.

Under his presidency the first successful U.S. space satellite, *Explorer 1*, launched in January 1958, one of the most important moments in the history of science and technology.

Remarkable progress on the ground also occurred as Eisenhower in 1956 signed the Federal Aid Highway Act creating a 41,000-mile “National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.”

Modeled on Germany’s Reichsautobahnen, of which Eisenhower had been impressed while stationed in Germany during World War II, America’s controlled access Interstate Highway System was established to serve dual purposes: domestically to provide “speedy, safe transcontinental travel” while replacing “undesirable slum areas” with attractive roads, and militarily to provide quick evacuation of civilians in case of a nuclear attack on America’s cities.

The specter of war ever loomed over the Eisenhower presidency. Shortly after ending the war in Korea, Eisenhower —



from his fear of communism spreading throughout Asia — argued for an American alliance with Vietnam, effectively taking the first steps toward what would one day be the Vietnam War.

Worried about a global nuclear holocaust, he proceeded to escalate the arms race. Despite the vast military resources at his disposal, as president the pacifist-turned-general only once sent American forces into active duty, a three-month intervention in a 1958 Lebanon political crisis.

Geographically, the 1959 admission of Alaska as the nation's 49<sup>th</sup> state brought America into closer proximity to the Soviet Union.

## PROSPERITY

Strategically, Eisenhower embraced free markets and capitalism as a non-military route to combating communism. Nonetheless, he perceived many businessmen as “crooks.”

Having spent his presidency creating the most lethal military force in history, in his presidential farewell address of Jan. 17, 1961 Eisenhower warned of the dangers of the military-industrial complex steering the nation into unnecessary wars in a quest for commercial profit.

Popular throughout his two terms despite many controversies, Eisenhower benefited from a period of national prosperity fueled by a post-war economic boom manifested in consumer products, recreational and leisure spending, and scientific advances, all chiefly enjoyed by white citizens.

Between his inauguration as president and his exit from the White House the first color televisions went on sale, large-scale polio vaccinations of children began, the first McDonald's restaurant opened, Disneyland debuted in Anaheim, Calif., and Gordon Gould, an American physicist, invented the laser.

Upon his departure as president Dwight D. Eisenhower, fitting of his personal paradoxes, bequeathed to his successor a nation divided. The government, having staked out positions both right and left, remained ideologically adrift.

Fears of communism and nuclear war overshadowed eight years of peace. White

prosperity towered far above black poverty. Civil rights remained stymied by white resistance.

## COMMON THREAD

Throughout all ran the common thread of religion. Within the space of a few short years America formally abandoned its historically strong commitment to church-state separation. Simultaneously, two contesting concepts of God violently clashed in the political and public spheres.

White nationalist Christians condemned communism; hoisted American flags in their sanctuaries; banished America's secular heritage in favor of civil religion; forced the word “God” upon the Pledge of Allegiance, on U.S. currency, and into a national motto; violently resisted racial integration and civil rights; and privileged white Americans economically.

At the same time, black churches, serving a God of social justice and human equality, marched forth to demand civil rights; remained steadfast in the face of white resistance and terrorism; felt the barbs of white accusations of communist influence; considered the American flag to be symbolic of inequality more than unity; and received only meager portions of America's economic prosperity.

## POST-PRESIDENCY

Befitting the divided nation that Eisenhower left in his presidential wake, upon leaving office on Jan. 20, 1961, he and his wife, Mamie, moved to a farm adjacent to the Gettysburg battlefield in Pennsylvania.

Upon that battlefield on July 1-3, 1863, the U.S. and the Confederate States had clashed at the height of the war over slavery. The victor of that mighty clash, in the minds of many then and afterward, would win the Civil War.

Suffering a devastating defeat, the South never recovered, losing the war two years later. From Southern defeat black Americans gained freedom. But in defeat white southerners resorted to a century of violence and terrorism in maintaining apartheid within the former Confederacy, ensuring the continued reign of white

supremacy and subservience of blacks that yet remained when Eisenhower assumed the presidential office in 1953.

Settling into life at Gettysburg post-presidency, the Eisenhowers did not entirely retreat from political life. An elder statesman of the Republican Party, during the final achieving of civil rights for African Americans in the 1960s, Democratic presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson sought his advice.

In 1963 the Eisenhowers joined the Gettysburg Presbyterian Church, a congregation founded in 1740. In this church 100 years prior to the Eisenhowers' joining, on Nov. 8, 1963, then-president Abraham Lincoln spoke.

Hours earlier Lincoln had dedicated the National Cemetery for the burial of Union soldiers in the Battle of Gettysburg. Afterward he delivered his Gettysburg Address.

Recognized by many Americans as the greatest speech ever, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address reminded a suffering nation of its founding principles of liberty and equality for all, and called upon patriots to finish the cause of “a new birth of freedom” for all.

In his address Lincoln, like almost all of his presidential predecessors only vaguely religious at best, and personally perceiving God as mysterious and distant, envisioned one nation under an inclusive God.

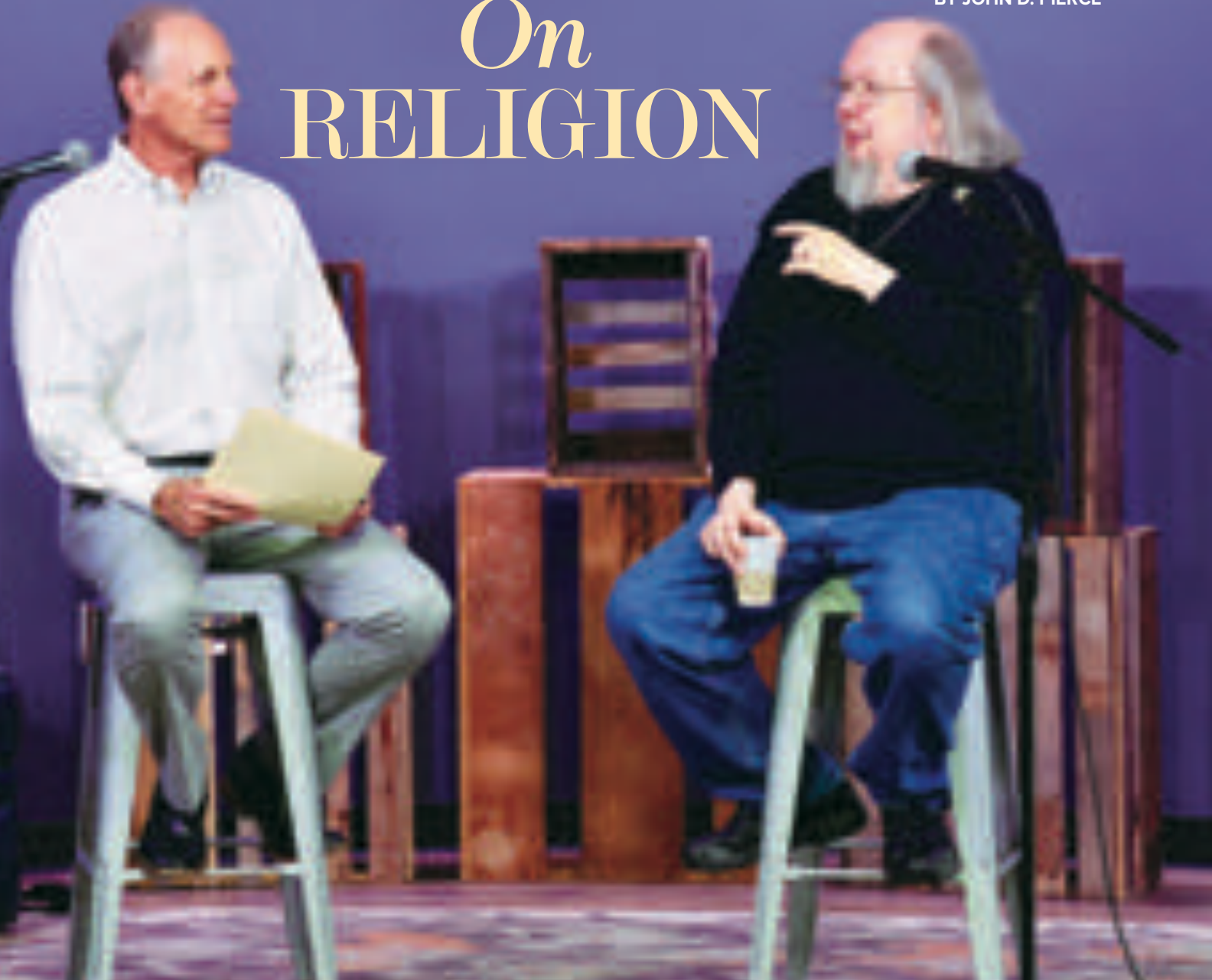
Following his address, Abraham Lincoln “attended a patriotic meeting” in the Gettysburg Presbyterian Church.

President Eisenhower, war hero of World War II, groundbreaking purveyor of white Christian nationalism, man of complexity, reluctant to fulfill Lincoln's dream of America's ideals of equality for all yet adviser of presidents who subsequently led the way, died in 1969 following two heart attacks.

He was laid to rest on the grounds of his boyhood home in Kansas, joined 10 years later by his wife, Mamie.

A mere 90 miles from President Eisenhower's final resting place was Topeka, Kansas, the city whose school board in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 lost the right to refuse admittance of black students. **NFJ**

# On RELIGION



**FAITH IN THE NEWS:** Religion writer Terry Mattingly (right) responds to questions from Nurturing Faith editor John Pierce in an interview held during the news journal's Board of Directors meeting at Central Baptist Church of Bearden, in Knoxville, Tenn., in April. Photo by Bruce Gourley.

*Syndicated  
columnist  
Terry Mattingly  
explores news  
coverage, shares  
personal journey*

**K**NOXVILLE, Tenn. — Terry Mattingly's syndicated column, "On Religion," appears in more than 200 newspapers. He is the author of *Pop Goes Religion: Faith in Popular Culture* (2012, Thomas Nelson).

In an April interview — with the Board of Directors of *Nurturing Faith Journal* in attendance — Mattingly explained the bridge he crossed from rock 'n' roll to religion coverage in his long journalistic and teaching career.

*"I was always interested in music, but I was very interested in the role that religion plays in American popular music. But I didn't think I had the stuff to be a national level music writer. I've thought about that a lot since then, but I think I made the right choice going into religion."*

## THE BRIDGE

A preacher's kid from Port Arthur, Texas, Mattingly would help bands set up for their gigs at the Port Arthur Teen Club. If he'd danced instead, he joked, "the deacons' kids would turn you in."

So he set up equipment for local bands including "a little band called ZZ Top, which some of you all might have heard of; they're in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame."

That interest — along with a bent toward writing that was nurtured at Baylor University — led Mattingly to cover the popular musical genre. In the late '70s, he had the chance to interview the then-highly successful ZZ Top trio in Urbana-Champaign, Ill., where Mattingly had moved for graduate studies.

However, Mattingly's interest in religion pulled him into what would be the hallmark of his career — starting as a reporter and religion columnist for the *Rocky Mountain News*.

That transition, he said, was most clearly noted during a happenstance encounter with a rock star.

"In the mid '80s I was in Denver, waiting in a corner of the lobby to land the first interview with the new Roman Catholic Archbishop of Denver," he said. "I'd arranged a private interview, and I am sitting there watching the three elevator doors — ready to get to this man before anybody else in the press does, so I can get him around the corner and get an exclusive interview. Journalists do this all the time.

"I'm standing at those elevators watching and I hear this deep Southern voice behind me go, 'Port Arthur Teen Club, right?' And I turned around and it's Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top."

In addition to his signature long beard and sunglasses, the rocker was wearing a red satin tour jacket with "ZZ Top" on it, Mattingly noted. And "at that exact

moment, the doors open and out comes the new Archbishop of Denver — also wearing red satin, but for a completely different reason. The two halves of my life met."

The transition from covering rock 'n' roll to religion was noted by Gibbons, when he asked Mattingly: "You went from interviewing people like me to interviewing people like him?"

## RELIGION WRITING

The two subject matters are more inter-related than some might think, said Mattingly.

"I was always interested in music, but I was very interested in the role that religion plays in American popular music," he said. "But I didn't think I had the stuff to be a national level music writer. I've thought about that a lot since then, but I think I made the right choice going into religion."

Mattingly traces his religion-writing career to his undergraduate days when he volunteered to cover "Foreign Missions Week" at the Baptist university for *The Baylor Lariat*.

"I went to this event and nobody showed up," he recalled.

However, Mattingly found that to be newsworthy — describing it as a reflection of "the beginning of Baylor's materialistic era with the business school quadrupling in size and everything else."

"I went back to *The Baylor Lariat* meeting and said, 'This is a huge story; I went to missions week and hardly anybody showed up.' They said, 'Well, if nobody showed up it's not a story.'"

But Mattingly countered: "You don't understand. This is Baylor. We should have people who want to be medical missionaries lined up around the block. It means something that nobody showed up at missions week."

Mattingly said the rest of the newspaper staff "just couldn't see it."

However, he said "the great" journalism professor David McHam summoned him and said: "I'm convinced religion is the worst-covered subject in the entire world of American journalism."

Then, after a long pause, McHam added: "You want to do something about that?"

McHam introduced Mattingly to other religion-focused journalists including Walker Knight, the founding editor of this newsjournal.

"Two years later, I did a masters degree in Baylor's Department of Church and State," said Mattingly. "I had made the decision that I was going to become a religion writer."

## PERMEATING TOPIC

Religion is sometimes mistakenly considered to be a separately defined category of news when in fact it permeates almost all the news we hear today, said Mattingly.

"Journalists basically worship politics," he said. "The religion of the typical American newsroom is that politics is the only thing that's real. The only way that things actually happen is either, I guess, business or politics, which means anything that claims to be religion is actually just politics."

Mattingly argues for a different perspective: that religion permeates the many headlines that are categorized as politics or culture.

"I would argue that ... in American politics all of our most divisive issues center on religion, morality and culture."

Since *Roe v. Wade*, control of the U.S. Supreme Court has dominated presidential elections, he noted. "That's because we've become so divided on moral and social issues that we can no longer compromise on anything."

Journalists who understand the role of religion in these larger issues are needed, said

*Journalists too often ignore the history and factual moorings of religion by assuming it all to be opinion. As a result, they miss important elements of a story.*

Mattingly, because many in media consider religion to be “an imaginary world,” and religious beliefs to be just “political beliefs in disguise.”

Journalists too often ignore the history and factual moorings of religion by assuming it all to be opinion, he noted. As a result, they miss important elements of a story.

“I could give you the next hour just telling you very important religion stories in sports that people blew in national coverage.”

Mattingly gave one example: The signing of basketball star Kevin Durant by the Golden State Warriors in 2016, although it meant less money than he could have made elsewhere and sharing the ball with other star players.

Most reports, however, missed the relationship Durant had with those new teammates, he noted. And others downplayed it.

“One news agency had the crucial fact, but put it 26 paragraphs into their main story,” said Mattingly. “Oh, just by coincidence, those were the four guys in the same Bible study and prayer group on the U.S. Olympic Basketball Team.”

[Editor’s note: Durant recently left the Warriors to sign with the Brooklyn Nets.]

“I could go on and on and on, but the basic rule here is politics is real, religion is well, you know,” said Mattingly. “That’s how most of the American press view religion.”

## **COSTS**

Religion news coverage took a hit a decade or so ago when “the bottom fell out of the advertising market” and newspapers began shrinking significantly, said Mattingly.

“The basic equation here is that news is expensive because you have to pay real people to do real work to produce copy that has attribution and facts and all that,” he noted. “Opinion is cheap. Just get people to write outlandish things, highly opinionated

things, people will click forward to make other people mad and you only have to pay them a freelance stipend.”

“So news is expensive, opinion is cheap,” he continued. “Well, you can see what that does to religion. They already thought religion was opinion and feeling and emotion, ... so why not save more money?”

The number of religion writers in America has fallen tremendously, said Mattingly, and the “signature agency to cover religion, the [now] non-profit group, Religion News Service,” is increasingly opinion-focused.

“I’m afraid the economics has pushed us even further into the world of opinion.”

## **ISSUES AND TRENDS**

“Mainline churches have been committing demographic suicide for about the last 40 years,” said Mattingly. “The question is why is that?”

Recently, he was asked by Catholic News Agency to speak with staff and directors about the four or five biggest issues affecting Catholic life in America.

“You expect the sexual abuse crisis to be issue number one, but I actually got to that one last,” said Mattingly. “I wanted them to see all the other stuff.”

The first two, he said, apply to moderate Baptists and mainline denominations as well.

“Number one is demographics, and by that I primarily mean birthright.” He encouraged congregations to find the ratio between active members and those under age 15 in the church.

“There’s no set number you’re looking for here, but in the mainline world there are hardly any children under that age,” he said.

“Whereas, I go to an Eastern Orthodox congregation in Oak Ridge, Tenn., which is probably 90 percent converts. We have about 120 in typical Sunday morning attendance and we have 75 children under the

age of 15. Whatever that means, something is going on there that has to do with family life, an embracing of what I would consider counter-cultural family life.”

Second, said Mattingly, is to ask how many people did you baptize last year over the age of 21?

“If you’re not at least in the neighborhood of five to 10, you functionally have decided that infant baptism is the norm for your church and that you’re only going to bring people into your church at the age of 4, 5, 6. It’s amazing to me how young Baptists now think children can make their own decisions.”

The basic question here, said Mattingly, is whether families or adults in general are being brought into the faith.

## **TRIO**

Mattingly said there are three doctrinal questions he asks when covering controversies within Christian groups.

“Number one is did the resurrection actually happen? ... Number two, the universalism question, is salvation found through Jesus alone? ... And question number three — I wish this wasn’t it, but this is the question of our age — Is sex outside of marriage a sin? Notice, I didn’t say gay or straight. I didn’t say illegal or anything like that. I just asked the doctrinal question: Is sex outside of marriage a sin?”

“Ask those three questions and you will hear some of the most amazing attempts not to answer...,” Mattingly continued. “You’ll find out some very interesting information listening to people try not to answer those three questions.”

Functionally, he said, he sees the mainline Protestant world as essentially universalist and sterile now.

“That’s not a way to have a decent plan for church membership and survival,” he said. “Sorry to be blunt but — anybody want to argue?”

## ATTENTION GETTERS

Mattingly tells his editors that the columns getting the most attention are ones about worship, such as changes in hymnals and worship styles.

“There’s a very interesting battle right now going on among conservative Lutherans in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church between what basically is the whole rock band and dry ice world of mega-church worship and a bunch of other people who have gone back to a reformed Catholic, very liturgical approach to worship.”

After speaking at a Missouri Synod Conference a year-and-a-half ago, Mattingly said he stayed afterwards for vespers and was surprised to hear an entire congregation of American Missouri Synod Lutherans singing the songs according to simplified Gregorian chant.

“It was beautiful,” he said, adding: “Of course I say that. I’m Eastern Orthodox, right? ... In my congregation, new music is something from the last 600 years.”

There are also cultural war issues that get a lot of attention when he writes about them, he said, “anything related to religion and politics.”

However, Mattingly said the most interesting responses he receives are about church life — such as a recent column on pastors wrestling with the issues of smart-phones and technology in their churches.

## FUTURE

With the loss of advertising revenues, religion news relies largely on support from those who value and fund such coverage now. Lilly Foundation recently made a multi-million-dollar gift for this purpose that brings together the resources of Associ-

ated Press, Religion News Service and another communications organization.

“By definition, you’re talking about nonprofit news,” Mattingly said of this grant-funded venture. “You’re talking about news that is basically existing off of donations, which means people have a reason to support it, which means they want to see a certain viewpoint represented, right?”

Mattingly said his primary concern is the continual growth of opinion and advocacy journalism.

“I can’t imagine anything worse for American religion writing than having more of it and that all of it basically be opinion-based,” he said. “That, to me, would solidify the conviction in American editors that religion is not really news. It’s just another form of politics and is opinion.”

Regarding the particular funding of this new RNS/AP effort, he added: “I’m hopeful but extremely cautious after this announcement.”

## FAITH JOURNEY

When asked how one goes from being a Baylor-educated Baptist preacher’s kid to a practicing Eastern Orthodox Christian, Mattingly spoke favorably of his fuller faith journey.

Following the example of his “spiritual father” — the late Father Gordon Walker, a former Southern Baptist missionary who became an Antiochian Archpriest but never said a “single negative word about his Baptist heritage” — Mattingly expressed appreciation for this spiritual upbringing.

“And ironically, Walker Knight [founder and editor of *SBC Today*, now *Nurturing Faith Journal*] published the piece in which I started my journey,” he added. “He

published it as anonymous because he didn’t want my family hurt by people that would know the last name.”

Mattingly noted: “My brother is Don Mattingly who created Centrifuge and that entire kingdom within Baptist life. One of the only people who built anything that both the left and the right liked in the last 40 years is my brother.

“My sister, Deana, is well known in Baptist circles in Texas. Her husband, Bill Blackburn, used to work for the Christian Life Commission and was a prominent Baptist pastor. He’s now the mayor of Kerrville, Texas.”

Mattingly said he basically affirmed two things in his piece titled, “Why I can no longer be a Baptist.”

“I don’t believe in *sola scriptura*,” he said. “I don’t care what modern people think the Bible means. Luther said he wanted the view of the Bible of the typical person of their age; that is the last thing I want.... I want to know what the people who gave us the New Testament think it means.”

He quoted G.K. Chesterton saying, “Tradition is a democracy of the dead. You’re allowing the saints to vote.”

“That would sum up why I went to the Ancient Church.”

“The second thing is just simply a matter of beauty,” Mattingly added. “We live in an astonishingly ugly era of American culture, popular life, media, et cetera.

“Worship in the Eastern Orthodox Church is beautiful, and I sang in classical choirs from the age of 6 years old on up,” he said. “C.S. Lewis would say that my imagination was baptized by that music early on.”

“Beauty and a yearning,” said Mattingly, shape his spiritual experiences. **NFJ**

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## NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE: ISRAEL/WEST BANK MAY 19-29, 2020

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covers the experienced guidance and insightful interpretation, all lodging (double occupancy), meals, tips, ground transportation and international flights starting from Raleigh-Durham International Airport in North Carolina.

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\$800 surcharge for those wanting a private room for one for the entire trip.

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Offering a unique opportunity to visit the land of patriarchs and prophets, to walk where Jesus walked, and to breathe the fresh air of Galilee, this customized experience will be expertly hosted by Nurturing Faith Bible Studies writer Tony Cartledge and veteran guide Doron Heiliger.

Offering much more than typical tourist agendas, the highlights will include an archaeological dig at Tel Mareshah, exploration of the Valley of Elah where David fought Goliath, and conversations with Palestinian Christians at Bethlehem Bible College.

Visits to numerous historical sites, exceptional lodging overlooking the beautiful Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee, as well as at the kibbutz hotel Ramat Rachel in Jerusalem, and delicious local dining while making new friends enhance this cultural and spiritual experience.

Other sites and experiences include the Roman capital of Caesarea Maritima, Megiddo, Nazareth, Caesarea Philippi, Golan Heights, Mount of Beatitudes, Capernaum, Magdala, Scythopolis, Masada, the springs of Ein Gedi, Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, and the Garden Tomb.

Take a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee, wade through the ancient Hezekiah's Tunnel and float in the Dead Sea if you choose. Explore the Old City of Jerusalem including the Temple Mount, the Western Wall, the pools of Bethesda and Siloam, Via Dolorosa and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

**REGISTER:** Visit [nurturingfaith.net/experiences](http://nurturingfaith.net/experiences) or call (478) 301-5655.

**QUESTIONS:** Email Tony at [cartledge@nurturingfaith.net](mailto:cartledge@nurturingfaith.net).



# NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCES

WHITEFISH/GLACIER, MONTANA

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Each day's agenda will be filled with adventure, fun and inspiration. Enjoy in-park lodging at the historic Many Glacier Hotel nestled beside Swiftcurrent Lake on the eastern side of Glacier National Park and settle into Grouse Mountain Lodge in the resort town of Whitefish to explore the western side of the park and the beautiful Flathead Lake region.

Optional activities will be available depending on one's interest and activity level while visiting "the Crown of the Continent." Delicious meals with new friends are always an enjoyable part of each Nurturing Faith Experience.

The experience will begin and end in Bozeman, Mont., where Bruce lives. So expect personal attention and local knowledge throughout the week.

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**Cost is \$3,385 per person (double occupancy) and includes all ground transportation, excellent meals, various activities and informative hospitality. For a single room, add \$850 to total cost. Participants are responsible for their own travel to and from Bozeman.**

# Questions Christians ask scientists

*How has learning science affected your religious life?*

I spent my first two undergraduate years at Young Harris College, a tiny institution in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Georgia. Those years affected me profoundly on a personal and emotional level, but also on an educational level.

Young Harris offered me clean air, quiet nights and an opportunity to exercise my mind freely, without the distractions and weird social pressures of high school. I loved it all — literature, history, calculus, even physical education. But two classes in particular opened my mind to worlds beyond my own: Religion 101 and Astronomy 101.

The first was a survey of the world's great religions. I had spent my life in a Baptist church and graduated from a Catholic high school but, aside from attending a single bar mitzvah in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, knew nothing of the world beyond Christianity. The professor took us on a global religion tour, spending a couple weeks each on Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Of the religions other than Christianity, Judaism was most familiar, of course. I felt at home with its scripture, its precepts of justice and righteousness, its creation story, its prophets and its God. It seemed strange that Jews still awaited the Messiah, but I was not unsettled or exercised by this difference. Everything about Judaism was recognizable and pretty unsurprising.

Islam was a few steps removed from the customary, and when we turned to it my fascination began to grow. Here was a global religion founded by a singular personality, a historical figure like Jesus himself, who

BY PAUL WALLACE

counted Jesus as a prophet and who claimed that his own expression of monotheism — not that of the Jews, not that of the Christians — was the true one.

Adam showed up in the Quran, as did Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Ishmael, Mary, Jesus and many others, but their stories diverged from the familiar ones in ways that seemed really important.

Also the so-called Five Pillars of Islam, the fundamental obligations of all practicing Muslims, seemed refreshingly straightforward compared to the whole “invite Jesus into your heart” business I had grown up with in the Baptist church. The differences between Islam and Christianity seemed so great.

But these differences were as nothing compared to those between the Eastern and Western religions. A deep conceptual abyss lies between these worlds of religious thought.

Whereas Judaism, Christianity and Islam come down hard and clear with monotheism, their Eastern cousins posit hundreds of millions of gods or zero gods. To the Western mind, Eastern theology grows hazy or doesn't seem to exist at all.

I was taught that Hinduism is largely unorganized, has no central personality or formal structure or absolutely canonical scriptures, makes room for whatever local gods happen to arise, and permits individuals as many lifetimes as they need to attain full spiritual awakening.

Buddhism is centered on a single personality but expresses itself across a

wide spectrum of belief and disbelief (even outright atheism), action and inaction, words and silences. Taoism was poetry to the prose of the West.

As a 19-year-old who had had only the vaguest experiences with his nearest-neighbor religion, all of this was both exhilarating and destabilizing.

It exhilarated me because it was so new and mind-expanding, but it destabilized me because it gave the clear impression that, when it comes to religion, no one really knows anything. It seemed that everyone on the planet was just making it up as they went along. How could I trust the claims of any religion at all?

Astronomy 101, which I took the following year, offered some answers to this question. Actually, what Astronomy 101 offered was not answers so much as perspective.

Sitting in the college planetarium, I learned about Jupiter's magnetic field, the Oort cloud, stellar spectroscopy, Hubble's law and all the rest. But these bits of knowledge themselves, fascinating though they are, did not themselves offer perspective — at least not when taken one by one.

Perspective came when they were all put together into a single, unified large-scale vision of the cosmos. The details served to make the big picture real, believable, and terribly exciting to me.

It is easy, as human beings fixed to the surface of our little planet, to forget the cosmos. We live deep in the human mix and rarely take a breath, step away, look up and take the larger view.

Back in August 2017 a total solar eclipse passed across the face of North America and amazed people from Oregon to South Carolina. This event evoked wonder and



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brought an enlarged perspective for everyone who witnessed it.

As I viewed the eclipse with my family (at Young Harris of all places), I recalled this quote from *Thoughts Selected from the Writings of Horace Mann*: “Astronomy is one of the sublimest fields of human investigation. The mind that grasps its facts and principles receives something of the enlargement and grandeur belonging to the science itself. It is a quickener of devotion” (p. 41).

The astronomical perspective, if held earnestly in the mind over months and years, produces several effects. First, by demonstrating the limits of our influence and power, it produces humility.

Second, it encourages wonder and reveals the miraculous nature of all things. Third, it shows, without ambiguity, that human beings are much more alike than we are different.

Each of these lessons finds an application in our approach to the world’s religions. First, we find ourselves on this tiny planet lost among an infinity of galaxies and time unimaginable. This knowledge produces an ironic effect: we realize we are subject to forces

far beyond our control and in reality we know very little.

Much of the knowledge we do have is provisional, or limited, or uncertain. Humility demands that we admit this includes religious knowledge.

Second, the cosmos teases us with its beauty and essential strangeness. If the universe is a bottomless well of mystery, so too is the God who continues to create it. Not one of us, Christian or otherwise, knows God fully.

Third, all human beings, without exception, seek transcendence, that is, connection with one another and with God. We notice our differences only because we are so fundamentally alike.

You wouldn’t spend time commenting on the surprising differences between a sparrow, a semi truck and a nice strong cup of coffee. It would never occur to you to do so. Our underlying sameness makes our differences obvious.

The same is true, I believe, of our religions. All of them, no matter how odd seeming, are good and outward signs of the

core human drive for transcendence.

Christians have a responsibility to learn about as many religions as possible, and as deeply as possible — since we live in a religiously plural society and knowing our neighbors is an essential part of loving them. But we must also come to know our own faith better. After all, if you’re looking for water it’s better to dig a single deep well than 10 shallow ones.

Here’s the good news: learning about other religions makes knowing your own not only possible, but also inevitable. You never see your own view clearly until you take a good hard look at the world through another’s eyes. And when you return to your own, as you always do, you will know it as never before.

Astronomy 101 offered me a new, mind-blowing perspective from which I could get above the human fray and see humanity anew, in all our religious variation and unity; a perspective from which the provisional nature of knowledge is made clear; and a perspective in which the mystery of God is always magnified. **NFJ**



# GIVING VOICE

So often the loudest public expressions of Americanized Christianity are exclusionary claims and self-serving ideologies lacking the very essence of what Jesus came to offer.

Therefore, alternative voices — crying in the wilderness of the harsh and demeaning civil religion rampant in American culture today — are greatly needed. Nurturing Faith takes that role seriously and freely.

Yet the very freedom that allows us to speak without self-protective, institutional restraints also makes us fragile. So your generous giving amplifies this needed voice.

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