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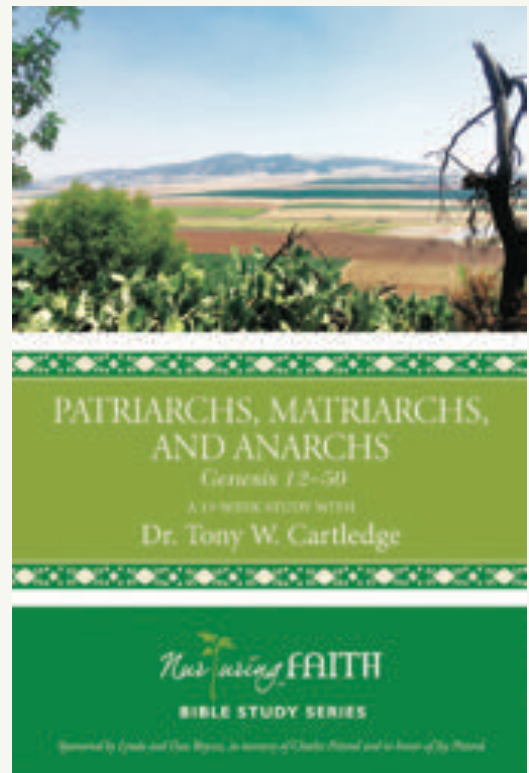
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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Changing seasons in the Montana backcountry remind us of the rhythms of life and faith, including the upcoming Advent and Christmas seasons.

Worth Repeating

“How do we help form ministers in both the black and white church traditions in ways that serve the purpose of God and bring healing and community?”

President David Cassady of Baptist Seminary of Kentucky that collaborates with historically black Simmons College in Louisville, Ky. (EthicsDaily.com)

“With the exception of current law enforcement officers, the carrying of lethal weapons on church property, concealed or otherwise, is prohibited.”

Updated policy from the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (*Salt Lake Tribune*)

“Our hope is that it will bring a very different audience into the cathedral. I mean, look around now; there’s a lot of young people.”

Jane Hedges, dean of the Norwich Cathedral in the U.K., on the large carnival slide brought into the nave of the ancient cathedral for a summer festival (*NBC News*)

“Roughly three-quarters of religious ‘nones’ in the U.S. were raised as Christians.”

Senior writer/editor Dalia Fahmy of the Pew Research Center on findings from the center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Survey

Charity is essential and I’m still actively part of charitable efforts in hunger. But charity can only do so much ... To end hunger — even to reduce hunger — we’ve got to get the whole nation behind it.”

Art Simon, 89, founder of Bread for the World and author of *Silence Can Kill: Speaking Up to End Hunger and Make Our Economy Work for Everyone* (RNS)

What’s driving a wedge down the middle of American Christianity is a failure to see the world as God sees it — a world where all life is precious and all are beloved children of God.”

Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas (BNG)

“This may surprise you, but God is a big supporter of naps. In the Hebrew language, Sabbath means simply ‘to rest’... After God creates the universe, God rests; and that day was made holy.”

Kate Hanch, associate pastor of youth and families at First St. Charles United Methodist Church in St. Charles, Mo. (BNG)

“Theological patriarchalism may not be a stated belief, but it’s revealed in the absence of women in leadership roles and pulpits. When patriarchal theology is allowed to prevail over protecting the victims of abuse, then I contend perpetrators are guilty of theological malpractice.”

Mitch Randall, executive director of EthicsDaily.com

“The values that Americans say define the national character are changing, as younger generations rate patriotism, religion and having children as less important to them than did young people two decades ago.”

WSJ writer Chad Day on findings from a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News survey

“Staying silent helps to avoid conflict and keeps people from getting upset... But when there is urgent danger and when something can be done, one needs to speak up. And so it is time, as people of faith, to talk about the climate crisis.”

Ruth Lofgren Rosell, associate professor of pastoral theology and counseling at Central Baptist Theological Seminary (EthicsDaily.com)

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Losing a preference for whitewashed history

By John D. Pierce

A series of *Washington Post* articles this year addressed how the brutal realities of African slavery in America — that began four centuries ago — are largely unknown by white Americans today.

Scarce attention is given to that horrific, yet significant, part of our history in much of the curriculum taught in American schools.

Such is not surprising, considering how quickly many of us are prone to “get past” those things that bring us well-deserved shame — keeping open the opportunity for current injustices to remain conveniently tucked within our blind spots.

One *Post* article addressed the negative feedback often received following tours of Southern plantations when the information provided included an honest retelling of the horrors of human bondage and exploitation.

“That’s not what we came to hear,” said one visitor.

Similar responses — or well-rehearsed and regurgitated, yet fact-free arguments — are often received by interpretative rangers at Civil War military parks. One ranger-friend pointed me to an article in *Contingent Magazine* that addressed this reality.

Writer Erin Bartram considered “why” historians are so often challenged — even when historical evidence for their conclusions is clearly verified.

“The discomfort comes from the fact that historians are often disrupting or

destroying connections people have *already* made between the past and the present,” she noted, “connections that may be based on no evidence at all, but that are an integral part of how they understand what the world is like, how it came to be that way, and what their place is in all of it.”

In other words, many people prefer comfort over truth. And historical truth is often uncomfortable.

That should be especially conflicting and troubling, however, for those who claim to follow Jesus, who is the truth — and said that the truth will set us free.

Not everyone argues with the truth, however. Many just want to ignore it.

On the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War, we published in this journal a series of articles (that became the Nurturing Faith book, *Crucible of Faith & Freedom*)

related to that historical event. Drawing from a deep well of research from his doctoral dissertation, writer Bruce Gourley gave an unfolding account of how Baptists reacted to the war.

The articles were primarily the actual words from sermons, editorials and resolutions offered by Baptist leaders at the time — with little or no interpretation. Yet some of the same argumentative feedback that interpretative rangers and plantation guides hear came our way: primarily that the war was not primarily about slavery.

One Deep South subscriber dropped

his subscription because Bruce did not steer the course of history in the direction he preferred. Another reader asked why we had to keep digging up all of that negative stuff.

However, both ignoring and revising history get us off the hook — reducing the possibility we will see current systems of discrimination and injustice that historians later will recount, revealing our failure to live up to the goodness we claim.

Perhaps worse than ignoring or rewriting history is pretending that all injustice has been rectified now.

Pastor Ken Wytmsa, in his book, *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege*, tells of being invited to speak on justice at a Christian university. However, the chaplain passed along the president’s prohibition of using the term “white privilege.”

Apparently, he wanted justice-light, the nice kind that doesn’t convict us or call for significant change.

Of course, “dwelling on the negative” doesn’t lead to hope. But understanding and seeking to make right the wrongs of the past and present are important for building the road to hope.

Some still maintain the nice idea that if we don’t talk about something it will go away. But, no: if we don’t face up to something, we can too easily face it again.

Facing our past and present failures at human equality is not a matter of manners, but of justice — a call of such importance to God that it flows throughout the biblical revelation.

It is as clear as, “Do unto others...” and love your neighbor as yourself. **NFJ**



HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Do we *really* have to love *everyone*?

BY E.B. SELF

Many Christians give great attention to salvation through believing in the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus. Some Christians share these beliefs but also think we should not neglect the life and teachings of Jesus.

What might Jesus expect of us in how we are supposed to live? Would he, for example, expect us to love everyone?

COMMANDMENTS

A big part of Jesus' teaching was love. He thought the second greatest commandment, after loving God, was to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-31).

He told his disciples he was giving them a new commandment, that they should love one another as he had loved them (John 13:34). Jesus even taught about loving your enemies (Matt. 5:44).

Nowhere in the New Testament do we find that Jesus specifically said we are to love everyone, but his teachings definitely point in that direction. If we are supposed to love our neighbors, fellow disciples, and even our enemies, is anyone to be left out?

Jesus disagreed with scribes and Pharisees, but he never said they should not be loved. Love sounds good, and there are people who are easy to love, but how can you love people you do not like?

LESS LOVABLE

Some people are not at all likable, much less lovable. It is even possible to lose faith in people in general.

A striking cartoon appeared in a magazine many years ago. To the best of my recollection, there was a glum man sitting in what appeared to be a transparent cube. The man was saying, "People are no damn good."

You may not be as negative as the man in the cartoon, but surely there are people you do not like.

What do you feel about people who do not treat you with respect and kindness or even common courtesy? Do you like those who jump ahead of you in line or cut you off in traffic?

Do you have positive feelings for obnoxious people who try to force their unwelcome opinions on you? What do you think about those who gossip about you?

If you believe you are forgiving and have high tolerance for unlikable people, consider some special cases.

How do you feel about those who physically torture others? What is your opinion of someone who has raped and murdered a young girl?

What do you think of mass murderers who slaughter many — including children — in schools or in places of worship? Where do suicide bombers stand in your estimation?

Did Jesus mean that we are supposed to love absolutely everyone, including people we do not like and who may not like us?

What is to be our attitude toward people who do horrible things? How is it even possible to love our enemies?

UNLIKABLE

Part of our difficulty is that we often think love always involves liking. Love frequently is considered to be very strong liking — but not always.

There is a kind of love that does not necessarily include liking. Jesus did not say that we have to agree with everyone or feel good about everyone or approve everything someone does.

Jesus did not say that we have to like everyone.

Let us consider Jesus himself. Did he like it when his disciples did not understand him? What did he think when they had little faith?

What were his feelings when his disciples deserted him? What was going through Jesus' mind and heart when Peter denied him three times?

I doubt that Jesus was very happy about any of this. But remember that love does not always involve liking.

Love can be an expression of goodwill even toward those who do not like us or who harm us or others.

RIGHT HEARTS

Our responsibility is to think not only about what other people may or may not deserve. We should also consider whether our own hearts are what they should be.

Think of it this way: A doctor is supposed to help everyone, even crimi-



nals. A doctor should not go by the moral worth of a patient or feelings for or against the person. The doctor may not like the patient, but the doctor is expected to render aid regardless. Perhaps not every doctor actually behaves in this way, but the ideal for doctors is clear.

What special examples should Christians consider?

Jesus was concerned about his disciples even though he probably greatly disliked their betrayal of him. Jesus even gave Peter three chances to reaffirm his devotion (John 21:15-17).

Jesus taught that God provides sun and rain for all, the evil and unrighteous as well as the good and righteous (Matt. 5:44-45).

Paul said that God showed his love for us in that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners — and presumably not too likable (Rom. 5:8).

Love may and often does involve strong liking. But love, especially for Christians, may express concern and goodwill even without liking.

If our hearts are right, then we will have the proper kind of love for people. We can be concerned about the welfare of people, including their spiritual welfare, whether we like them or approve of them or not.

HIGH STANDARD

But does love without necessarily liking meet the standards of love expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13? I think so.

Paul's account of love does not emphasize the presence or absence of the likability of the recipient. Paul's concern is with the heart and mind and actions of the one doing the loving.

Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 13:4-6 (NRSV) how a Christian is supposed to love: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth."

Did you notice that, in addition to many noble statements, Paul said love "does

not rejoice in wrongdoing?" Why did Paul make what seems to be an odd statement for his message on love?

Perhaps he was saying that we do not have to approve of wrongdoing in order to act properly ourselves. Christians are still expected to behave in a loving way even when encountering bad actions.

RESPECTFUL CONCERN

What should we think of love when we consider loving our neighbors as ourselves? How do I love myself?

I am not always happy about what I say or do or what I do not say or do. Yet I always have love for myself in the sense of being concerned for myself. Perhaps this attitude is the minimum of the love we should have for everyone.

Yes, police should arrest those who commit criminal acts. Law enforcement officials may need to kill a mass murderer before he takes more lives. And it is certainly reasonable to defend ourselves and our country.

But Christians are called on to act out of goodwill, not ill will. Also, let us not forget the possibility of change.

Matthew was apparently hated as a tax collector but is traditionally thought to have written one of the Gospels. Saul was a feared and disliked persecutor of the earliest Christians. He became Paul the missionary and author of many New Testament writings.

Christian love may and often does involve liking, but we should have respectful concern even for those we may not like. Loving everyone, at least in this way, is an ideal for Christians.

Salvation through Jesus is easy to accept. Living according to the teachings of Jesus can be challenging.

How are you doing, for example, with loving your enemies? I myself have a long way to go, but I know I should keep trying. **NFJ**

—E.B. (Ben) *Self is a retired professor and pastor with degrees from Baylor, Yale and Vanderbilt universities. He is the author of Ways of Thinking About God:*

The Bible, Philosophy, and Science (Nurturing Faith, 2013).



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The most disobeyed commandment

By Mark Mofield

“Fear not!” may be the most ignored commandment in scripture. Often, we connect those words to angels at Christmas.

But throughout the entire narrative of Scripture — from the time Abram set out from his father’s land through the establishment of the church — God has asked God’s people to not be afraid. It is safe to assume God is asking the same thing of the church today.

At the end of May, I was copied on an email asking for help. Receiving similar emails on a regular basis makes it easy to block out the various requests, but this one caught my attention.

Marc and Kim Wyatt, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field personnel working with refugees in the Triangle area of North Carolina, had learned that a Karen refugee family of five, including three small children, was arriving in a week. Permanent housing would not be available until July 1. The Wyatts reached out to churches to see if any would be willing to host this family.

My church has a recently remodeled and repurposed house used primarily for youth gatherings and to host mission teams. What was being asked of us was much bigger, however.

I tried to ignore the email because I was afraid of it, but God is very persistent.

A local family had agreed to take these refugees into their home for the last half of June, so housing would be needed for about 2½ weeks. That calmed my fears enough to take the request to our church leadership where there was unanimous affirmation.

Less than a week later, we welcomed the Say family into our Hospitality House. And, soon, we ran into things that had caused my fear. No one in our church spoke Karen, and the Says spoke no English.

Church members brought dinner



to the family over the course of those 2½ weeks. We were greeted with smiles, but were never sure if the time was convenient. I wondered if we were failing as hosts, somehow messing up their entrance into our community.

Then, on the second Sunday they were with us, the Says showed up for morning worship. When I saw them standing outside the door I was convicted to the heart.

They were coming to church where no one spoke in a language they could understand. We were all strangers to them, yet they were willing to be a part of our community.

I realized how many times I have let fear stop me from doing something, how many times as a church we had allowed fear to prevent us from stepping out in faith.

As refugees who have fled their homeland where they had faced persecution, the Says had much more to fear. Yet they were willing to take a bold step. And something in what we had done had communicated they were welcome to worship with us.

“We learned that smiles and hugs were about all we could communicate,” said one nursery worker. “But that was enough.”

Eventually we discovered the Says were facing two more relocations after already flying halfway around the world. So, we offered to let them remain with us until their permanent housing was ready — making the transition easier, especially for the children. Hosting the Says seemed a scary prospect at first, but now we wanted them to stay.

God is not just telling us to buck up and get over whatever makes us afraid. God is telling us to not fear what God is doing to address our doubts, worries and uncertainties.

The command to “Fear not!” is an invitation to step out of what is comfortable into the kingdom God is building in our midst.

Hosting the Says led our congregation to learn more about the persecutions the Karen people have faced for decades in their homeland. It made us aware of the thousands who are still waiting in refugee camps in Thailand and other countries, unable to return home but unable to move on to permanent housing.

Recently, we prayed with a representative from World Relief for the children who are trying to find a home here in our community right now. I don’t know if we would have had such a time of prayer if God had not removed the blinders of fear from our eyes.

Today, only one half of 1 percent of the world’s refugees are being resettled.

Today, I am learning how to stop giving God excuses out of fear.

Today, I am trying instead to listen to God and ask, “What’s next?” **NFJ**

—Mark Mofield is pastor of
Temple Baptist Church in
Durham, N.C.

Beyond Medicine

Discovering more in a hospital room than needed treatment

BY GEORGE W. BRASWELL

During a nine-day stay in a local hospital, I met some very fascinating people.

I am known for initiating conversations, and asking a multitude of questions of strangers.

Two of my hospitalist doctors who had, I guessed, Middle Eastern-sounding names on their white jackets, lingered as I conversed with them about their training and families and birthplaces.

One was from India, and the other from Pakistan. We spoke about the religion Islam. They asked me how I knew “so much” about it.

I told them I taught young ayatollahs in a Muslim seminary in Teheran, Iran, as the only Christian and American on the faculty of Islamic studies. I also told them my Ph.D. dissertation was on “Religion and Politics in Iranian Shiite Islam.”

Their eyes widened. Then I asked if they knew the imam of the nearby mosque. Their eyes widened again and asked how I knew him. I told them I had taken several thousand students and church folks to hold seminars in the mosque over the years.

They then told me they said their daily prayers at the mosque. The rest of the nine days in the hospital saw them frequent my room for “diagnosis” and more conversations.

We discussed Jesus often, as I mentioned that his name is referenced some 90 times in their sacred book.

At seven o'clock one morning the new nurse on duty entered my room and spoke with a British accent. I asked about her nurse's training and about her family.

She told me she trained in Great Britain. Then she and a friend backpacked

George Braswell speaks during a seminar at Campbell University Divinity School in 2018. Photo by Andy Wakefield.



across Europe and arrived in Teheran, Iran, where they worked at an international school.

It was 1978. She said they were at a famous square one day where protesters were gathered against the Shah.

I told her I lived in Teheran for five years and followed the developing history of the revolution. Then I told her the square where she and her friend were observing the protest was named Zhaleh Square — where within sight my three kids attended the community school. Her eyes widened.

She continued that it was becoming dangerous to be there and how that, as they started to leave, they saw a gentleman who looked either British or American. They invited him to the safety of their nearby apartment. He was an American who later became her husband and the father of their three children.

Each day thereafter when this nurse was on duty she came to my room to check

on me and discuss further the life in Iran. I asked her if she attended a church. We discussed the possibilities.

The day I was discharged she was down the hall, saw me leaving in a wheelchair, ran to me and hugged my neck, and said we would continue conversations about life.

The cardiologist assigned to me the first day came to check on me each morning. Our conversations revealed that his wife was on the staff of a local Presbyterian church. I asked where she received her theological training.

He replied, “Yale University Divinity School.” I told him I was a graduate of YDS too, in 1961. He said that he would tell his wife.

She later called to arrange for me to speak on Iran to 50-plus seniors. I did, and sold books whose royalties went to scholarships for graduating high school seniors in my local church in memory of my deceased granddaughter at age 14.

Many students have told me they have had similar experiences as ministers and chaplains in hospitals and other settings. They have been glad they took the various practica in world religions and missions I taught for some half-century.

What surprises are found often in the least expected places! **NFJ**

—George W. Braswell Jr. taught world religions and missions at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and at Campbell University Divinity School, which houses the George W. and Joan O. Braswell World Religions and Global Cultures Center. He is the author of numerous books including *Islam and America: Answers to the 31 Most-Asked Questions* and *Crossroads of Religion and Revolution*.

Running with the buffalo

By Mitch Randall

The day was growing late as our Jesus Worldview Retreat participants finished a wonderful meal in Yellowstone National Park. Before heading back toward the ranch we called home, we drove through the park's Hayden Valley just as a storm rolled over the sunlit mountains.

As we turned the bend, raindrops started to hit the van's windshield and a remarkable sight met our eyes. A herd of bison grazed on the hills, as the sun started tucking itself behind the mountains.

Our driver pulled over for us to get a good photo, but something drew me from the van. I leaped out and started running up a hillside for a better view, with raindrops splashing all around me.

Two bison bulls started jousting — a safe but impressive distance away.

The approaching storm started dropping hailstones, but that didn't deter my presence and wonder. I kept watching as the bulls snarled and kicked up dust, attempting to intimidate each other.

Dwarfed by their size, I was intimidated by their strength, which was clearly on display.

Standing and staring at these amazing animals, I could not help but recall the day Comanche Chief Charles Chibitty named me.

My brother and I were approaching college when my Muscogee Creek grandmother took us to see Chibitty in his home. He was a legend around Oklahoma as one of the last Comanche code-talkers from World War II.

Entering his house, we saw him sitting near an old wood stove fireplace while

smoke swirled around his head. After a few pleasantries, the chief asked my brother and me to stand.

He took coals from the fireplace and put them in a cast-iron skillet. He then took sage and sprinkled it on top of the coals, fanning them with an eagle feather.

Smoke began to encircle my brother and me, with the chief praying in Comanche all around us. As he stopped in front of me, his dark gaze penetrated my soul.

He told me of my great-grandfather, Mitchell Boudinot. He spoke fondly of my grandmother, a world champion fancy dancer.

He pondered on my father, a strong brave carving out a path for his family. Then he grew silent, staring directly at me, and thinking to himself what would become of me.

As we waited with anticipation, the chief finally spoke:

"Mitchell, a day long ago, the prairie was filled with buffalo as far as the eye could see. Our people depended on the buffalo, as they provided invaluable resources for us. Together, we created a symbiotic system that sustained life and ancient ways."

Then he continued: "As I look into your future, I see you will serve others as a resource. Therefore, your name will be 'Buffalo.'"

Watching the buffalo in Yellowstone National Park refreshed my soul and reconnected me with my ancestors. The Psalmist

wrote, "In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them" (22:4).

Standing near the buffalo, with rain and hail falling on and around me, and watching the sun setting behind the mountains, I could hear the songs of my people. Their song is a chorus of freedom, conflict and genocide.

The melody of the Native peoples can be heard throughout history. Their story is the story of others, as indigenous peoples come into contact with powerful systems of conquest.

My Muscogee Creek ancestors were removed from their lands, marched across the country, and resettled in Oklahoma. They were treated as a conquered people, their lands taken and their resources exploited.

Their way of life was threatened, as they worked hard to resist and maintain their cultural identity.

In the person of Jesus, they found someone they could identify with in their struggle for freedom and love of community. Jesus stood up to corrupt systems and powerful people, attempting to liberate those held in bondage by poverty and kept silent by oppression.

Native peoples saw Jesus as the great liberator, resisting the powerful as they attempted to marginalize humans and divide cultures.

As I think about nurturing ethics, I must acknowledge how my ancestral story has influenced my theological praxis. The Native struggle connected me with the Hebrew narrative of the Old Testament while joining me with the hope of the New Testament.



Editor's note: This 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.

“Running with the Yellowstone buffalo was a beautiful and meaningful moment, reminding me where I came from, and prophesizing where I am going.”

While I am a follower of Jesus and filter my belief and practice through him, I also cannot separate myself from my Muscogee Creek family. The blood of my forefathers and foremothers runs through me, linking their memories with my story.

Therefore, when I engage in modern-day issues and seek ways to interpret their meaning, my ancestors stand beside me. They remind me of their stories, recalling their struggles, and instilling their eternal hope that the Creator works towards justice.

Running with the Yellowstone buffalo was a beautiful and meaningful moment, reminding me where I came from, and prophesying where I am going.

If you are feeling like the world is spinning out of control, there is peace. If your faith has stalled, there is a new life

emerging. If you need to be refreshed, then living water awaits.

And, if you need a fresh start, join in on a Nurturing Faith Experience or ask about an upcoming Jesus Worldview Retreat.

In Yellowstone I found beautiful landscapes, soaring eagles and herds of buffalo. And I returned from this experience with my soul, my faith, and my heritage strengthened.

Running with the buffalo through rain and hail set me on a path I will not turn away from any longer. Therefore, I step out with my ancestors at my back and my faith looking toward the future. **NFJ**

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



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An empathetic response to why younger persons aren't in church

BY ANDY JUNG

According to Pew Research Center, the share of adults in the U.S. who identify as Christians fell from 78 percent to 71 percent between 2007 and 2014. The corresponding increase in those who identify as “religiously unaffiliated” jumped by almost seven points, from just over 16 percent to 23 percent.

No major Christian traditions are growing in the U.S. today. While young people ages 18–29 make up 22 percent of our population, they make up only 10 percent of people in the pews.

We simply have to look around our pews to gain a sense that we are missing a large portion of our youngest generations. The natural question is, “What happened?”

Why have we lost a large segment of our young people from the church? During a time in American church history when we have never put more time and resources into our youth ministries, why have we not reaped the fruit of our labor?

Unfortunately, I am afraid we are reaping what we have sown over the last 40 years. Out of great intention, we professionalized youth ministry. We built young

people their own dedicated space to gather, carved out a large percentage of our ministry budget for them and encouraged them to change the world from a distance.

We did everything to show them how much we loved and cared for them except one thing: we often forgot to actually get to know our young people!

In its book *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*, Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) studied churches that were reaching young people (those aged 15–29) successfully throughout the nation.

The research revealed a common core commitment of churches that are effectively reaching young people: they display empathy. *Growing Young* defines empathy as “sitting on a curb of a young person’s life, celebrating their dreams and grieving over their despair.”

What most young people have been missing are actual relationships with adults outside of their parents who love and care for them. Social structures such as schools, athletics, civic groups and even churches have helped to create a sense of systemic abandonment.

Young people now commonly view

pastors and even parents as too busy or too self-absorbed to invest in them without an agenda. Many feel they have been left alone in their journey toward adulthood.

In the years when most major decisions are made about marriage, childrearing and work, many young people feel acute loneliness and a sense of loss. Underneath the tough façade is a deep hunger for caring adults in their lives.

Every young person needs deep, authentic relationships with adults who can help them navigate the twists and turns of adolescence and emerging adulthood. This responsibility cannot fall to parents alone. The only way we are going to help young people navigate adolescence and emerging adulthood in healthy ways is to invest in their lives with great empathy.

As we walk alongside our teenagers and young adults, we also invest in their faith formation, helping them to experience the love of Christ through our words and actions. Studies have shown that young people who have at least five caring Christian adults outside of their parents who invest in their lives are more likely to stay active in their faith and in the church than those who lack the essential relationships.

So, how do we reach young people with the gospel? It isn't just the youth pastor or the Sunday school teacher. It isn't just the parents.

No matter our age, it will take you and me to invest in the young people around us by building meaningful relationships. It will take us sitting on the curb of young people's lives, celebrating their dreams and grieving over their despair. Won't you join me? **NFJ**

—Andy Jung is the associate executive coordinator of CBF of North Carolina. He leads CBFNC's *Growing Young* initiative, a partnership with Fuller Youth Institute.



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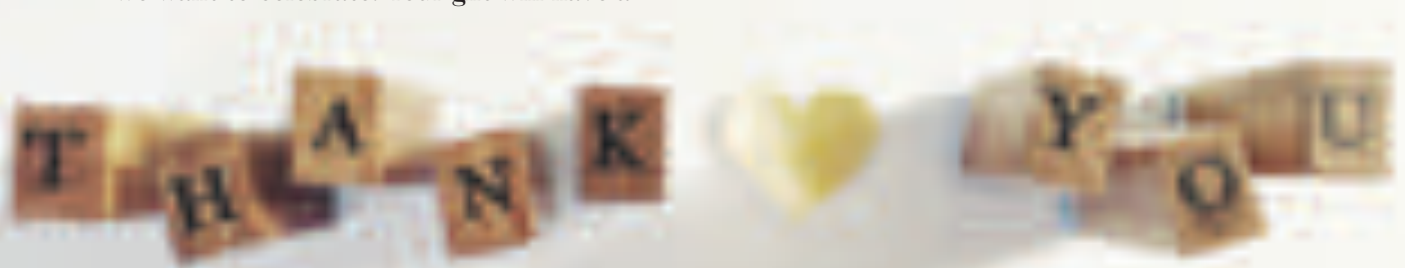
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“BEING
CHURCH IN
CHANGING
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This column is provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches (chchurches.org)

Signs of hope for the church in changing times

BY MATT COOK

Twenty years ago, an unprecedented collection of some of the brightest minds in the world turned their attention to poverty. A combination of a strong, global economy and the optimism that came from the beginning of a new millennium led government leaders, social scientists, economists and philanthropists to consider the hopeful possibility that extreme poverty could be eliminated.

They wanted to be smart and efficient, so before they launched a myriad of initiatives, they began to ask a very important question: What exactly *is* poverty?

You'd think it would be simple, right? Less money equals greater poverty. But what they discovered was that poverty isn't just a financial phenomenon. It is also and perhaps especially about powerlessness and hopelessness.

We've all known someone (or perhaps been someone) who had almost nothing financially but never lacked hope, never lacked the ability to make something happen. Perhaps you have even heard someone say, "We were poor growing up, but we didn't *know* we were poor."

And all of that brings me to the American church in the 21st century. For the past few months the Center for Healthy Churches, in partnership with Belmont University, has been working on a new grant funded by the Lilly Foundation on "Thriving Congregations."

We've been asking the question, "What does it mean for a congregation to thrive?" You'd think the answer would be simple, too: Greater attendance equals greater thriving.

In the 20th century, that *was* the definition of a thriving congregation. But now what we are discovering is that thriving is more complex, and becoming even more so as the 21st century progresses.

We are 50 years into what sociologists of religion are calling "the Great Decline." Detailing the evidence is easy: Fewer people are joining; giving in real dollars is flat or declining; and even the most committed members are attending less frequently than they did a decade ago.

More challenging still are what surveys tell us about the relative significance of religion and church for the average American and the growing number of people who don't consider themselves a part of any organized religion. Macro-trends for the institutional church are not good.

Yet, if you have eyes to see, there are also signs of hope in a surprising number of places. In Philadelphia, our team listened to the familiar story of the Westminster Presbyterian Church that declined as its neighborhood declined, almost to the point of death.

Today, where one church stood, there are three churches of two different denominations that are not only finding innovative forms of worship and faith development but also working together to run a community center called the Common Place.

In Charlotte, we listened to the story of a declining Methodist congregation that sold its building and surrounding acreage but not out a sense of hopelessness. The members creatively leveraged their resources and are now moving back onto their original campus as part of a mixed-use development where they will be offering shared space to their surrounding community.

In Dallas, we listened to the story of what used to be one of the largest Baptist churches in the country that has now declined to a congregation of fewer than 40 members with the average age of the membership well above 80 years old.

But that congregation is now surrounded by eight ethnic congregations made up primarily of refugees and immigrants who share their facility, along with a host of non-profit organizations that serve the poor and displaced.

These congregations may lack large numbers, but they do not lack visionary leadership or creativity. They are finding new pathways to alternative forms of thriving. Most importantly, none of these congregations lacked hope. Not because they were as large as they used to be, but because they could see God at work in their midst in new and creative ways.

Do we really believe God has abandoned the church in America? Isn't it far more likely that God is just up to something new and different?

I can't say exactly what thriving is supposed to look like for every congregation in the 21st century, but maybe that's the point. The culture around us is fragmenting, and a "one size fits all" approach lacks imagination and is destined to fail.

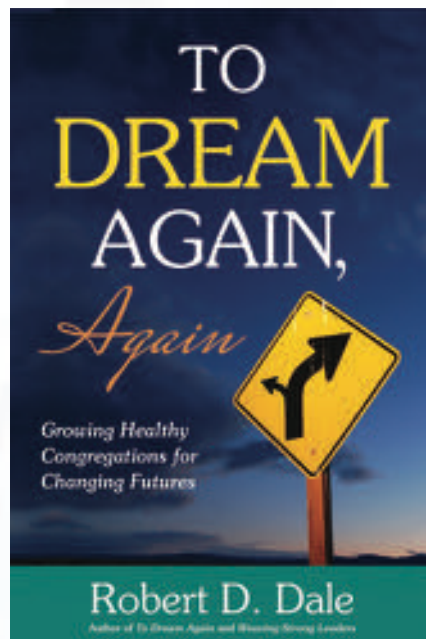
Now more than ever, American Christianity needs a creative, bottom-up, incarnational approach to doing church. I'm grateful to be part of an effort helping congregations do just that. **NFJ**

—Matt Cook is assistant director for the Center for Healthy Churches, following pastoral ministry in Texas, Arkansas and North Carolina.



HEALTHY CHURCH

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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 Lord

By John R. Franke

One of the central claims of the New Testament is that Jesus is Lord.

This has often been taken to be primarily a statement of belief.

However, the lordship of Jesus in our lives is not simply a matter of right belief but rather of participating in the creation of a new world. This is clear in the concluding verses of Matthew's Gospel (28:16-20), which have come to be known as the "great commission" — to make disciples of all the nations.

It is important to note that this calling is framed within the lordship of Jesus — "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" — and the presence of Jesus — "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This is a reminder that the commission given here proceeds by the power and presence of God. The followers of Jesus throughout history who have been baptized into solidarity with him and have therefore inherited this commission are not left to fulfill it on our own.

Jesus the Lord is with us in this work and ultimately it belongs to God, not us.

To understand the content of the commission Jesus gives to his disciples and by extension the church, it will be helpful to know something about the nature and structure of Matthew's Gospel and its particularly deep roots in Judaism.

Scholars have long noted that the five distinct sections that give overall shape to the work reflect the Pentateuch (first five books of the Old Testament) and its story of God's covenant with Abraham, Moses and the exodus from Egypt, the creation of a new community under God, and the giving of the laws by which the community was to live.

The fivefold structure of Matthew implies that the story of Jesus is analogous to the ancient story of Israel.

This background has led scholars to note the correlation between the "great commission" in Matthew 28 and God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12, "Go ... and I will make you a great nation ... so that you will be a blessing ... to all the nations of the earth."

The two commissions are indivisibly linked, showing that the Jesus story is intended as a continuation of Israel's story with a common concern: the creation of a new community formed by God's love and committed to the establishment of that love throughout the earth in order to bring about a new world — a world where the will of God is done on earth as in heaven.

We demonstrate our commitment to the lordship of Jesus in our lives by participating in this work.

In the Hebrew tradition, this vision of a new world is profoundly captured in the words of Isaiah 65, a world in which "no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress."

This is a vision of an alternative to the reality we see around us, a vision of a world where everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid. This is the world God



intended from the beginning.

However, we have rebelled against this vision for creation. Instead of seeking the well-being of our fellow humans, we have sought our own good at the expense of others.

In response to this rebellion God made a covenant with Abraham and called a people to bless the nations of the world and sent Jesus not to condemn the world but to redeem it through a life of humility, service, obedience and death for the sake of others.

But the death of Jesus is not the end of the story. Instead, leading New Testament scholar N.T. Wright describes the death of Jesus as "the day the revolution began."

Jesus institutes a covenant of vocation whereby he commissions his followers to go to the nations and make disciples who will follow his way of life and create a new world, the Kingdom of God, here and now, on this earth.

As we noted at the outset, this is God's mission, not ours, and we are dependent on the power and presence of God for its fulfillment. However, it is also important to understand that God has chosen us to share in this work.

To be sure, it will not happen without God, but neither will it happen without our faithful participation. We are called not just to believe the gospel, not just to believe in the lordship of Jesus, but to become the gospel by being disciples of Jesus.

In this way we share in God's life by sharing in God's work of bringing about the world God intends and demonstrating that Jesus is the Lord. **NFJ**

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



Fully known, fully loved

BY GINGER HUGHES

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of God’s hands.”

The starlit skies devoid of city lights sparkle down at me. The eagle soars high above my head, the vast Wyoming skies its home. The rugged edges of the Grand Tetons, the rushing rivers and spewing geysers of Yellowstone, speak of God’s magnificence.

The prairies graced with roaming buffalo and the flowering meadows providing food for the bear are all a part of God’s glorious creation.

And then there’s me.

Standing on the precipice of the mountain, looking down at Jenny Lake, I feel small. Unseen. Unknown.

The heavens surround me, the mountains tower over me, the winds whip wildly around me. God’s glory is on full display in creation, the vastness of it mesmerizing.

I’m reminded of Psalm 8:3-4, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?”

How can it be that the Creator of the heavens and the earth loves me? How can it be that God knows my name, and not only my name but also my every thought and feeling?

Creation is a testament to God’s power and might. It’s a testament to God’s glory and splendor. And, as for me and you, we are a testament to God’s love.

And this loving God longs for a relationship with you and me. We aren’t lost in the vast expanse of eternity. Rather, the One who placed the stars in the sky also placed us in this time and place.

We are here for a purpose. We are here for a reason.

I am not unseen, and neither are you. I am not unknown, and neither are you.

Rather, we are fully seen. We are fully known. And by the grace and goodness of Almighty God, we are fully loved. **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.



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Beyond Complaining

By Brett Younger

Do you know what is irritating?

When cashiers give us our change on top of the receipt.

The words “gif” and “meme.” Is it “jiff” and “me-me”?

Going through security at the airport. How can we not be TSA pre-check?

Trying to find the end of the Scotch tape.

Junk mail.

Car alarms.

When we have a mini panic attack when we think we have lost our phone.

That delicious foods are bad for us.

Do you know what else is annoying?

Bags of potato chips that are mostly air. They should fill the bags or make the bags smaller.

Leaving a tissue in a pocket and putting it in the washing machine.

Typing in all caps — a strangely aggressive form of communication.

When we step into an elevator and the person looks right at us and says, “Hello.” We are surprised to meet a friendly person, so we say “Hello” — and realize they are on their phone.

When we need help and get an automated response, “Hit one for this, two for that, pound when you give up.” If we get a choice that is close to what we need, we hear “All our representatives are busy, but your call is important to us, so please hold.” If our call was important, a human being would answer the phone.

How messed up Black Friday is. On the day after Thanksgiving we line up to buy more things.

Do you know what kind of people are frustrating?

People who hold the door open for someone who is too far away, forcing that person to speed up to receive their



kind gesture.

People who pick food out of their teeth. Having something stuck in your teeth is annoying, but watching someone pick it out is disgusting.

People who RSVP at the last minute. There are reasons that the host wants to know how many are coming.

People who take both armrests. We would all like two armrests, but we each get one and the other is for sharing.

People who look at their phone when we are talking to them — even though we are fascinating.

People who talk about how busy they are. This is the most infuriating humble-brag.

People who start sentences with “No offense.” They are about to offend.

So many things are frustrating. Our parents’ politics. The underrepresentation of minorities in government. People who do not see how privileged they are. People who do not care about tragedies in other countries. People who do not believe climate change is real.

The world is filled with irritations. If you cannot find anything to complain about, then you are not trying hard. Enough bad things happen to keep us whining.

Our complaints are rooted in the belief that we know best about pretty much every-

thing and the world would be a better place if only everyone else would acknowledge that. We deserve better treatment and have the right to gripe whenever the world does not give us our due.

The problem with complaining is that ingratitude takes over our lives. We know people who have more than enough to be happy and yet are not. Ingratitude is a dead end.

When we view our lives through the lens of thanksgiving, we become better people. Gratitude gives us the perspective that keeps day-to-day irritations from overwhelming us.

After Abraham Heschel suffered a heart attack from which he never fully recovered, a friend who visited him in the hospital found him weak and barely able to talk, but Heschel whispered: “Sam, when I regained consciousness, my first feeling was not despair and anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I’ve lived. I’ve seen so many miracles.”

We have so much for which to be thankful: freedom, friendship, rain, rivers, flowers, apples, dogs, cats, mornings, evenings, laughter, poetry, yoga, Zumba, organs, guitars, chocolate, stir fry, red peppers, Adele, Netflix, bubble wrap, waking up before the alarm goes off and getting to roll over and sleep some more, comfortable chairs, comfortable shoes, good books, shoulders to lean on, help in the kitchen, drawings on the refrigerator, the right word at the right time, and the church of Jesus Christ.

Gratitude leads us beyond complaining and turns what we have into more than enough. **NFJ**

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



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

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- > Simply click the “Teachers” button in the orange bar at the very top of the home-page. This will take you to where you enter the November/December password (**joy**) and access the Teaching Resources. You will find the current password on page 21 (this page) in each issue of the journal for use by subscribers only.



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



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

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

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

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 3, 2019

Ephesians 1:11-23

At Home with the Saints

Have you ever gained an inheritance? An inheritance we receive from grandparents or parents can come with mixed feelings, because the gain of money or property comes with the loss of someone we have loved. If you're the executor or executrix, settling the estate and possibly dividing the inheritance can also be a major hassle.

Our text for the day concerns an inheritance that has no negative aspects whatsoever. It's an inheritance whose anticipation brings assurance in this life, and joy beyond imagining in the next – or so Paul told the Christians in Ephesus and possibly elsewhere.

Ephesians is one of the more important Pauline letters, distinguished primarily by its focus on the church. It does not deal with local problems, as do most of his other letters, but with big ideas for the larger church.

These and other bits of evidence lead us to think that the letter may not have been directed to Ephesus alone. Paul had lived there for three years and undoubtedly knew and loved many people in Ephesus, but his missive includes none of the personal references common to his other letters.

It is likely that Ephesians was an

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places . . . (Eph. 1:20)

“encyclical” – a letter intended for circulation among a group of churches, of which Ephesus was probably chief.



We have an inheritance (vv. 11-12)

The text is amazing in its grammatical complexity: verses 3-14 can be read as one sentence in the Greek text, and vv. 15-19 as another. The first chapter is a nearly breathless call for Christ-followers to fill their lives with days of praise as they look forward to the fulfillment of all that God has done.

The letter begins with a reminder of many ways in which God has blessed believers, which Paul stressed had come through Jesus Christ. Throughout the text, “in him” and “in Christ” are key reminders of this.

Paul rejoiced that God had granted “every spiritual blessing” (v. 3) and adopted believers as children through the work of Christ (vv. 4-6). Those who hold a doctrine of predestination depend heavily on this text, believing it indicates that God chose only certain persons to be saved. That view robs the gospel of its missionary imperative, which is much clearer than any suggestion of predestination.

God saves believers not only as individuals, but also as a community of faith. Paul was not teaching that God has a checklist of predestined believers, but that God has a place for every

person who seeks grace and follows Christ. Those who believe this cannot help but give praise to God.

In vv. 7-10, Paul affirmed that in Christ we have redemption through an amazing grace that is beyond our comprehension. The word used for “forgiveness” (*aphesis*) is a technical term that referred to a legal pardon. There are various views of how we should understand the atonement, but all of them lead to the same end: we are forgiven.

Paul next asserted that God not only loves us enough to forgive us and adopt us as children, but has also set aside an incredible inheritance: “In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory” (vv. 11-12).

Paul had grown up in a Jewish family. He would have heard about the inheritance of the land that God had promised to Israel. Now he declared an even greater inheritance, an eternal home for those who trust in God. This inheritance does not come when someone else dies, but when *we* move beyond the limitations of this world to discover what God has prepared in eternity. ↓

Paul cited this good news as a motivation for praise to God: “so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory” (v. 12). This was especially true for the first generation of Christian believers. Their lives of praise would set a pattern for others to follow, including us.

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If you have ever shingled a roof, you know that the lowest row of shingles becomes a guide for the next row, which becomes a guide for the next, and so on. Just so, every generation of Christians provides a pattern for the next to follow. If we would lead those who come after us rightly, then we will lead them to offer praise to God, not just with words, but with actions.

We don't just praise God when we sing hymns on Sunday, but when we show love to a child on Monday, when we feed the hungry on Tuesday, when we listen to a hurting friend on Wednesday. We praise God with our lives when we visit the sick on Thursday, repair a needy neighbor's toilet on Friday, or even when we enjoy family recreation on Saturday. Because Jesus Christ has filled our hearts with amazing grace, we fill our lives with days of praise.

Consider this: in Hebrew, "to worship" and "to serve" are rendered by the same word. What are ways we can offer worship to God through service to others?

We know the Holy Spirit (vv. 13-14)

Some of us, like Paul's readers, might think: "But I don't feel so full of praise, and how can I be so sure about this eternal inheritance anyway?" Paul would respond that God offers to us a taste of heaven on earth as we open our hearts and lives to the presence of his Holy Spirit:

"In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory" (vv. 13-14).

Jesus no longer walks with us as he walked with Mary and Martha

and Peter and John. Even in Paul's day, Jesus was no longer present in that physical way. But Paul believed Christ's promise that he would in fact be present through his Spirit. The touch of the Spirit in this life is the guarantee of God's embrace in the next.

The Spirit of Christ in our lives works not only as an internal guide to direct our living, but also as an outward mark of our redemption. The Spirit inspires positive changes in our lives that should be obvious to others.

In Jesus Christ we have redemption from our sins. We have an inheritance in eternity. We have a present comforter and guide. We have, in short, all that we need for a life that is filled with meaning and laced with praise.

We know God's power (vv. 15-23)

Paul concluded this section by thanking God for the Ephesian believers and praying that they might receive deeper spiritual insight through "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" as they grew in their relationship with Christ (vv. 16-17). Such insight would give them a new "heart vision" that would inspire the great hope in Christ Paul wanted them to hold (v. 18). 📖

That hope, Paul believed, would lead them to experience "the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe" (v. 19). Can you imagine feeling the touch of God's power? 📖

God had used that same power, Paul said, to raise Jesus from the dead and elevate him to "the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come" (vv. 20-21).

Notice how Paul emphasized Christ's elevation by listing four other "powers" that were beneath him. We

keep in mind that most new believers and the church had probably come from pagan backgrounds. In Ephesus, especially, Diana was worshiped as a powerful goddess who ruled over spirits and powers.

In the first century, popular thought imagined that there were various levels of spiritual powers or beings who could influence the world. Paul used language his readers could relate to as he posited that Christ alone had supreme authority, and believers relate directly to Christ, not to superstitious spirits or imaginative demi-gods.

Few of us believe that mystic spiritual powers rule various levels of reality. How, then, might Paul's language speak to us? Some scholars suggest we could think of Paul's authorities and powers as civil rulers such as kings or presidents or dictators. Perhaps a better view is to think of them as the insidious powers of racism, alcoholism, nationalism, greed, or hate.

Christ has power over all these things, Paul said: God has put all things "under his feet," probably alluding to Ps. 110:1. To the extent that we know Christ and experience his power, we can overcome these daily temptations to give in to our darker nature.

Christ is "the head of all things for the church," Paul said, "which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all" (vv. 22-23). We, as believers, are members of the church and thus part of the body. When Christ's Spirit is present, filling our lives, we become the fullest expression of Christ's power and presence on earth: the saints.

To represent Christ on earth is an amazing privilege and an incredible challenge. It's no wonder that Paul prayed for us to receive both insight and power to become who we are called to be. Is there a better challenge for "All Saints Day"? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 10, 2019

Luke 20:27-38

Trick Questions

Has anyone ever asked you a trick question? Riddles are designed to be tricky. Both children and adults can enjoy them, even when they're embarrassed by surprise answers.

For example, it's quite possible to make one disappear. How do you do it?

Add a "g," and it's gone.

Did you groan? Try this one: two girls were born to the same mother within a few minutes of each other on the same day, but they're not twins. How can this be?

They're two-thirds of a set of triplets.

Can you think of a word that gets shorter when you add two letters to it?

Short.

Want one more?

A man walked for half an hour in the pouring rain with no hat or umbrella. His clothes were soaked, but not a single hair on his head got wet. How could that happen?

You know it: he was bald.

Questions designed as brain teasers can be well-intentioned, fun ways to spice a conversation or encourage us to think out of the box.

Our text for the day deals with a question that had darker motives.

Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. (Luke 20:36)


A tricky question (vv. 27-33)

The story finds Jesus in Jerusalem, where Luke had him arrive after a lengthy journey that we followed in *Nurturing Faith Journal and Bible Studies* during the summer months. Once there, Jesus sought out the temple and, like any good rabbi, picked out a spot and began teaching his disciples along with anyone else who cared to listen.

Among the listeners were members of the party of the Sadducees, an aristocratic cadre of Jewish men who held particularly conservative religious beliefs. A larger and more proletarian group known as the Pharisees accepted the Torah, the prophets, and oral traditions reportedly going back to Moses as authoritative. In contrast, the Sadducees accepted only the five written books of the law – commonly called the “books of Moses” – as authoritative.

This led to differing beliefs, with resurrection from the dead being a particularly contentious subject. The Pharisees believed in a resurrection, largely based on oral tradition and their reading of texts such as Dan. 12:2-3. The Sadducees could find no reference to resurrection in the Torah, so they did not believe in it.

One of the ways the Sadducees ridiculed their opponents was to ask them trick questions such as the one posed to Jesus in today's text, the third

pointed question directed at Jesus in this chapter. 

The first question challenged Jesus' legitimacy as a teacher: “Who gave you this authority?” Jesus responded with a trick question of his own, asking them whether John's baptizing had been from God or not. They thought “not,” but were unable to answer honestly for fear of the crowds (vv. 1-8).

The second question was asked by “spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said.” Feigning admiration for Jesus' judgment, they asked “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Jesus befuddled his inquisitors with a familiar and straightforward answer: they should “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's” (vv. 20-26).

The questions, then, were not designed to gain information, but to embarrass and divide, an attempt to gain an advantage over Jesus and turn some of the populace against him. This was not unlike much of the political rhetoric that we hear in our own day, when posts are tweeted and press conferences are held not to inform or to foster helpful dialogue, but to cause division between those who support one party or candidate or idea, and those who do not.

So what was the question?

A Jewish custom called Levirate marriage, which is drawn from Deut. 25:5-10, sought to ensure that every married Jewish man left an inheritance to a son. We would see this as incredibly sexist, but it was par for the course in the ancient world. If a man should marry but then die before siring a son, the law stated that his brother should marry the widow: the first son born of

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that union would stand to inherit the initial husband's estate. 📖

We have no knowledge of how often Levirate marriages actually occurred, but they were probably rare. The Sadducees used the rule, however, to set up a trick question designed to befuddle the Pharisees.

Suppose there were seven brothers. One of them married a woman but died without producing a child. The second brother dutifully fulfilled his obligation, but also died without issue. The third brother then stepped in to marry the widow, and the same thing happened with brother after brother until all had married the same woman.

So, the Sadducees would ask – no doubt with a smirk – “In the ‘resurrection,’ whose wife would she be?” The Sadducees had no skin in the game because they didn't believe the dead were raised, but they delighted in posing the puzzle to Pharisees, who did believe in the resurrection but couldn't answer the question.

How would Jesus respond?

Answer: part one (vv. 34-36)

Jesus recognized the intent of his interrogators. He could have responded with a sharp retort pointing out the hypocrisy of asking a question they had already answered to their own satisfaction. Instead, he saw the possibility of a teachable moment and responded with a two-part answer, using a text from their own authoritative scripture to refute them.

Jesus first responded with logic. The trick question was about marriage, so Jesus argued that the question was moot, because there would be no need for marriage in the resurrection. Modern people, especially in the West, believe we should marry out of love and commitment to a partner whether children are in the picture or not. In

the ancient world, however, marriage's primary function was to have children and establish a family large enough to ensure survival. In the resurrection, people would no longer die and procreation would be a thing of the past: there would be no need for marriage.

So, Jesus said, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (vv. 34-35).

Instead, they would all be “children of the resurrection,” sharing the eternal nature of angels.

Answer: part two (vv. 36-38)

The Sadducees did not believe in angels, either (Acts 23:8), so Jesus added to his argument a quotation from his inquisitors' own limited scriptures. Even the Torah spoke of resurrection, Jesus said: “And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed ...” (v. 36a).

In the story of Moses meeting God in a burning bush, God declared “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (vv. 36b-37, citing Exod. 3:6). The Hebrew sentence actually has no verb, but begins with the first-person pronoun and reads “I (am) the God of your father, the God of Abraham ...” The verb of being has to be understood, which is not uncommon in Hebrew.

Jesus' argument may seem a bit convoluted to us, but in rabbinic fashion he reasoned that if in Moses' day God claimed to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then those patriarchs must still be alive. “Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive” (v. 38).

It's likely that few of us would think of it that way. In our minds, the

idea of God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob does not necessarily imply that the early Hebrew fathers had been resurrected and were thus still alive. But Jesus' reasoning was apparently good enough to silence his critics:

“Then some of the scribes answered, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’ For they no longer dared to ask him another question” (vv. 39-40). Whether the scribes in question were embarrassed Sadducees or competing Pharisees, who would have taken delight in Jesus' defense of the resurrection, is unclear.

Well and good, we might say: but how is this knowledge supposed to help *me* get through the week? There is more here than first appears.

Think back to Jesus' statement that those who attain the resurrection “. . . are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection” (v. 36). 📖

In the resurrection, social and ethnic and economic differences will be a thing of the past. Women and men will be truly equal. Those who have been oppressed will be free. Those who have hungered will be eternally satisfied. 📖

In this world, many people struggle, including faithful Christians. Some face daily abuse. Others work hard for little reward, stuck on the lower rungs of the income ladder. Yet others suffer from systemic racism, classism, and even a mean-spirited form of nationalism. Illness as well as oppression can take a toll. Relationships can be fractured and painful.

When we are tempted to bow beneath the load and say “It is what it is,” this text reminds us that “It is not yet what it will be.” The promise of the future brings hope to the present and enables us to push on through difficult days, knowing that we are children of God. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 17, 2019

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Right Things

Imagine two boys who grew up on the same family farm and with the same parental influences, but who adopted vastly different philosophies. The youngest was a great fan of hunting and fishing. Work, for him, was a temporary inconvenience whose greatest advantage was that it afforded him money for a boat and a four-wheeler. His philosophy was, “Why work when you can play?”

The older brother bore a heavier sense of responsibility. He knew how to have fun, but also found joy in feeding cows, growing corn, repairing equipment, and laboring long hours for a better life. His philosophy seemed to be “Why play when you can work?”

There is little doubt as to which brother the Apostle Paul would have chosen to spend time with. Paul was a working man. He had grown up as a scholar who worked to support his studies. He became a traveling missionary who supported himself as a tentmaker. When he was not making tents, Paul was making disciples. He was always busy.

Today we might characterize Paul as a driven man, a workaholic, a Type A personality. Paul seems to have given little time to leisure, for his greatest joy was in his work. Paul probably

Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. (2 Thess. 3:13)

lived a more balanced life than his words suggest, but there is no question that work was important to him, and he had no patience for idle people who sponged off of others – especially if they were idle *Christians*. ↓

A bad influence (v. 6)

Paul’s initial encounter with the Thessalonians is recounted in Acts 17:1-10. His second letter to them urges maturity, warns against imposters, speaks to the question of Christ’s return, and addresses indolence. ↓

Paul had emphasized the importance of work and personal responsibility in his first letter to the Thessalonians (4:10b-12; 5:14), but with little apparent effect: the church still had a significant population of idlers. The word for “idleness” can denote undisciplined and disorderly along with laziness. The two are related: undisciplined people may tend to be both slothful and disorderly. ↓

The issue may have related to beliefs about Christ’s return, which Paul had addressed earlier. Some church members may have been so excited by the prospect of Christ’s imminent return that they quit working to await him. Occasionally, we read of cult-like groups in America who have left their jobs, sold their assets, and gathered in an isolated spot to wait in anticipation of the Second Coming. Paul also believed Christ would return soon, but that was no reason to slack

off. If anything, it should compel more focused efforts to spread the good news while time remained.

Paul’s sharp words may also indicate the presence of some believers who were simply lazy. As in many early churches, communal meals were probably frequent. Church members may have pooled their assets into a common fund for mutual support (as in Jerusalem, Acts 2:44). The church, then, offered a perfect haven for habitual moochers. Persons with a penchant for idleness might enjoy living off the largesse of their harder working friends. Paul had little patience for those who would take advantage of their Christian family.

The solution Paul proposes seems strange to us: “Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us” (v. 6). This seems to be a form of church discipline, though Paul clearly intended for the faithful to remain in relationship with their slacker friends. Did this mean that the family freeloaders were to be turned away from communal meals? Some have argued that the church in Thessalonica was composed mainly of men who worked together in a communal business. ↓ If so, those who didn’t work would naturally be cut out of the profits.

Paul’s advice could serve two functions. By distancing themselves, laboring Christians would avoid the bad influence and disruptive behavior of their lazier brothers and sisters. Secondly – hopefully – the ostracized idlers might come to appreciate the

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serious consequences of their slothful ways and return to life as productive persons.

Paul raised the issue again a few verses later: “Have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed” (v. 14b). Paul clearly hoped such persons could be restored to full fellowship. Thus, he instructed church members to treat those who were indolent, not as enemies, but as fellow believers who need to be warned for their own good (v. 15).

Paul’s instructions could lead us to wonder what attendance would be like in our churches if everyone who didn’t pull their own weight in supporting the church’s activities and finances were turned away at the door. It’s not unusual for the church to attract people who want all the benefits of church membership with none of the responsibilities. They “want to be fed” but invest little and complain if the worship service doesn’t pump them up. What might Paul say to them?

A good example (vv. 7-9)

Instead of following the sorry standard of the inactive members, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to model their lives after the positive pattern that he and his fellow missionaries had set for them. His advice might seem presumptuous to us, but Paul was so confident that challenging readers to imitate his example is a common theme in his writings (cf. 1 Thess. 1:6; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 4:9).

Paul claimed that he and his companions never ate a heel of bread in Thessalonica without paying for it, but worked long hours to support themselves and the ministry (vv. 7-8, see also 1 Thess. 2:9).

Paul did not feel unworthy of support, nor did he have ethical quibbles with a minister being paid

by those to whom he or she ministers. Paul insisted on that right, not only in v. 9, but elsewhere. In 1 Cor. 9:14, he recalled Jesus’ command that the laborer is worthy of his hire (Matt. 10:9-10, Luke 10:7-8) by saying that “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14).

There were times, apparently, when Paul accepted the hospitality of others, as in Philippi where Lydia insisted that Paul’s party lodge at her home. Luke, who was with Paul, said “And she prevailed upon us” (Acts 16:15). Later, when Paul was in prison and could not work, he gratefully accepted support from his friends.

Among the Thessalonians, however, Paul chose to support himself and set an industrious example from the beginning. Perhaps he had observed the problem of hangers-on in the churches of Antioch or Jerusalem, and he wanted to help new churches avoid this problem by emphasizing his hard-working ethic. “This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate” (v. 9).

The balanced treatment Paul gives to the issue, especially with regard to clergy, echoes in some ways how some modern ministers are “full-time” and supported by the church, while others are “bi-vocational,” working another job while receiving part-time support. Non-clergy folk can also devote many hours to the work of the church, but entirely as volunteers. All of these have a place in the picture, but Paul had no patience with those who enjoyed the benefits of the church but gave nothing back.

A stern command (vv. 10-13)

Here is Paul’s message in a nutshell: “Anyone unwilling to work should not

eat” (v. 10). Note that Paul’s concern was not with those who are *unable* to work, but with those who are *unwilling*. The veteran missionary was not suggesting that persons who are physically or mentally incapable of working should be left out in the cold. Following Christ’s lead, the church has always been concerned with those who are unable to provide for themselves (Matthew 25).

What lit Paul’s fuse was the unhappy news that “some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work” (v. 11). The NRSV translation fails to do justice to a wonderful play on words in which Paul uses two forms of the same term. We could capture Paul’s wordplay by translating “some of you are not busy, but busybodies.”^u

The problem was compounded in that the layabouts were not only lazy, but also were minding everyone’s business but their own. This led to disorder and dissension in the church family. A slacker lifestyle does not affect the slacker alone.

Paul did not mince words: “Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (v. 12). Such quiet work is the opposite of noisy loafing, and its value is manifest. The roots of the “Protestant work ethic” are deep. Contemporary church traditions that promote honest labor as a cardinal virtue (such as Amish and Mennonite communities) certainly have a friend in Paul.

“Do not be weary,” Paul said, “in doing what is right” (v. 13). Or, “do not give up doing good.” Here, Paul has combined the ethic of diligent work with the responsibility to do good. He wasn’t interested in members working to earn a living alone: he wanted them to work for good. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 24, 2019

Colossians 1:11-20

Blown Minds

Do you feel strong and confident, able to do what God has called you to do?

The first church I served was (and still is) named Loco Baptist Church. The congregation lived up to its name when it called me – at the age of 20 and with no theological training beyond Sunday School – to become its pastor.

At the time I suffered from the illusion that age and a lack of experience didn't matter because I was brimming with confidence. Looking back, I cringe at some of the sermons I preached to those poor people.

Still, good things happened. The church grew a little. I learned to baptize in a small outdoor pool sunk into the ground a few yards from a dusty dirt road. We completed a fellowship hall whose construction had stalled, and we put a new coat of white paint on its white clapboard sides.

To paint the high gable, two men propped a tall ladder on the slanted tin roof of the porch. My older cousin Bo said "Preacher, we'll hold the ladder. We figure you've probably been livin' better than the rest of us."

Thus shamed into feigning more confidence than I had, I climbed up and slapped paint on everything I could reach, including some angry yellow

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience ... (Col. 1:11)

jackets swarming from a hole at the very top.

In today's text, Paul talks to the Colossian believers about a kind of confidence and strength that arises from more than youthful hubris: it comes from the power of God.

Christ and strength (vv. 10-17)

We have no evidence that Paul had personally visited Colossae, and when he wrote this letter to the church, he was confined to a prison cell, probably in Rome.

But he had heard about them.

He had heard that the Christians in Colossae and their neighbors in Laodicea were being confronted with a syncretistic form of the faith that included Jesus but demanded more. Paul wrote to defend his understanding of the gospel and to insist on this belief: Jesus is enough. 🇺🇸

Paul began by identifying himself, noting that Timothy was with him, and greeting "the saints" in Colossae (vv. 1-2). Paul considered all Christ-followers to be saints, not because he thought they were morally perfect, but in the sense that they were God's set-apart people.

He then broke into a long and complicated sentence (vv. 3-8) offering thanks for the church's adherence to the gospel message they had learned from a colleague named Epaphras, a native

of the area who had also evangelized the neighboring towns of Laodicea and Hieropolis.

After thanking God for the Colossians' faith, love, and hope in Christ, Paul assured his readers that he was praying for them, asking God to bless them "in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" so they might "live lives worthy of the Lord" and "bear fruit in every good work as you grow in the knowledge of the Lord" (vv. 9-10).

Is that what is happening in our lives?

Paul knew that bucking temptation and culture is not easy, so he prayed that the Colossian believers would "be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power" (v. 11a). The repetition shows the depth of Paul's emphatic concern. He knew the believers would need strength to "endure everything with patience" (v. 11b).

Despite the difficulties of life and faith, Paul encouraged his readers to give thanks to God and find joy even in their struggles, remembering their hope of an eternal inheritance "in the light" (v. 12). 🇺🇸

Light and darkness are timeless contrasts, often used for artistic effect. Rembrandt was famous for his portraits, which typically featured dark backgrounds and the masterful use of light to draw attention to faces.

Paul drew on this metaphor to remind his readers that in Christ we find the strength and the motivation to resist our darker natures and live in the light. "He has rescued us from the power of darkness," Paul wrote, "and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (vv. 13-14).

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For Paul, people had two options when confronted with the gospel: they could continue living in darkness, or they could follow Christ into the light. Paul's readers believed in demonic powers that were characterized by darkness and held sinful people in their sway – but Paul offered a better way.

To encourage his readers, Paul emphasized what Christ had accomplished, a primary theme in Colossians. The verbs behind “has rescued” and “transferred” are in the aorist tense, indicating completed action. The word for “have” is an active verb, suggesting a present state. Because of what Christ has already done, we now have redemption from sin and the hope of an eternal inheritance. Nothing else is needed.

Jesus is enough. We can have confidence that the love and power of God in Christ are sufficient to release us from sin's dark clutches, bring us into God's light, and give us the strength and wisdom we need to grow with patience and joy.

Christ and creation (vv. 15-17)

In vv. 15-20, Paul sets forth a wide-ranging description of Christ's divine activity from beginning to end, a lyrical passage that many scholars consider to be an early hymn or confession that Paul quoted as a reminder of what the Colossians had been taught. ↓

The section begins with the affirmation that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (v. 15). God is typically imagined as an unseen reality beyond human vision, but in the person of Christ, Paul says, we see God. ↓

The great and mysterious God revealed in the Old Testament – the God whom no one could look upon and live – *that* God took on a human face in Jesus Christ, and so became visible.

Other belief systems popular in the ancient world taught that a primary god created (or gave birth to) a second generation of gods, who were then responsible for actually creating the world and humankind. The hymn's reference to Christ as “the firstborn of all creation” might seem to suggest that Christ was God's first creation, who then took responsibility for creating everything else.

The term “firstborn” could mean either first in time, or first in rank. With firstborn sons, the two went together, but in this text, the word clearly indicates a rank of preeminence. Jesus had authority over all creation. ↓

The image of Christ as “firstborn” does not indicate any subordination to God. This is clear from v. 16, which attests “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created” (v. 16a, see also John 1:1-5).

First-century peoples commonly believed in a variety of unseen powers, thought of as varying ranks of angels or demons. Royal terms such as “principalities,” “powers,” or even “thrones” were used to designate the invisible beings thought to inhabit the atmosphere, engage in “spiritual warfare,” and influence life on earth.

That is why Paul went on to affirm that every aspect of creation comes through Christ, including “things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him” (v. 16b).

Paul did not claim to have special knowledge of these presumed powers, nor did he expressly affirm their existence – but he did insist that anything created owes its existence to Christ, and is thus subordinate to him: “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (v. 17).

In these words, Paul declared that Christ is not only the creator, but also

the sustainer of the universe. On those days when we may feel that our world is falling apart, it is helpful to recall Paul's affirmation that Christ holds all things together. The same powerful Christ who constrains protons in the nucleus of an atom can hold broken hearts together and give us hope to face another day.

Christ and the church (v. 18-20)

The second stanza of Paul's poetic confession again uses the term “firstborn,” but clearly in support of the affirmation “He is the head of the body, the church” (v. 18a). Paul's contemporaries did not understand the brain as we do, but they knew that the head controls the body. If the church can be described as a body, then Christ is clearly its head: the same Christ who rules the universe gives special attention to believers as “the body of Christ.” ↓

Christ is the head of the church because he is the founder of the church, “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything” (v. 18b). ↓ — first place in everything, including our lives.

With v. 19, the confession shifts from “firstborn” to “fullness” as Paul proclaims Christ as the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (v. 19). False teachers might claim that Jesus was only a partial manifestation of God, but Paul was emphatic in his insistence that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully sufficient for us.

Believers have no need to concern themselves with other spiritual beings, whether real or imagined, for God in Christ has reconciled all things to himself through his death on the cross (v. 20). Whatever is fragmented or fractured in the universe, Christ has the power to make whole – including us. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Dec. 1, 2019


Isaiah 2:1-5

When Soldiers Plow

Of all human aspirations, is there anything more basic, or more powerful, than hope? It is hope that leads us to work for a better world, to seek love and community, to keep plodding away though life's prospects seem bleak. Even when faith stumbles, hope soldiers on.

We hope for security, for peace, for justice, for love. We want our lives to *mean* something beyond daily existence.

On close inspection, all of those hopes are related. Our basic desire for survival requires sustenance and security and the ability to earn a living. These require a setting in which principles of peace and justice are known and practiced. When these things are in place, we have the luxury of hoping for meaningful relationships in which we can love and be loved. We can hope for opportunities to serve others and know that we have a purpose in life.

Today's lesson marks the beginning of the Advent season, which typically begins with a hopeful theme. Though often celebrated with gospel texts, it is also traditional to study passages from the book of Isaiah that New Testament writers related to the coming messiah. This season, all of our texts for December will derive from Isaiah. 

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isa. 2:4)


Wherever we find ourselves along the spectrum of hopefulness, from struggling for survival to yearning for meaningful purpose, the prophet Isaiah has a word for us. Today's text, Isa. 2:1-5, is an image so inspiring and iconic that the prophet Micah also called it up to encourage the people who were on the verge of giving up hope (Mic. 4:1-4).

It is the image of a promised day when Jerusalem would be established as "the Mountain of Yahweh" and people from around the globe would travel there to learn what it means to live in justice and peace, what it means to build a place where combat weapons could be melted down and re-forged as farming tools because war has become a thing of the past.


Can you imagine such a world?


Would it be worth our efforts to make it happen?



A promised day (vv. 1-3)

Isaiah of Jerusalem lived and worked during the last half of the 8th century BCE.  Judah had enjoyed a period of relative prosperity under the long rule of Uzziah, but days of peace and plenty had led to a false sense of security. Some believed that keeping up the temple rituals was all that was needed

to fulfill their part of the covenant. They expected a "day of the Lord" to come as a time of glory for Israel, and seemed confident that God would never allow Jerusalem, the home of the temple, to be captured.

From about 735 BCE, however, a series of serious conflicts with surrounding nations deeply threatened national security. Syria and Israel tried to force Judah into an alliance against Assyria, and attacked the country when King Ahaz refused. Hezekiah later joined an alliance with Ashdod and Egypt against Assyria, with disastrous consequences. Political instability was rife, and economic disparity was on every hand. 

We cannot be sure if today's text was first spoken during the spiritually corrupt days of King Uzziah or during the troubled days of later years, under Ahaz or Hezekiah. Whatever the setting, Isaiah held hopes for a better future despite the odds, and that hope found its voice in this prophecy of a coming day when not just Judah, but every nation would turn to God. 

"In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains," Isaiah wrote, "and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it" (v. 2). The "mountain of the LORD" is an obvious reference to the temple mount in Jerusalem. Isaiah envisioned a day when it would become more than a spiritual height for Israel, a day when the mountain would rise to a height above all others and become a landmark to which all peoples would come.  

The important thing is not the height of the mountain but the presence

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of God, which Isaiah saw as being so tangible that all would know it as the Mountain of Yahweh, and people from every nation would “stream to it” for a global gathering in which “he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.”

Jerusalem, in Isaiah’s vision, would become the center of learning for those who wanted to know God and know God’s way: “For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (v. 3a).

Note, however, that the future Jerusalem would be more than a learning center for scholars seeking an understanding of the ways of God and humankind. The promised instruction, “That he may teach us his ways,” would be followed by action: “that we may walk in his paths” (v. 3b).

Knowing God’s way is laudable, but it means nothing if we do not also follow God’s teaching. Isaiah saw the future Jerusalem as a place of both education and inspiration.

An age of peace (v. 4)

Isaiah reveled in the thought of people coming to Jerusalem not only to learn of God’s ways, but also to seek God’s guidance to settle grievances: “He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples.” The result is expressed in the classic image of a happily shocking scene: “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (v. 4). 🇺

Can you imagine the appeal of such a hope? Isaiah lived in a day when the deadliest weapon was a sword, while we live in a world where a single automatic rifle can kill scores of people, bombs can kill hundreds, nuclear weapons can kill millions.

When we consider the intractable political issues that continue to plague Isaiah’s former home in the Middle East, the prospect of peace in our own day still seems beyond any hope short of divine intervention.

Civil war in Syria and the attempt of ISIS to establish an Islamic caliphate through terror and violence have caused more than a hundred thousand deaths and sent even greater numbers fleeing to refugee camps, with no peaceful resolution in sight.

In the State of Israel, settlers backed by the Israeli government and American supporters push deeper and deeper into Palestinian territory, illegally occupying their land while creating tensions and hardship for millions.

Those countries are not alone. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq and Iran, Sudan and Somalia, political peace seems far away. Closer to home, Venezuela continues to suffer under a punishing dictator and drug cartels with their gangs run rampant while feeding American appetites for cocaine. Thousands flee, suffering mightily as they seek safety and survival for their children, only to be blocked at the border.

We are well aware of how the issues underlying political unrest or drug-related crime in other parts of the world may also haunt and threaten our own peaceful existence. Global terrorists seek to harm all they consider to be enemies, and international versions of the Mafia can strike anywhere.

Can you imagine anything more desirable than a day when all nations will live at peace, when our technology can be turned from cruise missiles and nuclear warheads to more effective and environmentally responsible methods of agriculture and industry?

Isaiah saw just such a day, and the power of the image is unabated. 🇺

A present challenge (v. 5)

Some scholars believe v. 5 should be seen as the beginning of the next oracle, but one can make a good case that it serves as an appropriate conclusion of 2:1-4: the vision of future peace concludes with a call for present action. The covenant people of Israel already knew what God expected of them: what they lacked was the will to act on it.

In v. 3, Isaiah had spoken of a day when all would seek to learn God’s ways and “walk in his paths,” but Isaiah saw no need for his compatriots to wait for that future day. Thus, he pleaded: “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!”

Isaiah’s great hopes did not call for the people of Israel to sit back on their haunches and just wait for God to make their lives better. The vision of a day when all would live according to God’s teaching calls for God’s people to work toward that day even now. It calls for us to make the effort needed to communicate with others to work out our differences and seek justice without resorting to violence.

It is when we learn to walk in God’s ways, then put on our shoes and get on with it, that God’s word to the world takes shape. When we trust God to teach us about justice and commit to walking in the ways of peace, then we can divert our budget resources from guns to gardens; we can shift our focus from feuding to friendship, from war efforts to food production. When we walk in God’s ways and put feet to our hopes, we may discover that they’re more likely to come true.

What are your deepest hopes? How do they fit into what it means to hear God’s teaching and follow God’s paths?

And, what are you doing to make those hopes a reality? Guns can’t turn themselves into garden tools: they need help. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


Dec. 8, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10

When Stumps Sprout

Do you ever worry about wild animals? When hiking in Glacier National Park, or in other places where bears are known to roam, hikers are encouraged to carry an air horn and bear spray (a sizable can of pepper spray), as well as to talk loudly so bears or other large predators will stay in hiding.

Isaiah of Jerusalem lived in a time when wolves, leopards, and lions were endemic to Israel and a constant threat to livestock. When the prophet imagined a time of God-sent peace, it surprisingly included animal amity. Wolves and lambs and leopards and kids and lions and calves could take a nap together, and even a little child could shepherd them safely.

Do you remember the first time you saw a depiction of the idyllic scenes of Isa. 11:6-9? Whether it was in the pages of a children's book or one of Edward Hicks' folksy 19th century paintings, the image has an enduring appeal. We love the thought of a world where lions and tigers and bears can play with lambs and bunnies and children. 

The second Sunday of Advent traditionally centers on the theme of peace, and one could hardly find a better text than Isa. 11:1-10 to celebrate the hope of a peaceable kingdom.


The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isa. 11:6)

A wise counselor (vv. 1-3a)

Last week's lesson (Isa. 2:1-5) envisioned the hope of a world in which war would be a thing of the past and combat weapons would be turned into farming tools.


Today's text brings yet another image of peace, this one led by a righteous ruler who establishes an Eden-like world in which predators and prey live in perfect harmony.


Both texts imply that God's people should not just wish for such things: they should also work for them.

Isaiah 11 is part of a larger unit that begins with 9:1-7, which speaks of the birth of a righteous king, predicts judgment on Israel and Judah for their prideful lack of justice (9:8-10:4), and declares that the Assyrians who oppress them will be brought low (10:5-19, 28-34) as God preserves a remnant of the scattered Hebrews (10:20-27). 

In 11:1-9, the text returns to the theme of a righteous ruler who would establish a blissful age and bring all nations to God (11:10-16).


Isaiah, who often employed metaphors, described the coming king as a shoot sprouting from the stump of Jesse (v. 1), the father of David and thus an ancestor of the Davidic line of kings. The tree of David's line had diminished considerably, but it would not die. The Hebrews believed that God had promised to David an eternal

kingdom (see 2 Samuel 7), and Isaiah saw a day when a new and righteous king would rise like a green sprout from an old stump, a fresh branch from the roots of David's line. 

Isaiah describes the new ruler with three pairs of laudable attributes, all related to wisdom (vv. 2-3). 

The coming king's admirable virtues would have their source in "the Spirit of the LORD" that "will rest on him," bringing "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD."


"Wisdom and understanding" suggest that the ruler would not only possess a great depth of knowledge, but also would know how to use it properly.

"Counsel and might" (reminiscent of Isa. 9:6) portray the ruler as one who is not only strong but also who uses his power in appropriate ways. 

"Knowledge and the fear of the LORD" are paired as a reminder that information is most valuable when used in service to God and God's people. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" was the mantra of Israel's wisdom teachers (Ps. 111:10, Prov. 9:10).

The coming king, Isaiah said, would find joy in that very thing: "His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD" (v. 3a)

A righteous judge (vv. 3b-5)

Ancient Near Eastern rulers, even those from Assyria and Babylon, prided themselves on ruling with justice, though their concept of fairness often differed from biblical ideals. 

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Isaiah declared that the coming ruler, wise in the ways of God as well as the world, would govern with divine justice. Like God, he would not base his judgments on people's outward appearance or on their testimony, but on something deeper.

The passage recalls 1 Sam. 16:7, where Samuel was about to anoint Jesse's oldest son Eliab as Israel's next king before Yahweh said "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Only David, the eighth and youngest son of Jesse, was chosen as a man "after God's own heart."

Isaiah, like his contemporary Micah, had a special concern for poor people who were exploited by their wealthy neighbors. A cozy legal system requiring just two witnesses to appear before village elders made it relatively easy for a large estate owner to accuse a poor neighbor on false charges, hire a couple of lying witnesses, and take the poor person's land. The elders who passed judgment were also men of means.

Earlier, Isaiah had pronounced woe upon those "who join house to house, who add field to field" to build large estates (Isa. 5:8). In contrast, the coming king would judge the poor rightly "and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (v. 4a).

The second half of v. 4 sounds surprisingly violent to modern ears, but "he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth" probably refers to the king's spoken decrees demanding justice for the poor, not to a shout-induced earthquake. The reference to his "breath" killing the wicked parallels the preceding line, and its main intention is not murder, but to indicate that the coming king who would overcome wickedness,

wearing righteousness and faithfulness as a doubled belt (v. 5). 🇺🇸

A promise of peace (vv. 6-10)

As the coming ruler's power and sense of justice would bring an end to greedy humans preying on one another, Isaiah declared, such justice would extend even to the animal kingdom, bringing all creatures great and small into a time of harmony echoing themes of creation, when all animals (including humans) were to eat only green plants (Gen. 1:30).

Isaiah's image plays on the imagination like tuned wind chimes in a gentle breeze. A wolf lives side by side with a lamb. A leopard stretches out beside a resting baby goat. A cow and a lion munch on grass while a child watches over the odd but amazing flock and a baby plays safely with snakes. 🇺🇸

Would you ever, in your wildest imagination, have come up with an image like that? It seems completely antithetical to the world as we know it, a world of predators and prey, eaters and the eaten.

What remains is for us to ask whether Isaiah believed the world would ever truly become a happy paradise where humans and animals roam freely and none are afraid, or whether he was using the animals as metaphors for something else.

Some commentators have suggested that the various predators symbolized aggressive countries that would lay down their arms and live in peace with their weaker neighbors. Others believe Isaiah's main intent was to forecast an image of what a wonderful world it could be if a leader emerged to inspire such a peaceable kingdom.

Finding a clear answer to this question is not nearly so important as catching the sublime emotional feel of Isaiah's imagery, and considering what

steps we might take toward creating a world where violence and destruction give way to a land infused with "the knowledge of the LORD" (v. 9).

Some believers take this text so seriously that they choose not only to live at peace with other people, but also to tread so lightly upon the earth that they subsist happily on fruits, grains, and vegetables, and do not contribute to the death of animals.

Most readers are unlikely to go that far, but perhaps Isaiah's vision can inspire us to seek justice and better lives even for animals, working toward that peaceable kingdom ruled by the promised shoot from the stump of Jesse (v. 10).

Isaiah did not live to see such a king arise, nor did any of his spiritual descendants who added to his book over the next 200 years. No ruler has yet to touch the ideals displayed by the "signal to the peoples" that Isaiah envisioned, but believers who read this text through the lens of the New Testament believe that the shoot from Jesse's stump has emerged – and been cut down – and has risen again.

Jesus came as precisely the kind of leader that Isaiah imagined, proclaiming the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Those around him could not understand the importance of the kingdom, which has yet to reach its fullness. We may long with the writer of Revelation for a new heaven and earth, but we remain responsible for working toward that kingdom in our own time.

With attendance in decline across the country, we may sometimes feel that the church has also been reduced to a stump, but there is still life in it as we trust in God's Spirit for the wisdom, compassion, and courage needed to bring kingdom growth through justice and equity for all.

That would be glorious indeed. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 15, 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10

When Sorrow Flees

When moments of joy come into your life, how do you express them? Do you dance? Laugh? Sing? Do you clap your hands or pump your fists like a basketball player who has hit the winning shot in overtime?

Joy finds expression in many ways, from quiet smiles to exuberant activity. Today's text is all about euphoric joy that calls for a jubilant response to God's delivering power.

Many churches celebrate Advent through a progression of themes from hope to peace to joy and love. The third Sunday of Advent is sometimes called "Gaudete Sunday." *Gaudete*, Latin for "rejoice," is the first word in the Roman Catholic mass for the day.

Today's text is just that, a call to rejoice, directed to a bedraggled people who were clinging to their last shreds of hope. Despite their woeful situation, it promised a day when the desert would bloom and the lame would dance.

Isaiah 35 should be read together with the previous chapter, with chapter 34 being the yin to chapter 35's yang: the first chapter is a dark picture of desolation for Edom, while its twin is a bright image of redemption for Israel.

Israel's tradition held that the Israelites and Edomites were descended

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom ... (Isa. 35:1a)

from the twin brothers Jacob and Esau, and the prophets often referenced that tradition in discussing the fates of Israel and Edom (see also Ezekiel 35–36 and Malachi 1). 🇺🇸🇺🇸

A desert that blooms (vv. 1-2)

When things are going so badly that life could hardly get worse, it may seem that the only hope is in a wholesale change. Sometimes that leads to social or political revolution within a country. When the oppressor is a foreign power with a clearly superior military advantage, however, revolution is risky.

King Hezekiah of Judah learned that lesson when he revolted against Assyria's King Sennacherib (c. 705–701 BCE), who ravaged the land and besieged Jerusalem. King Jehoiakim learned that lesson when he rebelled against the Babylonians in 601 BCE and died shortly thereafter. Babylonian domination grew over the next few years, with waves of Hebrew captives being taken into exile until King Nebuchadnezzar's forces leveled the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 587, carrying even more into exile.

That dark period of ethnic homelessness may be reflected in the background of today's text, with the Edomites – some of whom aided the Babylonians in destroying Jerusalem – serving as an emblem for all of Israel's enemies.

Isaiah 34 depicts a slaughter of

"all the nations" outside of Israel, with special attention given to Edom. The chapter is filled with imagery of desiccation, an unfolding picture of Edom's fields and flora becoming parched as water sources dry up and the once-fertile land enters a period of empty desolation.

Chapter 35 portrays a totally opposite fate for Israel, promising life instead of death. 🇺🇸 Isaiah sees a day when the Promised Land – especially the desert areas bordering on Edom – would be suffused with gushing springs that would transform the wilderness into a verdant vision of fertility. 🇺🇸

"The desert shall rejoice and blossom," Isaiah said, "like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing" (vv. 1b-2a). Crocuses are prolific bloomers that can thrive in habitats from meadowlands to tundra, and can even be found in deserts.

In 33:9, the prophet claimed that the typically fertile areas of Lebanon, Sharon, Bashan, and Carmel had withered away. Now he names Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon as prime examples of the land's revitalization, 🇺🇸 but it is clear that the land's restoration reflects the presence of God. Isaiah says that in the "glory" of Lebanon and the "majesty" of Carmel, "they shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God" (v. 2).

The power of water in a dry land is obvious to anyone who has ever flown over the southwestern U.S., where giant green circles of farmland or lush fairways of golf courses sit amid a barren landscape.

Ancient travelers in Israel's environs would have seen the wonder of places such as Jericho, where a

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single spring can turn desert land into an oasis. 📖

Sufferers who rejoice (vv. 3-7)

In vv. 3-6a, Isaiah's imagery shifts from a transformed landscape to people who need renewing. With striking imperative verbs, he offered encouragement to his hearers and challenged them to pass on their hopeful confidence to others. The redeemed should actively "strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees," inspiring others to be strong and not fear (vv. 3-4a).

The prophet goes on to call forth an image of God deleting what is evil and opening the door to a new world in which the blind and weak will leap for joy at God's salvation, introducing an era in which those who once faced physical limitations will dance with joy in praise to God (vv. 4b-6a). 📖

With vv. 6b-7, Isaiah returned to his overriding image of a land that is not just renewed to its former state, but more verdant than ever before. "Waters shall break forth in the wilderness," he said, "and streams in the desert" (v. 6b). 📖

The "burning sand" of v. 7 may describe a desert mirage in which heat waves create the image of water. In God's new day, visions of desert lakes would become real, and the former wilderness haunts of wild jackals would give way to land so saturated that it supported tall grass, reeds, and rushes.

The NRSV's use of the word "swamp" is an unfortunate translation, obscuring the positive image with one that most readers would find unappealing, as we think of a swamp as an unpleasant place crawling with alligators, snakes, and dangerous insects. There is no word for "swamp" in the text, which says that the former lairs or "resting places" of jackals will sprout

lush plants that normally grow only in water-fed wetlands, usually near riverbanks.

A highway to Zion (vv. 8-10)

Isaiah's paean to God's restoration of Israel concludes by describing a highway for redeemed pilgrims to use as they return through the transformed desert on their way to Jerusalem. While we may call our roads expressways or parkways, this road would be called "the Holy Way," a limited-access road where the toll would be paid by divine grace and only the righteous could travel.

Those who would follow the holy highway, furthermore, would be perfectly safe. Only the righteous would be there, and none of them would need to fear lions or other predators that could make travel by foot a dangerous enterprise. 📖 The wild beasts who had previously terrorized the way might be symbolic of the Edomites, who had formerly controlled the southern highway leading from the Negev to Jerusalem.

Isaiah envisioned a day when "the ransomed of the LORD" would return to Zion amid songs of everlasting joy. Just as desolation would depart from the land and the wicked would be barred from the Holy Way, he said, "sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (v. 10, compare 65:19). The scene echoes Isa. 25:8, a promise that God will wipe away all tears, an image that reappears much later in Rev. 7:17 and 21:4.

This image of a secure freeway by which pilgrims could joyfully sing their way toward Jerusalem was so appealing that the same promise appears again in Isa. 51:11. 📖

The question we must ask about this text is whether the prophet spoke in metaphoric hyperbole – wildly

exaggerating the change in fortunes of the exiles as they returned to Jerusalem – or whether he was thinking eschatologically, as in 2:1-5 and 11:1-10, the texts for our previous two lessons.

If we assume an exilic setting, it's likely that the prophet had in mind the exiles' return to Jerusalem along a highway not unlike that spoken of in Isa. 62:10, and that he used the metaphor of a transformed landscape as a hopeful image of a better future.

Many Hebrews did return from exile to Jerusalem, but it was not on a daisy-strewn pathway with fresh fruit on every side, and the return to the ruined city was characterized more by trouble than by everlasting joy. The ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy is yet to come.

What are modern readers to make of this prophetic and poetic call for praise to God?

One doesn't have to be captive in a foreign land to feel restricted or in bondage to circumstances that can make life burdensome or hard. One doesn't have to live in a desert to experience such spiritual desiccation that we wonder if we'll ever sense God's presence again.

None of us have been threatened by Edomites, but many people continue to be oppressed by those whose racist, homophobic, self-serving, and outright boorish behavior puts them at odds with God, even though some of them claim their attitudes are biblical.

Are these situations likely to change? Not without the kind of intervention that could only be divine. Still, whether we look toward the return of Christ or a new life in heaven, Isaiah points to a day when joy abounds and all "sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

And what makes that hope possible? The coming of Jesus. Remembering that is what Advent is all about. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 22, 2019

Isaiah 7:10-16

When a Son Astounds

Many seminary students struggle when their advanced studies introduce them to new ideas that challenge the embedded theology they acquired from years of Sunday school or sermons in particularly conservative churches.

Readers of this material may also feel stretched occasionally, for this curriculum doesn't hide or gloss over the same insights from academic study that students learn in a good divinity school.

Today's text could be one of those tension points, because it involves a very familiar passage that our Christian tradition reads in a particular way, but rarely with an appreciation for its background and original intention.

Many people may have heard Isa. 7:14 only in the context of Christmas and remember it mainly from the King James translation: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." We are thus inclined to think of it as a prophecy of Jesus' birth from the beginning. A closer look at the verse in its context will show that to be incorrect, but without necessarily negating the way New Testament writers interpreted it.

Let's find out what was really going on in Isa. 7:10-16.

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." (Isa. 7:14)

A doubtful king (vv. 10-13)

We need first to consider how the text fits into its literary and historical setting. For once, the historical situation is unambiguous: we find Isaiah confronting King Ahaz, who came to the throne at age 20 and inherited a foreign policy crisis that was not of his own making.

Around 735 BCE, the Assyrian king Tiglath Pileser III (745–727) was pushing westward, leading King Rezin of Aram (Syria) and King Pekah of Israel to form a defensive alliance. The two kings pressured Judah to join the coalition, but King Jotham refused shortly before his death, and his young successor Ahaz followed suit. Syria and Israel invaded Judah in an attempt to depose Ahaz.

At some point in the conflict, Isaiah approached King Ahaz and told him not to fear the two northern kings, whom he dismissed as the smoking remains of burned-out torches (Isa. 7:1-7). Isaiah predicted that their coalition would not last (7:8) and insisted that Ahaz – known for having turned to foreign gods – must learn to trust in Yahweh alone: "If you do not stand firm in faith," Isaiah declared, "you shall not stand at all" (7:9).

Sometime later, Isaiah approached Ahaz again, possibly in the palace. Speaking for Yahweh, he challenged Ahaz to ask for a sign that God would

deliver. He could ask for anything: the sign could be "as deep as Sheol or high as heaven," v. 11.

Ahaz, whether pretending piety or simply unwilling, declared "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test" (v. 12). This prompted Isaiah to charge him with wearying God through his obstinance and refusal to trust in Yahweh. It was he who was being tested, and he was failing badly (vv. 13).

A shift to plural verbs alerts the reader that others were present, probably including members of the royal family. It also reminds us that the story is not about Ahaz alone, but involves the future of David's royal line.

A promised sign (v. 14)

We now come to the familiar part of the passage: "Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign," Isaiah said. "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."

A number of things bear comment. First of all, Isaiah declared that God would give Ahaz a sign whether he wanted it or not.

The sign would involve a young woman who would bear a child. Here we run into several issues related to translation. The word translated by the NRSV as "young woman" means exactly that: the word *'almah* comes from a root that means "ripe" and refers generically to a young woman who has achieved puberty: the masculine form of the word (*'elem*) was used for a young man.

Young women were often married shortly after reaching puberty during

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that period, so an *‘almah* may or may not have been a virgin. Isaiah could easily have used the word *betulah*, which means “virgin,” but chose the less specific *‘almah*, indicating a stage of physical maturity rather than sexual experience.

It is likely that the woman Isaiah had in mind was not only married but also present and already pregnant. The direct article is attached to the word *‘almah*, so it should be translated as “the young woman” (NRSV) or even “this young woman” (NET).

The familiar KJV’s reference to “a virgin,” then, mistranslates the Hebrew text on two points, ignoring the direct article and using the more specific word “virgin” when the text did not demand it. (For more on how this happened, see the online “Hardest Question.”)

The state of the young woman’s pregnancy depends on another iffy translation: the Hebrew word translated “will conceive” in the Greek Septuagint (or LXX, followed by the Latin Vulgate and the KJV) is actually an adjective that means “pregnant,” not a verb meaning “will conceive.” Thus, the NRSV renders it properly as “the young woman is with child.”

The young woman is not identified. Scholars have speculated that she may have been one of the king’s wives, or Isaiah’s wife, or an unknown member of the royal court. 📌

Translation difficulties continue with the woman’s naming of her child. The NRSV translates the text as a third-person verb (“and shall name him ...”), but the form of the verb used could also be translated in the second person, as if Isaiah looked at the woman – or at the king – and said “you shall call his name Immanuel.”

“Immanuel” is composed of two words that are written separately in the Hebrew: *‘immanu ’el*, meaning “with

us, God,” or “God [is] with us.”

Now we get to the real significance of the sign: it was to show Ahaz that God was present with the people of Judah, including him. The words appear again in 8:8 and 8:10 in the context of an oracle describing Assyria’s coming devastation, serving as a reminder that even in the most difficult of times, God would be present.

One purpose of the sign may have been to remind Ahaz that despite the hard days and continuing threats, a young woman would have the courage and faith to name her child “God is with us.” Perhaps Isaiah hoped that the powerful but fearful Ahaz would take a lesson from a vulnerable young woman who showed firm faith under trying circumstances.

Deliverance ... and judgment (vv. 15-17)

Isaiah continued to explain the sign in v. 15, which is also difficult to interpret, but seems to be a promise that before the soon-arriving child reached the age of knowing good from bad, the lands of Syria and Israel would be desolate and the threat they posed to Judah would be over. 📌

The difficult part is Isaiah’s reference to the child eating curds and honey and the relationship of the food to the child’s knowledge of good and evil. Although “curds and honey” has a positive sound, Isaiah used it to reflect a time of deprivation when Israel’s inhabitants would be forced from their cities and farms, returning to a nomadic lifestyle that depended heavily on milk products supplemented by honey or other foods that could be gathered from the scrubby land. 📌

The bottom line of the sign is that within a few years – by the time the boy about to be born could tell good from bad – the threat would be gone: “the land before whose two kings you

are in dread will be deserted” (v. 16).

The oracle of salvation quickly switched to judgment, however. Rather than trusting Yahweh to take care of Syria and Israel, Ahaz had relied on the Assyrian king, sending lavish gifts (including gold vessels from the temple) and asking him to attack Judah’s northern enemies (2 Kgs. 16:7-9).

Tiglath-Pileser III took the bait and attacked Syria, but Ahaz soon discovered that he had escaped two cats only to encounter a lion. Judah became a vassal to the Assyrians, forced to pay a heavy annual tribute. Although Ahaz had engineered the unprofitable alliance, Isaiah saw Assyrian domination as divine discipline, predicting that Yahweh would “bring on you and your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah – the king of Assyria” (v. 17).

What can a modern reader do with this ancient text? It is not enough for us to hear it only as a happy promise ultimately fulfilled in the virgin birth of Jesus, for that was not its purpose, though New Testament writers saw a deeper meaning in it.

This text reminds us of several things. Sin has consequences. Bad things happen. Hard times, whether we’ve brought them on ourselves or not, can be expected. That’s not the end of the story, however. In the midst of our trials, we can trust in God and believe that God is with us.

In this sense, Matthew’s use of the text at a time when Israel longed for deliverance is appropriate – not just to bolster the account of Jesus’ virgin birth, but to remind believers that in Jesus Christ we find the ultimate sign of Immanuel, the promise that God is with us, not just at Christmas, but through all the times and circumstances of our lives. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 29, 2019

Isaiah 63:7-19

When Prayer Makes Bold

Do you ever grow impatient when facing hard times or unpleasant circumstances, longing for the difficulty to pass and easier times to arrive?

As a boy, it seemed as if time must have slowed down between two and three o'clock in the afternoon. I would watch the minutes creep by on an institutional wall clock and long for the bell that would deliver me from school.

Waiting is hard – especially when we are waiting through a period of life that we consider difficult, unpleasant, or painful. In those times we may pray for deliverance and hope for healing. Sometimes it seems that our prayers go no farther than the ceiling, and we may wonder if God is still around, or still cares.

The post-Christmas season can be prime time for feeling down. Even a “good Christmas” filled with family and gifts and Christmas cheer can leave us in the dumps once the house empties out and we are left with piles of trash and leftover goodies. How will we pay the bills? When will we see the children again?

Celebrating Christmas does not make the troublesome issues of life disappear, and in those days we need a

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. (Isa. 63:7)

reminder that God is still around.

Such was the situation for Israel in the text for today.


Disappointment and hope (vv. 7-14)

The lectionary text for the day encompasses only Isa. 63:7-9, a woefully small excerpt cherry-picked from the surrounding text. Read in isolation, it might suggest a triumphant return and happy days in a beautifully restored city. The text is part of a unit extending from 63:7 through at least 64:14, however. We'll follow the text through v. 19 to get a larger picture.


Israel's return to Jerusalem was one of the great disappointments of all time. In messages designed to offer hope to the people, Isaiah of the Exile had announced boldly that Jerusalem would be rebuilt (44:28), enriched by the wealth of the nations (45:14), and so prosperous that the borders of Jerusalem would have to be expanded (49:19-23, 54:1-3).

Such prophecies led many Hebrews to expect nothing but prosperity when they returned. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, however, they found a devastated city in a desolate countryside. They encountered opposition from neighboring provinces when they tried to rebuild (Ezra 4:1-5). They

experienced famine and drought (Hag. 1:6, 9-11; 2:16-17). They existed only as a very small sub-province of Persia and were forced to pay heavy taxes to support the local government and provide tribute to Persia (Neh. 5:15).

In the face of such hardship, many of the people concluded that God must not love them anymore. Many apparently decided that the practice of their faith was a waste of time (Mal. 1:2a, 3:14). How could God's spokesperson deal with a people such as this? The prophet responsible for our text chose to pray for them. 

Today's text is part of an intercessory prayer. The first six verses of chapter 63 depict God as a blood-stained warrior taking vengeance against Edom. The prayer of intercession is found in 63:7-64:12, followed by a comforting divine response in 65:1-25. The prophet prays in behalf of the people – expressing their pain, asking their questions, pleading their case. He prays, not necessarily as *he* would pray, but as the *people* would pray. Then, he responds to the people with the words of God.

The prayer sounds very much like a psalm, because most of the psalms were prayers, and many of them were prayers of lament, like this one. Our own prayers in times of deep pain rarely follow a logical progression of thought, and the same is true of biblical prayers. 

In a fashion similar to some psalms (compare 89:1-2, 105:1-2, 106:1-2), Isaiah initiated his prayer with a burst of praise (v. 7). God had blessed Israel and called the Hebrews to be his special people. In times of distress, God had delivered them. Even when their rebel-

Additional information at
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lion led to promised discipline, God again bestowed favor on the people and “became their savior in all their distress.” God’s divine presence, love, and compassion “redeemed them . . . lifted them up and carried them all the days of old” (vv. 8-9).

Perhaps the poet began with praise as an appeal to God’s memory, hopefully inciting God to recall past love and be moved to deliver the people from their current distress. The opening words of praise would also remind the Hebrews that the Lord had been faithful before, and God could be counted on to deliver again despite their rebellious and unbelieving behavior (v. 10).

Isaiah recalled Mosaic traditions of how God had delivered Israel from Egypt in miraculous fashion. The prophet glossed over the people’s intransigent stubbornness and many difficulties along the way, saying God led them “like a horse in the desert” that does not stumble, giving them rest “like cattle that go down into the valley.”

“Thus you led your people,” Isaiah prayed, “to make for yourself a glorious name” (vv. 11-12). Note again how the prophet appealed to the divine ego: if the people who struggled during the lean early years of the postexilic period didn’t deserve to be delivered, perhaps God would intervene nevertheless for the sake of preserving a reputation as just and faithful, having “a glorious name.”

Disillusionment and sorrow (vv. 15-16)

But deliverance had not come. In behalf of the suffering people, Isaiah cried, “Look down from heaven and see!” (63:15a, compare Ps. 80:14). In so many words, he was asking “Can’t you see what kind of trouble we are in? Are you so caught up in your holy and glorious habitation that you can’t take the time to look upon our sorrows?”

“Where are your zeal and your might?” Isaiah asked. “The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me” (v. 15).

People of every age have asked this question. When trouble comes and prayers aren’t answered as we like, we may think God doesn’t love us anymore.

The prophet turns to the metaphor of a parent and child in v. 16, adding “For you are our Father.” The parental imagery of God as father seems familiar to us because it is common in the *New Testament*, but it is quite rare in the Hebrew Bible, where “Creator” is more commonly used. Thus, Isaiah’s emphasis on the parental nature of God and the relationship responsibilities implied by it is a notable claim.

The Israelites commonly spoke of “Father Abraham,” and they revered Jacob (also called Israel, cf. Gen. 32:28) as the father of the twelve tribes, but those ancestors were long dead and gone, unable to help: “Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us” (v. 16a). In contrast, Isaiah prayed, “You, O LORD, are (still) our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name” (v. 16b). The implication is: “You’re our parent. We’re in trouble. *Do something!*” 📌

Doubt and blame (vv. 17-19)

Have you noticed that children have a way of blaming their troubles on their parents? Sometimes, of course, parents *are* culpable, and many children suffer because of parental neglect. But, in the everyday course of life, short-sighted and immature children often accuse their parents in unjust ways. “You hate me!” “You don’t want me to have any friends!” “You’re trying to ruin my life!” “It’s all *your* fault!”

A child who is reprimanded for “talking back” may then blame the parent for making them mad and

thus “forcing” them to misbehave. Sometimes our Ultimate Parent gets the same sort of treatment. In the old story of the “fall,” when Adam was confronted with his sin, he blamed it on both Eve *and God*: “the woman whom *you gave* to be with me, *she gave* me from the fruit of the tree” (Gen. 3:12).

Isaiah’s prayer, reflecting the mood of the dispirited people, made the same kind of charge against the heavenly parent. “Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?” (v. 17a).

Was Isaiah thinking of how God had hardened Pharaoh’s heart prior to the Exodus (cf. Exod. 7:3), and charging the Lord with hardening the Hebrews’ hearts, as well? The prayer calls on God to “turn back for the sake of your servants” (v. 17b). The word translated “turn back” (*shuv*) is often translated as “repent,” but it was not God who needed to repent.

Israel had enjoyed the bounty of Canaan in the past, but the people had come to believe those days were over (v. 18). After years of exile and a troubled return, the people felt as far removed from God as those who were “not called by your name” (v. 19). They didn’t feel like the people of God at all.

Isaiah shifted to a challenge, pleading with God to act in the present as in the past: “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Isaiah wanted God to appear with such power that the mountains would shake, Israel’s enemies would quake in fear, and Israel would once again experience God’s compassionate presence (vv. 1-4). 📌

Have you had similar longings? It’s not unusual for us to feel distance from God, recalling an earlier sense of closeness and wondering if God has forgotten us. Isaiah would suggest that God is not the one who moved. **NFJ**

CLASSIFIEDS

Senior Minister: First Baptist Church, Athens, Ga., a thriving downtown church adjacent to the University of Georgia, is seeking a full-time senior minister. We are a moderate CBF congregation celebrating diversity in belief and theology, participating together in worship and believing in being transformed by mission. The person God is preparing for us will have a high level of intellectual curiosity as demonstrated by formal seminary education and commitment to lifelong learning experiences. We seek a person who has strong pulpit skills that produce relatable and challenging messages. This person will demonstrate a passion for meeting the needs of the congregation through counseling, family support during difficult times and developing trusting relationships. The senior minister will develop strategies for growth and lead the congregation in implementation of those strategies. If you believe you may be the person God is preparing for Athens FBC, we want to know more about you. Please send a letter of interest and résumé to ministersearch@firstbaptistathens.org. A pastor profile can be found at firstbaptistathens.org/senior-minister-search/.

Minister to Children and their Families: First Baptist Church in Dalton, Ga., is seeking candidates for a full-time minister to children and their families who will minister to the needs of all children and their families in the church. Opportunities for growth in a secondary focus will be explored with the candidates based on their interests, gifts, and passions. With an average attendance of 400, FBC Dalton is committed to our vision of being "Together in Christ, Sharing His Love." More information, including our core values, can be found at fbcdalton.org. Submit résumés to fbcdchildrensministersearch@gmail.com.

Senior Pastor: Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church (HAB), a moderate Baptist church in Jacksonville, Fla., is seeking a senior pastor who is a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and a committed Baptist, called by God to the pastoral ministry and to HAB. Requirements include five or more years of ministerial experience and a doctoral degree from an accredited institution. Interested persons may request information at contact@habchurch.com.

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Executive Director (formerly Director of Missions): Raleigh Baptist Association (RBA), an association of 143 churches, is seeking a full-time executive director to serve our rural and metropolitan area. We include 40 language and ethnic congregations and four churches with female senior pastors. The member churches represent a broad range of diversity in Baptist life, including affiliations with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) and other Baptist bodies. The executive director shall endeavor to work in cooperation with all churches, giving priority to casting a unifying vision, developing effective leaders, and building strong relationships within the Baptist churches, the RBA, other Baptist bodies (including SBC and CBF), and the larger community. The executive director shall serve as the chief planner, administrator and resource person responsible for the oversight of all ministries, programs and staff of the RBA. A graduate degree from an accredited seminary/divinity school is required. Extensive leadership within a Baptist church and/or association is preferred. Candidates must complete the application at raleighbaptists.org/. (From the homepage, select Executive Director Application.) In addition, candidates must email their résumé, a photo and at least 3 references with contact information, within 2 weeks of completing the application, to RBASearchTeam@gmail.com. Application deadline is October 15.

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Reading scripture through the lens of faith development

BY ANDREW GARNETT

In 2005, I first read James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* and was captivated by his work. It describes so well the patterns of faith I had experienced in the church.

After years of research, Fowler — a minister and developmental psychologist — claimed to have discovered six stages of faith. These stages were universal and sequential, with individuals progressing through them in order — having to do with the ways in which an individual believed rather than the specific content of those beliefs.

After a series of typical childhood stages, Fowler argued, most individuals entered Stage-3 faith during their teen years. This stage is marked by an emphasis on meeting the expectations of peers, a lack of independent perspective, implicit trust in authority figures, unquestioned acceptance of traditional beliefs, and strong emotional feelings.

Fowler believed some individuals in early adulthood would move to Stage-4 faith; as feelings give way to facts, a person would critically examine previously held beliefs, thereby coming to “own” their previously untested faith.

Around middle adulthood, some individuals proceed to Stage-5 faith; comfortable with tension and paradox, these people would experience a renewed appreciation for the emotional power of faith, recognize the complexity of the world, and be ready to spend their lives for the good of others.

Stage-6 faith, which was rarely realized in a human life, meant abandonment of oneself to God in a process of radical transformation.

Fowler's proposal has been contested. His idea that each person is on essentially the same spiritual journey does not seem particularly relevant in a postmodern world.

Yet I am struck by how Christians (and others) have long been aware of the broad contours of what Fowler proposed. Stage 3 is a period of conventional and expected growth. Stage 4 is a period of questioning and searching. Stage 5 is transcendence above those questions, and Stage 6 is a nearly complete union with God.

Third-century theologian Origen named this movement *purgation*, *illumination*, and *unification*. In the sixth century, Gregory the Great wrote of the need for the soul to collect itself, then to critically consider itself, and then rise above itself.

We may give the process different names, but the basic experience is the same: first conventional growth, then a period of questioning or testing, and then transcendence. We see this general pattern everywhere — even in scripture.

When thinking of the Bible as a witness to faith development we see that some scriptures are more suitable for some age groups than others. James presents a very confident faith with little room for questioning or doubt. Ecclesiastes delights in testing and questioning.

Paul demonstrates very nuanced thoughts on doubt. Some of us have doubts about theology or disagree about ethical action, but can live together through the unifying power of love (Rom. 14:1-18).

The worldviews of the three authors roughly correspond to Fowler's Stage-3, -4, and -5 faith, respectively. A youth Bible

study on James often goes well, college students intuitively understand what Ecclesiastes is struggling with, and middle-aged adults appreciate the nuance and complexity of Paul.

Also, faith development can help congregants understand that biblical authors had a faith that was similar (or dissimilar) to their own. Both James and Paul cite Lev. 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet they use the verse in very different ways.

For James, the verse functions as a concrete guide to relationships — Stage-3 faith, which makes moral decisions on an interpersonal level. Paul seems more similar to Stage-5 faith. Moral decisions should ensure the greatest good for the greatest number of people, while minimizing adverse effects for those who do not benefit.

Finally, reading scripture through the lens of faith development can help us interpret an author's original intent. The last verses of Ecclesiastes (12:9-14) seem so different from the rest of the book. After speaking in the first person for 12 chapters, the voice suddenly shifts to the third person.

The bulk of the book is radical and freethinking, while these final verses emphasize traditional concepts such as fearing and obeying God. If we can imagine a Stage-4 author writing the bulk of the book, we might better consider how the closing verses are in character with such an author's faith.

Faith development is a useful tool for Christian education and pastoral care, but learning to think of biblical authors in terms of their faith development sheds new light on their writings, and will be a fruitful avenue of study for those willing to undertake the journey. **NFJ**

—Andrew Garnett is minister for children and senior adults at Forest Hills Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C.



John F. Kennedy (1961–1963)

By Bruce Gourley



October 7, 1963, President Kennedy signs the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty at the White House.

Following a decade of overarching peace and prosperity for many Americans, two new presidential candidates emerged in the election year of 1960. Republican candidate Richard Nixon, sitting vice president under Dwight D. Eisenhower, staked a claim to the good times and good feelings brought about by a solid economy under the Republican administration and built upon union jobs, high tax rates on wealthy Americans and expanding federal infrastructure.

Democratic Massachusetts Senator and World War II veteran John F. Kennedy, a charismatic and well-known figure from a well-connected and powerful political family, won the Democratic nomination.

PROMINENCE

One of the most prominent and wealthy families in mid-20th-century Massachusetts, the Kennedy clan had arrived in America in the 1850s as Irish immigrants. By the 1880s Patrick Joseph Kennedy, a successful businessman, achieved political prominence via statewide elected office.

Son Joseph P. Kennedy also became a wealthy businessman and high-ranking politician, serving in the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. In this rarefied atmosphere John F. Kennedy, son of Joseph, was born in 1917 in Brookline, Mass., his elite destiny seemingly determined.

During much of Kennedy's childhood

his family spent summers in Hyannis Port on Cape Cod. With his family, young John attended mass at the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Hyannis that became known as the "Kennedy Church."

As did his father, John attended Harvard. Despite severe back problems that would remain for the rest of his life, his college years included athletic competition and international travel with his family. Handsome and eloquent, Kennedy graduated from Harvard in 1940 with a Bachelor of Arts in government studies.

World War II intervened, and Kennedy answered the call. Turned away from Officer Candidate School due to his poor health, the young man enrolled in the Naval

This is the 35th 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.

Reserve and soon assumed command of a patrol torpedo (PT) boat, tasked with intercepting encroaching Japanese destroyers.

When a Japanese destroyer rammed and sank his boat on Aug. 2, 1943, Kennedy, despite re-injuring his back in the attack, led his crew in swimming more than three miles to the safety of an island, personally towing a severely injured crewman as he swam.

A promotion to full lieutenant, more heroics and many medals followed during Kennedy's wartime service prior to a medical discharge from military service in 1945. His awards included the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, Purple Heart Medal, American Defense Service Medal, and the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with three bronze stars, among others.

Tragically, John's older brother, Joseph Patrick Kennedy Jr., a U.S. Navy lieutenant, died during the war.

POLITICS

Under the tutelage and maneuverings of his father, John F. Kennedy in 1946 won a seat to the U.S. House of Representatives. In office for six years and focusing on international affairs, he advocated for the Truman Doctrine of containing Communist Soviet aggression.

Domestically, he supported public housing and labor unions. As did many other Democrats in an era of feverish communist fears known as the Red Scare, Kennedy hewed rightward in support of legislation requiring communists to register with the government.

Again with the help of his father, election to the U.S. Senate on behalf of Massachusetts followed next, where Kennedy served from 1953–1960. Early in his Senate career in 1953 he married socialite and photographer Jacqueline Bouvier. Four years later the couple celebrated the birth of their first child, Caroline Bouvier Kennedy.

Although often critically ill and undergoing two spinal operations, Senator Kennedy further elevated his profile by publishing a book about senators who had risked their careers for their beliefs. *Profiles in Courage* became a best seller and won a

Pulitzer Prize. Decades later it was revealed that Ted Sorenson, an adviser and speechwriter for Kennedy, actually penned the book that bore Kennedy's name.

During his Senate career, Kennedy muddled through some of the most important and notable legislation of the decade, displaying a less-than-firm commitment to civil rights and refusing to make clear his position on Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, a demagogue who used unconstitutional tactics to attack and publicly malign suspected communists.

PERSONA

Against a backdrop of mixed accomplishments in the Senate, and upon Kennedy's re-election to the office, with the aid of advisers and family he focused on his storied persona and personal charisma and eloquence by initiating a public, nationwide tour intended to pave the way for a presidential bid.

He leaned upon his brother, Robert Kennedy, a lawyer at the Justice Department, as a close political adviser, a relationship that would endure for the remainder of John's life.

Upon announcing his candidacy for president, Kennedy criticized the Eisenhower administration for falling behind the Soviet Union in the Cold War, particularly in the strategic Space Race. Promising change and a more prosperous future, Kennedy also criticized a recent uptick in unemployment due to a mild recession, promising to get "America moving again."

Securing the Democratic nomination, Kennedy chose U.S. Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, previously his primary opponent, as his vice-presidential running mate. Johnson helped Kennedy secure votes in his home state of Texas.

Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon, Eisenhower's vice president, dismissed the 43-year-old Kennedy as too young and inexperienced. The Republican highlighted the 1950s economic successes of the Eisenhower-Nixon administration and peace amid containment of Soviet aggression.

Large crowds filled the campaign

events of both candidates in the summer of 1960. Taking nothing for granted Kennedy campaigned extensively, including in traditionally safe Democratic states such as Georgia.

There he visited the small town of Warm Springs, former President Franklin D. Roosevelt's second home. Surrounded by a huge crowd, he shook hands with polio victims at Roosevelt's Warm Springs Institute treatment center. Praising Roosevelt's legacy, to applause Kennedy spoke of the need for better health care for poor Americans.

In rural southern towns and urban northern environs alike, Kennedy drew enthusiastic crowds. Nonetheless, Nixon maintained a small lead where it counted—the polls. Then, technology intervened.

POPULARITY

For reasons not entirely clear, Eisenhower failed to endorse Nixon. When asked by a reporter to verify Nixon's claims of being an important administration adviser as vice president by naming Nixon's contributions, Eisenhower offhandedly replied, "If you give me a week, I might think of one."

Alertly, the Kennedy campaign transformed Eisenhower's statement into a television commercial. Weeks later the first-ever televised presidential debate took place.

In 1950 few American households owned a television set. But in 1960 some 70 million people, nearly one-half the U.S. population, watched the first debate between Nixon and Kennedy, underscoring the popularity of television in American households by that time.

Kennedy came to the debate prepared, relaxed and confident. Nixon arrived at the last moment. Refusing makeup, the Republican candidate appeared tired, haggard, sweaty and uncomfortable in living rooms across America.

Afterward, public polling swung toward Kennedy. Although Nixon did well in the remaining three debates, the damage had been done.

Off camera and late in the campaign, the contentious issue of civil rights moved to the forefront. Arrested and jailed on

October 19 at an Atlanta department store sit-in, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. — Baptist minister, prominent activist and co-founder of the nonviolent Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) — tested the candidates' commitments to racial justice.

Although still perceived by some as the party of Lincoln, the Republican Party had done little in recent decades to excite black voters. The Franklin D. Roosevelt administration's New Deal policies of the late 1930s, aimed partially at blacks, netted 70 percent of the black vote in the 1936, 1940 and 1944 elections, signaling the beginning of a shift of the black vote toward Democrats.

Roosevelt's predecessor Harry S. Truman also reached out to the black community, garnering an even larger share of the black vote in 1948. But in the 1956 election moderate Republican Eisenhower reversed the trend, winning almost 40 percent of the black vote.

POWDER KEG

Now, four years later, Nixon strategically suggested that Eisenhower pardon King. Hesitant as always to embrace civil rights, for fear of angering southern whites, the president refused.

Civil rights organizations sought candidate Nixon's alliance, but their petitions fell on deaf ears. Intervening, baseball star and civil rights hero Jackie Robinson, a supporter of Nixon, personally asked the vice president to intervene. Nixon refused, bringing "tears of frustration" to Robinson's eyes.

Kennedy, also fearful of a backlash, quietly assured white southerners that he would not enforce desegregation. Heeding appeals from civil rights leaders could ignite a political powder keg. Mere weeks earlier before his arrest King had met with the senator and Democrat candidate, whom he urged to take meaningful action signaling his commitment to black equality. Kennedy demurred.

Now, unbeknownst to King and motivated by conviction and political opportunity alike, Kennedy personally called Coretta Scott King, King's wife, to express his sympathy for her husband.

Meanwhile, Robert Kennedy on behalf of his brother helped secure King's release from prison.

Upon regaining his freedom, King publicly praised John F. Kennedy. In so doing, the civil rights activist suddenly galvanized the widespread support of the black community for the Democratic senator's candidacy.

Kennedy, on the other hand, remained at a disadvantage in the matter of religion.

PROTESTANT FEARS

In opposition to atheistic communism and under the influence of popular Baptist televangelist and Christian nationalist Billy Graham, the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s overturned more than 150 years of America's religion-state separation heritage by officially aligning the U.S. with God.

The words "Under God" were added to the historically secular Pledge of Allegiance, and the phrase "In God We Trust" was placed on U.S. currency and enshrined as the nation's motto. American flags appeared in church sanctuaries. The marriage of Protestant religion and patriotism represented moral clarity and superiority in the ideological warfare against communism.

With civil religion cemented to their benefit, Protestant Christians, long prejudiced against Catholics, had no intention of allowing Catholics, some 25 percent of America's population, access to the levers of political power.

Kennedy's Catholic faith garnered strong opposition from Protestant leaders who, ironically and hypocritically, selectively re-embraced separation of religion and state in opposing Kennedy. Anti-Catholic fever mounted.

During the early stages of the primary campaign season Kennedy addressed the religious prejudices that threatened to derail his presidential bid. Entering the West Virginia primary, a state with a Catholic population of a mere four percent, he made a pointed speech to the American Society of Newspaper editors:

"Are we going to admit to the world that a Jew can be elected Mayor of Dublin, a Protestant can be chosen Foreign Minister

of France, a Moslem can be elected to the Israeli parliament — but a Catholic cannot be President of the United States? Are we going to admit to the world — worse still, are we going to admit to ourselves — that one-third of the American people is forever barred from the White House?"

The speech and his family's personal wealth contributed to an unexpected win in West Virginia.

PERSISTING ISSUE

Kennedy hoped "the religious issue" had been put to rest. He was wrong. Protestant sermons and church bulletins warned of the dangers of voting for a Catholic who would certainly do the bidding of the Pope.

Many opposed to Kennedy voiced vitriol. Kennedy speechwriter and aide Ted Sorensen remarked: "The single biggest obstacle to his election was his religion. You should have seen the hate mail that came in, both from rednecks and from liberal intellectuals who should have known better."

The opposition included Billy Graham who by late summer grew concerned that Kennedy might defeat the evangelist's favored candidate, Nixon. When word leaked out of Graham's opposition to Kennedy, the evangelist on Aug. 10 penned a letter reassuring the Democratic candidate of his neutrality.

"There is a rumor circulating in the Democratic Party that I intend to raise the religious issue publicly during the presidential campaign," wrote Graham. "This is not true."

Graham also stated that he did not believe certain "ugly rumors and gossip" being circulated about Kennedy, perhaps a reference to the candidate's unfaithfulness to Jacqueline, and seemingly a veiled threat. Stating that he intended to vote for Nixon, Graham nonetheless assured Kennedy he would give him his "wholehearted loyalty and support."

But eight days after penning the disingenuous letter, Graham convened a secret meeting of prominent Protestant leaders in Montreux, Switzerland. Norman Vincent Peale, author of the bestselling *The Power of Positive Thinking*, was in attendance. Ruth Peale, Norman's wife, confided in a letter to

a friend that those present “were unanimous in feeling that the Protestants in America must be aroused in some way, or the solid block Catholic voting, plus money, will take this election.”

POSITIONING

Afterward, Protestant voices against Kennedy grew louder. Recognizing the danger of public religious bigotry, on September 12 the Democratic candidate addressed religion in a speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association.

“I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute,” he insisted, “where no Catholic prelate would tell the President — should he be Catholic — how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference, and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him, or the people who might elect him.”

Kennedy continued, “I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials, and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.”

His words a subtle rebuttal of Protestant Christian nationalism in violation of church-state separation, Kennedy positioned himself on the conservative side of the issue, reassuring at least some Protestants of his independence from the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church.

Unable to overcome Kennedy’s slim lead in the final weeks of the campaign, Nixon turned to Eisenhower, who finally came off the sidelines and campaigned for the Republican candidate. Although Eisenhower’s advocacy helped, it came too late.

Kennedy narrowly defeated Nixon, aided by multiple currents: 70 percent of



the black vote due to his embrace of King, a surge of votes from northern Catholics countering a loss of Protestant votes, and a charismatic presence in an age of television.

Disappointed, Billy Graham thereafter staked out a cordial if aloof relationship with the new president. For his part, Kennedy as president ceremonially attended the annual evangelical National Prayer Breakfast, offering words more vague and inclusive than Christian nationalists wished to hear.

Of more interest to Americans at large, John F. Kennedy Jr., John and Jacqueline’s second child, was born 17 days after the presidential election, the presence of a presidential family baby enduring the Kennedys to many.

PRESIDENCY

Inaugurated at the age of 43 on Jan. 20, 1961, as the youngest president in history, Kennedy’s inaugural address invoked God’s favor, national civility, freedom’s triumph

over communism, peace through strength, and a future guided by the “wonders of science.”

Calling Americans to “a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself,” the new president warned that harmony, peace and the dividends of science “will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor ... in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.”

Declaring that the “role of defending freedom” had reached “its hour of maximum danger,” Kennedy began his presidency with a charge to his fellow citizens: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”

Many younger Americans embraced their new president, who frequently spoke at universities. Like many university students an idealist at heart, Kennedy hoped for global progress and peace.

With the encouragement of students, the president by executive order on March 1, 1961 created the Peace Corps, an organization designed to engage Americans personally in the ideals of global democracy, peace, development and freedom through voluntary service in poor nations. Months later the program became a permanent federal agency.

Ideals of global peace notwithstanding, foreign and domestic circumstances alike immediately pressed upon the new president. On the world scene Kennedy quickly received a proverbial baptism by fire.

Green-lighting an Eisenhower plan to overthrow Fidel Castro's communist regime in Cuba, known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Kennedy in April 1961 blundered into failure as Castro defeated U.S.-backed Cuban revolutionary forces.

PRIDE & PROWESS

Making matters worse, amid the Cuba fiasco the Soviet Union on April 12, 1961 launched the first man into space, a blow to America's pride and technological prowess. On the defensive, Kennedy issued a call for America to become the first nation to send a man to the moon.

Congress authorized funding through the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) for a difficult, expensive and years-long mission that, if successful, would become humanity's greatest accomplishment.

Nonetheless, troubles with the Soviet Union continued. Although warned by advisers of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's diplomatic skills, the confident young president found himself bested again by the communist leader at a June 4, 1961 summit in Vienna.

Sensing Kennedy's weakness, Khrushchev defied the U.S. by blocking off communist East Berlin from democratic West Berlin, building the Berlin Wall. Tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union further escalated late the follow-

ing year amid intelligence revelations of the Soviet Union's installation of ballistic missile sites in Cuba within attack range of the U.S.

Implementing a naval quarantine of Cuba, Kennedy addressed the nation on Oct. 22, 1962, warning Americans of the Cuban missile threat and announcing the quarantine.

In response, Khrushchev warned Kennedy that the Soviet Union would not back down. Threatening to sink American ships if attacked on the seas, the Soviet leader raised the specter of "the destruction of the world."

As fears of nuclear warfare consumed America, on October 25, U.S. naval forces detained a Soviet tanker near Cuba. Satisfied the ship contained no weapons, Kennedy let the ship proceed. Although Khrushchev sensed the American president's weakness on the one hand, he also believed reports from his intelligence sources that Kennedy was prepared to attack if Soviet missile-bearing ships breached the quarantine line.

Backing down, Khrushchev offered a compromise of removing Soviet missiles if the U.S. promised not to invade Cuba. Kennedy accepted. Even so, two days later the U.S. sank a nuclear torpedo-equipped Soviet submarine whose commander, unaware of the agreement, thought the war had already started and was preparing to attack America.

Having averted nuclear war by the slimmest of margins, both nations kept their end of the bargain regarding Cuba.

Elsewhere, however, communism remained ascendant. Training his attention on communist advances in Southeast Asia and resisting calls to withdraw American forces from the region, Kennedy sent additional military advisers and special forces to South Vietnam.

At the same time and largely due to the corrupt, anti-democratic South Vietnamese government under Ngo Dinh Diem, he declined to enact a full-scale deployment of troops.

By September 1963 the president, convinced that the South Vietnamese, even with American assistance, lacked the ability to emerge victorious over communist North

Vietnam, explained his reasoning:

"In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam, against the Communists... But I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake."

Just as the U.S. had successfully defended Europe from Nazism, "the defense of Asia" against communism was now America's responsibility.

Public statements aside, weeks later and with the tacit approval of the U.S. government Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated.

PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

Although foreign diplomacy framed by nuclear tensions consumed much of Kennedy's energies, domestic issues also challenged the Kennedy administration, none greater than civil rights. Religion, and Christianity in particular, infused and provided leadership for America's growing Civil Rights Movement, as well for the white supremacist opposition.

From the perspective of a minority, despised, disadvantaged and historically-oppressed people group, a theology of love, justice, human equality and nonviolence served as the basis of the African-American



Civil Rights Movement birthed in churches and largely led by ministers.

Conversely, from the privileged white majoritarian perspective of historical oppressors of non-whites, a theologically-blessed mindset of racism and hatred — an extended legacy of hundreds of years of black slavery, racial apartheid, Jim Crow laws and white terrorism against blacks — characterized Southern white families who for decades had worshiped God on Sunday mornings and participated in the public lynching of black Americans on Sunday afternoons.

In December 1960, six years after the *Brown v. Board* desegregation public school ruling and one month prior to Kennedy's inauguration, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Boydton v. Virginia* ruled segregation in interstate travel illegal. Even so, much of the South still refused to allow black children in public schools, a sign of white supremacist dominance and defiance in the region that black citizens hoped Kennedy would challenge.

In response to the interstate travel ruling, the African-American civil rights activist organization CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) scheduled a May 1961 "Freedom Ride" through the South on Greyhound and Trailways buses.

Although encountering little trouble in Virginia, several of the 13 Freedom Riders — seven black, six white — were arrested in North and South Carolina, and three beaten (including future U.S. congressman John Lewis) by whites in Rock Hill, S.C. Continuing, the Freedom Riders crossed Georgia without incident.

But in Alabama the self-professed Christian Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a white terrorist organization, awaited. At a stop in Anniston, Klansmen boarded the bus and attacked the riders, paralyzing one.

In Birmingham and with the encouragement of Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, violence broke out again. Led by local members of the KKK, a mob beat riders with baseball bats and burned their bus.

Heroically, civil rights leader Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, co-founder with King of the nonviolent SCLC, and activists from the

Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights rescued the severely injured Freedom Riders from the white supremacist mob.

Newspaper reporters covered the entire incident, their news stories and photos soon flashing around the nation and the world, including in Washington, D.C.

PROTECTION FAILED

Embarrassed and angry, Robert Kennedy, serving as U.S. Attorney General, called for a "cooling off period," blaming "extremists on both sides" for the bloody confrontation, his aloofness stunning the Freedom Riders.

Undaunted, the Freedom Riders prepared to travel from Birmingham to Montgomery on a new bus. Amid public pressure the Kennedy administration secured a pledge of protection from Alabama Governor John Malcolm Patterson, who reneged on his word.

Near Montgomery the Highway Patrol escorts for the bus fell away. Police previously stationed at the Greyhound depot also disappeared.

Absent a law enforcement presence, in Montgomery on May 20, a KKK-led terrorist mob of more than a thousand violently beat the peaceful Freedom Riders, reporters and black onlookers with baseball bats, broken bottles and lead pipes. Police eventually returned, but made no arrests. Instead they served injunctions to the Freedom Riders for instigating violence.

With the evil of southern white supremacy laid bare and under pressure to do something, President Kennedy again opted for caution in issuing a "statement of concern." Attorney General Robert Kennedy, meanwhile, ordered federal marshals to Alabama to protect interstate commerce. Black activists, determined despite the violence, set about recruiting new Freedom Riders.

No less defiant, Alabama's white supremacist justice system issued an injunction against further interracial group travel and ordered the beaten Freedom Riders arrested. Eyewitness accounts from "Veterans of the Southern Freedom Movement" described what happened after the Freedom Riders sought refuge in the First Baptist Church of Montgomery, served by the Rev.

Fred Abernathy, also a co-founder of the SCLC:

"When the cops come with photos and arrest warrants, the riders quickly don choir robes, assemble up in the choir loft, and pretend to be practicing. With his head bandaged, John Lewis is hidden at the rear of the group. They're used to singing gospel-based freedom songs, so they sound good. The police searching the pews below assume they are the regular choir and ignore them, eventually leaving empty-handed."

Civil rights activists and white supremacists converged on the First Baptist Church the following evening, a Sunday. James Farmer, leader of the Freedom Ride movement and co-founder of the Congress for Racial Equality, described the scene outside the church:

"The streets were full of roving bands of short-sleeved white men shouting obscenities ... they clogged every roadway, waving Confederate flags and shouting rebel yells...."

Federal marshals struggled to maintain control of the 3,000-strong white supremacist mob. The angry crowd overturned a car, set it ablaze, and tried to firebomb the church. Inside some 1,500 voices sang hymns and freedom songs.

From the pulpit Martin Luther King Jr. preached a message of freedom. Rocks shattered stained-glass windows. Tear gas crept inside. Parents sent children to the basement for protection.

PRESSURED RESPONSE

Finally acting, President Kennedy called for federal troops, whereupon Alabama Governor Patterson intervened by declaring martial law. After breaking up the mob, state National Guard forces, wearing the Confederate flag on their uniforms and with pointed bayonets forced church attendees to stay inside the tear gas-filled sanctuary for the entire night.

Reflecting the political fraughtness of the Freedom Riders movement, the Kennedy administration and the racist governors of Alabama and Mississippi arrived at a compromise: the governors promised to protect future Freedom Riders from mob violence, in return for federal leniency in

allowing the states to arrest Freedom Riders lawfully engaged in interstate commerce.

Privately desirous of equality for African Americans but harshly opposed by white supremacists in southern states of which he needed political support, and publicly concerned that black activism reflected badly on the world stage, the Kennedy administration chose an uneasy stance of neutrality.

Calling the Freedom Riders “unpatriotic,” Attorney General Robert Kennedy declared he could not “side with one group or the other in disputes over Constitutional rights.”

As the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement grew and, in response, white terrorism in the South intensified, the Kennedy administration largely sat on the sidelines, reluctantly allowing FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to wiretap King and his supporters based on suspected communist sympathies.

In January 1963, in defiance of federal law, newly-elected Alabama Governor George Wallace pledged, “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Three months later, Martin Luther King Jr. led protests in Birmingham. In response, President Kennedy quietly worked behind the scenes to alleviate racial tensions.

Arrested yet again, King was jailed in Birmingham on Good Friday, April 12. In his cell he read a letter from eight prominent, moderate white Alabama clergy condemning the protests and criticizing King as extremist. Incensed at white indifference, on the margins of newspapers and on toilet tissue he wrote a response that became known as the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

In his letter King challenged his white “Fellow Clergymen” for aligning with white supremacy, for which King was “gravely disappointed.”

“Few members of the oppressor race,” he noted, “can understand the ... passionate yearnings of the oppressed race.” “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights,” King noted. White southern legal and societal defiance of federal desegregation continued unabated. No longer was he willing to

“wait” for whites to voluntarily do what was right.

Citing the immorality and evil of segregation and white supremacy supported by white “organized religion,” King declared the “judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20th century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.”

“Let us all hope,” King said near the conclusion of his letter, “that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.”

PROTESTS & PROMISE

King’s letter reignited a despondent Civil Rights Movement. Within a month of his release from jail, activist pressure resulted in desegregation in the city of Birmingham. Alabama Governor Wallace, however, resisted federally-ordered desegregation of the University of Alabama.

On June 11, 1963, as Wallace flanked by state troopers literally blocked the door of the University of Alabama’s enrollment office to prevent blacks from entering, President Kennedy finally took a public stance. In so doing he evoked both the Constitution and the Bible, co-opting texts that white supremacists claimed sacred.

“We are confronted primarily with a moral issue,” Kennedy spoke into the television sets of tens of millions of Americans, including many white Americans who attended church but hated African Americans. “It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.... The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated.... One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed

the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.... Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise.”

Acting upon his words and going further than any previous president, Kennedy called for a new civil rights bill “giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public — hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments.” He also called for “greater protection for the right to vote.”

In Alabama, Governor Wallace relented in the face of federal troops. On Capitol Hill and to the dismay of white supremacists, Kennedy set to work trying to persuade Congress to pass strong civil rights legislation.

In August the president voiced support for the Civil Rights Movement’s March on Washington, during which King delivered his pivotal “I Have a Dream” speech, envisioning, following centuries of white oppression of blacks, freedom for all Americans.

One month later yet another white terrorist bombing in a string of bombings in Birmingham rocked the nation. During Sunday morning worship at the city’s 16th Street Baptist Church a bomb killed four little girls. Kennedy responded more aggressively than in prior bombings by opening an extensive federal investigation.

POLICIES

Although not as searing as racial unrest in the South, other domestic issues challenged Kennedy during his presidency. Like his Democratic predecessors Roosevelt and Truman, Kennedy called for a national health care system. To his disappointment, his efforts failed, victim to long-time Republican dismissal of social programs as “socialism.”

On the other hand, the president led the successful enactment of several laws expanding social security legislation. Among domestic issues the Kennedy administration also tilted leftward in the abolishment

of the death penalty in Washington, D.C., and in advocating for a ban on discrimination against immigrants based on national origin.

Economically, a large deficit and persistently high unemployment prompted the president to successfully raise the minimum wage (twice) and expand federal investment in highway construction. Tilting to the right on the matter of tax cuts, however, Kennedy, claiming tax cuts would spur the economy, proposed a reduction in the top marginal tax rate of 91 percent to 70 percent.

Destined to meet an untimely death, Kennedy's proposed ban on national origin immigrant discrimination and his proposed tax cuts did not take effect in his lifetime.

Meanwhile, amid a whirlwind presidency the Kennedy family home in Cape Cod served as the president's summer retreat from the strain and stress of political life. On Cape Cod the Kennedys attended mass at the long-time family church, St. Francis Xavier Church.

Jacqueline — beautiful, fashionable and intellectual — was a highly visible First Lady. She established the White House Historical Association, led a televised tour of the White House, traveled nationally and internationally with her husband, and served as a role model for young women. The family's young children delighted many Americans.

But the excitement, good will and glamour surrounding the Kennedy family did not last.

Jacqueline accompanied President Kennedy during a Nov. 22, 1963 trip to Dallas to address Democratic Party liberal and conservative divisions.

PLAZA TRAGEDY

On that sunny autumn day as the couple and their entourage traveled through the city's Dealey Plaza in an open-air motorcade, tragedy of enormous proportions struck. Without warning, three shots rang out. President Kennedy crumpled in Jacqueline's arms, blood pouring from his head.

The motorcade rushed to nearby Parkland Hospital. It was too late. Kennedy was pronounced dead shortly after arriving

at the hospital. Two hours later Lyndon B. Johnson, aboard Air Force One over Texas air space, was sworn in as president. Jacqueline Kennedy stood at his side.

The assassination stunned America. Former U.S. Marine and suspected Marxist Lee Harvey Oswald was identified as Kennedy's killer and quickly arrested. Two days later, before Oswald could stand trial, Jack Ruby, a local nightclub owner, killed Oswald on live television in the basement of Dallas Police Headquarters.

On the same day of Oswald's murder and carefully staged by Jacqueline, John F. Kennedy's funeral, modeled after that of Abraham Lincoln, assassinated nearly 100 years earlier, took place in the nation's Capitol rotunda.

During a day of national mourning a quarter of a million people filed past his coffin. A funeral mass followed at St. Matthew's Cathedral, after which Kennedy's body came to rest in Arlington National Cemetery.

Jacqueline Kennedy received many letters of sympathy from women around the world. Despite her calmness immediately after her husband's death, in the months and years following she fell into a deep depression marked by heavy drinking and nightmares.

In letters to Catholic priests she expressed anger at God and contemplated suicide. Striving to remember the "civilized side of Jack [John F.]," she refused to acknowledge that he, like many previous presidents, had been involved in marital infidelities.

Later in life her health improved. She remarried and prominently reentered public and political life, dying in 1994.

Mysterious and with unanswered questions due to Oswald's murder, the strange circumstances of Kennedy's death led to many investigations, including an exhaustive federal investigation, the Warren Commission.

All the investigations concluded that Oswald acted alone in assassinating Kennedy. Nonetheless, to this day many Americans do not believe in the lone gunman conclusion, Kennedy's death having fostered a long-running suspicion by

some Americans of the government's truthfulness in other matters as well.

PERSONAL FAITH

Kennedy also left behind a murky religious life. According to at least one biographer, as president he regularly attended mass, whether for reasons personal or political. Little is otherwise known of his personal faith.

Kennedy's enduring contribution to religion is two-dimensional, and remains controversial to this day.

In a time of ascendant Christian nationalism on the part of Protestants, Kennedy maintained a firm insistence upon the separation of religion and state. As president he reaffirmed this commitment on June 27, 1962, two days following *Engel v. Vitale*, the Supreme Court decision declaring unconstitutional government-sponsored prayers in public schools.

Prayer, he reminded Americans, belonged in the home — not in public institutions by government mandate. Some religious Americans, including many Baptists, historical champions of religion and state separation, agreed. Others, of Christian nationalist persuasion, did not.

In addition, Kennedy's eventual choice of supporting civil rights — a nonviolent, non-sectarian justice movement founded upon religious, moral and ethical convictions of human equality — moved the Democratic party toward a more inclusive, social justice-oriented future.

Yet at the time of Kennedy's sudden death, a better future seemed beyond reach. Upon the proverbial shoulders of Lyndon Baines Johnson — Texan, political veteran, Kennedy's primary opponent in the 1960 presidential election and then vice president — fell the weight of the task of shepherding, should he so choose, the former president's unfinished business of Soviet containment, space exploration, expanded civil rights and enhanced social programs.

From their very different perspectives, black and white Americans anxiously wondered how their new, unexpected president would govern following the assassination of the progressive and popular John F. Kennedy. **NFJ**

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Season after Christmas

Jan. 5, 2020
John 1:1-9, 10-18
The Word That Reveals

Epiphany

Jan. 12, 2020
Matthew 3:13-17
A Son Who Pleases

Jan. 19, 2020
John 1:29-42
A Lamb Who Leads

Jan. 26, 2020
Matthew 4:12-23
A Preacher Who Calls

Feb. 2, 2020
Matthew 5:1-12
A Teacher Who Challenges

Feb. 9, 2020
1 Corinthians 2:1-16
A Savior Who Died

Feb. 16, 2020

1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Children Who Grow

Feb. 23, 2020

2 Peter 1:16-21
A Message That Glows

Lent

All Things New

March 1, 2020
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7
A New Choice

March 8, 2020

Genesis 12:1-4a
A New Start

March 15, 2020

Psalms 95
A New Song

March 22, 2020

1 Samuel 16:1-13
A New King

NEW for 2020! Each lesson concludes with a *Jesus Worldview Lens* — focusing on how the lesson can apply to the faithful following of Jesus.

March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14
A New Life

April 5, 2020

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
A New Foundation

Easter

April 12, 2020

Colossians 3:1-11
A New Wardrobe

April 19, 2020

1 Peter 1:3-9
A New Future

April 26, 2020

1 Peter 1:17-23
A New Birth

May 3, 2020

1 Peter 2:19-25
A New Example

May 10, 2020

1 Peter 2:2-10
A New Hope

May 17, 2020

1 Peter 3:13-22
A New Approach

May 24, 2020

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11
A New Strength

Pentecost Sunday

May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-21
A New Spirit

Season after Pentacost

What the World Needs Now ...

June 7, 2020

Matthew 28:16-20
The World Needs the Gospel

June 14, 2020

Matthew 9:35-10:8
The World Needs Healing

June 21, 2020

Matthew 10:24-39
The World Needs Shaking

June 28, 2020

Matthew 10:40-42
The World Needs Kindness

July 5, 2020

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
The World Needs Rest

July 12, 2020

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
The World Needs the Word

July 19, 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
The World Needs Patience

July 26, 2020

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
The World Needs Wisdom

Aug. 2, 2020

Genesis 32:22-32
The World Needs Engagement

Aug. 9, 2020

1 Kings 19:9-18
The World Needs Faith

Aug. 16, 2020

Isaiah 56:1-8 (RCL 1, 6-8)
The World Needs Justice

Aug. 23, 2020

Isaiah 51:1-6
The World Needs to Remember

Aug. 30, 2020

Jeremiah 15:15-21
The World Needs Mercy

A Prayer List for Today

Sept. 6, 2020

Psalm 119:33-40
Teach Me, Lord

Sept. 13, 2020

Psalm 103:1-13
Forgive Me, Lord

Sept. 20, 2020

Psalm 78:1-7, 34-38
Convict Me, Lord

Sept. 27, 2020

Psalm 25:1-9
Deliver Me, Lord

Oct. 4, 2020

Psalm 80:7-15
Restore Us, Lord

Oct. 11, 2020

Psalm 23
Lead Us, Lord

Oct. 18, 2020

Psalm 96:1-13
Be Honored, Lord

The Right Stuff

Oct. 25, 2020

Matthew 22:34-46
The Right Questions

Nov. 1, 2020

Matthew 23:1-12
The Right Stance

Nov. 8, 2020

Matthew 25:1-13
The Right Preparation

Nov. 15, 2020

Matthew 25:14-30
The Right Investment

Thanksgiving

Nov. 22, 2020

Psalm 100
Good God!

Christmas Letters

Advent

Nov. 29, 2020

1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Every Good Gift

Dec. 6, 2020

2 Peter 3:8-15a
Patience and Peace

Dec. 13, 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
A Sanctified Season

Dec. 20, 2020

Romans 16:25-27
A Christmas Benediction

Season after Christmas

Dec. 27, 2020

Galatians 4:4-7
Children of the Child

ELEPHANT *in the yard*

Advocate still calling church leaders to protect sexual abuse victims, not predators

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Earlier this year news media gave wider exposure to the longtime, multiple mishandlings of sexual abuse cases among Baptist churches and denominational agencies. The scale was surprising to many.

But not to Dee Miller.

A former Southern Baptist missionary and mental health nurse, Miller has been sounding the alarm for decades — only to find leadership that largely preferred self-protective silence.

GOING PUBLIC

In this publication (known then as *Baptists Today*), Miller found an ally in editor Jack Harwell who gave space in 1995 for a series on the uncomfortable topic that denominational leaders largely ignored.

“I prescribed specific, practical actions for each [Southern Baptist Convention] agency — things they might choose to immediately undertake to address the elephant in the front yard of the second largest Christian denomination in the world,” said Miller of her writing mission.

The reception to her writings was less than warm — but that too was not surprising to Miller.

“It’s always been dangerous to stand alone on the right side of history — especially for a Southern Baptist in the last years of the 20th century,” said Miller. “My husband and I already knew that far too well in 1989, as I began writing about



widespread attempts to protect a missionary-colleague of ours, discovered to be a sexual predator three years earlier.”

Miller said she was criticized for damaging missions or portraying Southern Baptists negatively — though neither was her intent.

SOUNDING AN ALARM

“This story wasn’t just about missions gone awry — nor only about Southern Baptists,” said Miller. “My intent was to blow the whistle on the entire community of faith, to spark discussions, and provide a case study, encouraging every system in spiritual exercises of confession and ultimately transformation — all while lessening the intense isolation of survivors and advocates.”

Simply put, Miller was looking for a better response from church and denominational leaders. “Shaming, discrediting, and chastising any of us back into silence must cease!”

Miller, who started writing in 1989 about the cover-up of abuse, knew that

taking such a stand came with a price. The efforts she and her husband took to remove a missionary colleague with a long history of sexual predation cost them their own places of service.

After the Millers left the mission field, Dee wrote her first book, *How Little We Knew: Collusion and Confusion with Sexual Misconduct* (Prescott Press). She was pleased with much of the response.

“With the book in 14 countries, letters of gratitude from faith leaders, as well as survivors, poured into our mailbox...,” said Miller.

“Mainline executives were working frantically, getting denominational policies and procedures in order while mandating training for every minister — not always out of the goodness of their hearts, but under pressure from insurance companies threatening to drop coverage.”

These hopeful signs were not shared by all denominational and church leaders, however.

POOR PRACTICES

Responses to sexual abuse were often inadequate if not counterproductive. Identified predators were often offered counseling with little consequence for their repeated behavior.

While writing the series for this publication, Miller said the SBC Sunday School Board (now LifeWay) announced the formation of a committee to address abuse cases. Yet the announcement included the offering of “social protection” for offenders but nothing to assist victims.

*Congregational autonomy — along with a culture of silence — makes it easier
for a predator minister to move from church to church
than in connectional church bodies.*

“I smiled when a group of psychotherapists called them out before I had a chance,” said Miller, who also noted that the committee formed to study this problem that primarily impacts females included just one woman.

In a joint investigation published this summer, the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* revealed the extensive cases of sexual abuse and cover-up patterns within Southern Baptist congregations and its missionary-sending agency that Miller had identified and experienced decades ago.

Congregational autonomy — along with a culture of silence — makes it easier for a predator minister to move from church to church than in connectional church bodies. Longtime calls for a database of confirmed abusers are getting some traction now that was largely ignored for decades.

And SBC International Mission Board leaders, according to the *Chronicle*, are committed to a “rigorous examination” of its policies and procedures — a very late, but welcomed response for Miller and other advocates, if properly executed.

NEEDED CHANGES

“No committee or single agency can change the hearts and minds of individuals, nor can the enforcement of stricter guidelines, though vitally important,” said Miller, noting that her writings of three decades ago are still as pertinent today.

“As mainline denominations have shown for years,” she added, “without changes of individual hearts and minds, all else is futile.”

But policies and procedures are vitally important. Those in leadership roles with congregations and agencies have major responsibilities for creating and enforcing policies to protect sexual abuse victims, not their abusers.

Additionally, Miller said everyone can

be a sensitive and supportive friend to those who seek them out following abuse.

“If you have ever had a victim of clergy violence confide in you, rest assured you were carefully selected,” said Miller. “You probably felt a heavy weight of responsibility.”

Those feelings, said Miller, parallel those experienced by the victim — feelings that had likely been there for months or years already.

“Shock, temporary paralysis, anger, guilt and fear may have rushed at you in rapid succession,” she said. “Unless you had thought this situation out well in advance, your responses may have inflicted further injury.”

RIGHT RESPONSES

“Before you can effectively respond to victims,” said Miller, “you must find the courage to face a painful reality: You — male or female — and every member of your family are potential victims.”

Miller said she knows of several victims, still active in churches, who have kept their secrets from their parents for 20 years or more — fearful they would not be believed.

A good starting point is to simply say, “I’m sorry,” when someone confides in you — followed closely by expressing, “Thank you for taking the risk of talking to me.”

Assurance is then needed, said Miller. This can be stated as: “I know this is tough, but I’ll be here for you.”

Miller warns, however, “Don’t say it unless you mean it!”

Most importantly, said Miller, assure the victim of your commitment to her or his safety.

SENSITIVITY

Resist the temptation to resort to old, well-intended clichés, said Miller. Even words

like “God is with you” or “I’m praying for you” can be resented by those most seriously wounded, she added.

If sincere, a better response, said Miller, would be: “I am angered to know that anyone, especially someone in this profession, would take advantage of you.”

Listening with sensitivity is required to be most helpful, she added.

“Most of all, listen to what may be a highly complicated story,” said Miller. “Be aware that the victim is testing you with small bits of information. Be sensitive to his or her fears to reveal more at this time.”

When the victim feels safe, it is appropriate to ask what you can do to help, said Miller.

“If the victim wants to seek the help of a professional therapist, encourage this,” Miller advised. “Look for ways the church can assist with therapy bills.”

Miller said the victim should know what the advocate plans to do next.

“In most cases, I would advise you to immediately go outside of the church system to a professional counselor who is well-versed in abuse issues,” said Miller. “Assure the victim that you are doing everything possible to protect his or her anonymity.”

However, there is at least an ethical obligation (and in some cases a legal one) when dealing with a minor to report abuse to the proper human services agency, she added.

Miller said it is important to make a commitment following the initial conversation to get back in touch with the abuse victim within a couple of days.

“Whatever you do, don’t leave the victim hanging a day longer than your agreement,” she said. “The burden of initiating the next conversation is on your shoulders.”

Miller offers more resources for abuse victims and their supporters at takecourage.org. **NFJ**

A bad day frozen in time

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Archaeologists from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte recently announced they and Israeli colleagues in the “Mount Zion Archaeological Project” have uncovered poignant remains from the brutal day Babylonian soldiers pillaged the city of Jerusalem around 587/586 BCE.

Nebuchadnezzar’s forces had previously defeated Jerusalem in 597, but chose to take its leading citizens into exile without destroying a perfectly fine city that could be of use to them. They installed the former king’s uncle on the throne, renamed him Zedekiah, and ordered him to send annual tribute payments — or else.

About a decade later, Zedekiah decided not to send the tribute, and soon found out what “or else” meant. Nebuchadnezzar sent his armies back and, after a long siege, they swept into the city, killing and maiming and raping, pillaging anything of value, and burning the rest.

Zedekiah’s sons were murdered in his sight, and then his eyes were put out before he was carried in chains to Babylon. It was a really bad day.

Archaeologists with the project, including James Tabor and Shimon Gibson of UNC-Charlotte, have been digging at a site south of the Temple Mount and not far from the Pool of Siloam for more than a decade. The site is outside of the current city walls, built in the 16th century CE by the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I, but would have been inside the city during the seventh century BCE.

This summer, the project announced the discovery of an ashy destruction layer bearing pottery characteristic of the early



Right: A piece of gold and silver jewelry from the 587/586 destruction area in Jerusalem. Credit: Mt. Zion Archaeological Expedition/Rafi Lewis.
Below: An arrowhead of the “Scythian” type used by Babylonian archers, found in a 587/586 destruction layer in Jerusalem. Credit: Mt. Zion Archaeological Expedition/Virginia Withers

sixth century — along with Scythian arrowheads and a small piece of gold and silver jewelry.

Arrowheads of that type are well known from the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, and were commonly used by the Babylonians. The combination of broken oil lamps, arrowheads and precious jewelry in a layer of burned ash indicates a time of violent destruction, according to the researchers.

The only time Jerusalem was destroyed during that period was the Babylonian conquest that leveled the city and sent thousands more Judahites into exile.

The jewelry is of particular interest, a rare bell-shaped gold cap topping a cluster of grapes made from silver. It could have been a pendant, or possibly an earring.

Was it lost in the shuffle as the residents fled, or torn off in an act of violence against its owner? In any case, it ended up on the floor, stepped on or crushed by falling debris as the building burned.



The prophet Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem during that time. He had warned of the coming invasion, but many refused to hear him because they believed God’s presence in the temple would never allow the city to fall.

They were wrong.

Sometimes we may hold similar misconceptions about what might and might not happen. We may choose to ignore dire warnings about the dangers of global warming, the folly of texting while driving, or the health risks associated with overeating, smoking or other harmful practices.

If we do, it won’t take an archaeologist to explain why our precious possessions were left behind. **NFJ**

It's a calling, not a formula

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

A big question is how did so much of American Christianity today get so far from Jesus?

The answer can be traced to what pastor/author Ken Wytsma calls the “Salvation Industrial Complex.” And his personal experience mirrors mine.

“I grew up with the notion that to be saved we simply asked Jesus into our heart,” he writes in *The Myth of Equality*. “This was the most central thought in my mind regarding Jesus and Christianity.”

Through an honest reading of the Gospels, however, one can see that Jesus didn't tell us to “accept” but to follow him. In fact, Jesus seemed much more intent on accepting those regarded as unacceptable, than being accepted himself.

“Accepting Jesus” was devised for manufacturing Christians through a discernible process. It's easier to count those who have prayed “the sinner's prayer” than those who keep on walking additional miles, caring for the least of these and loving their enemies.

So, these non-biblical constructs (like “accepting Jesus” and “the sinner's prayer”)

became the primary vocabulary for expressing and concepts for defining what it means to be Christian — which comes with a comforting guarantee of avoiding eternal damnation.

Institution building needs membership requirements, stakeholders and recruiters. So, following Jesus goes from being a sacrificial, ongoing calling to a sure-step, definable formula.

The challenge of hearing and heeding Jesus' call is replaced by a sanitized and mechanized process.

With “Follow me!” relegated to lesser status, one is then free to ignore all kinds of things Jesus said and did — and still claim to be Christian.

That is precisely how so much of American evangelicalism has reached the point in which it doesn't even wince at amoral, racially-offensive, compassion-less politics. In fact, it is the most dependably supportive bloc.

This is not to suggest that those who created the Salvation Industrial Complex

did so in a menacing way. Revivalists and church leaders simply wanted to count their results — although Jesus was never known to have handed out membership cards other than noting that his followers would be known by their love.

When the Christian faith becomes more transactional than relational, however, it becomes something other than what Jesus sought.

Wytsma, a pastor in Beaverton, Ore., puts it this way: “The reduction of God's good news in Jesus to a magic formula ... allows a highly personalized and consumer approach to salvation. Instead of requiring everything, it requires nothing.”

That's why Religious Right operative Ralph Reed can say without shame that evangelicals' devotion to the president is because “There has never been anyone who has defended *us* and fought for *us*...”

Us? Us?

Manufactured Christians can focus on “us” — what *we* get out of this. Indeed, that is a consumer approach.

Followers of Jesus, however, will hear another call: deny yourselves; do unto others; whoever wants to be first must be servant to all; and seek first the kingdom of God. **NFJ**



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MUSIC & MINISTRY



A conversation with Bob Morrison

BY BARRY HOWARD

After 52 years of music ministry, 32 of those at First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Fla., Bob Morrison retired in July 2019. In my four decades of pastoral ministry, Bob is the minister of music I served with the longest (12 years) and, likewise, I was the pastor Bob served with the longest during his ministry.

In the words of Robert Frost, Bob's vocation is his avocation. As gifted as Bob is in bringing out the best in choir and orchestra members through music, he excels even more in his care for the greater church family.

The music ministry in Pensacola was grounded in a graded choir program led by capable volunteers. In addition to conducting the sanctuary choir and orchestra, Bob provided hands-on leadership for the high school chapel choir, the auditioned youth ensemble, "Surrender," and the older-adult "Singing Seniors."

Bob's choirs toured widely to sing at Winchester Cathedral and St. Paul's Cathedral in London, the Basilica at Notre Dame

in Paris, St. Michael's Cathedral in Vienna, St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, and First Baptist Church of Rome and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Italy.

In April of this year, Bob took 160 choir members and friends to historic Carnegie Hall in New York City where they presented *The Peaceable Kingdom* by Randall Thompson, an unforgettable experience that served as a pinnacle moment of Bob's 52-year career.

"Bob Morrison is the consummate church musician," said Bob Burroughs who composed the musical piece "Go Out With Joy" (Isa. 55:11-12) as a retirement tribute to Morrison. "He has a gentle spirit, a love for his people, a witness for Jesus."

The following conversation is adapted from an interview with the veteran music minister.

Barry: When did you sense the call to music ministry?

Bob: I felt called to actual music ministry while I was serving as [Baptist Student Union] choir director at Jacksonville State

University in 1970. But I had made the decision to go into music in some fashion as a second grader at Lineville [Alabama] Elementary School in 1958.

My music teacher had selected me to "conduct" the little rhythm band for our spring program, which consisted of me pointing to the appropriate rhythm instrument when it was their turn to play. Pretty much like I do to our church orchestra!

From that day forward I knew I wanted to "do music" with my life; I never wavered from that decision.

When I entered JSU as a freshman, I was on track to be a band director, having served as drum major for our high school band my junior and senior years. Through the BSU choir experience, though, I felt God redirecting me to be in church music.

While I definitely had a God-called experience back in 1970, answering the call has been a dynamic activity for me, wherein I need to recommit to that call periodically.

One of my life verses has been Philipians 3:12b: "We press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us."

Staying in ministry throughout my whole life definitely has been predicated on the truth of this exercise: “taking hold of that for which you were taken hold.”

Barry: You started in music ministry before finishing college and seminary. What were the advantages and disadvantages of starting at a younger age?

Bob: Always active in my churches’ choir programs, I was asked to serve as the “minister of music” during Youth Sunday when I was 15 at the First Baptist Church of Saks in Anniston, Ala. I loved it!

I remember my minister of music trying to convince me it wasn’t necessary to hold extra rehearsals leading up to Youth Sunday, something I guess we disagreed on.

A year later, when we lost our minister of music, the church asked if I would direct the choir during the interim.

We did a full program for Easter, a John Peterson cantata as I recall. It went well, and the church asked if I would take the position permanently.

Though it was only part-time, the experience I gained leading the adult choir, instrumental ensemble, youth choir and children’s choirs there for the next four years was invaluable.

The experience gained at such a young age affected my life’s work in a major way and became the foundation on which everything else would be built. Another big advantage would have to be how it helped determine whom I married. Any prospective wife would already know what she’d be getting into.

God perfectly put me with someone who was active in our choir at church, and in my band at school. Annette has been a co-laborer from day one and, in my mind, is just as called as I am.

Barry: How have you benefited from your seminary training?

Bob: Seminary was a natural progression to preparing me to be a church musician. I can’t imagine doing this work without the knowledge I gained at seminary.

There were some classmates who were only attending seminary because they felt it would afford them a bigger church ultimately, and who weren’t really buying

into what was being taught. I was just the opposite; I hung on to every word.

There simply was not a subject that I didn’t grow from and enjoy, but some of my favorites were “Music in Missions & Hymnology” by T.W. Hunt, “Choral Diction” by Jack Coldiron, “Practice of Church Music” by Joe King, “Philosophy of Church Music” by Cecil Roper, and “Conducting Techniques” by Robert Burton.

A couple of non-music classes I totally loved were “Evangelism” by Roy Fish and “Baptist History” by John Baker. [Southwestern Baptist Theological] Seminary showed me the big picture and served to provide impetus throughout my ministry.

My prayer is that, in this day of much change, the baby is not thrown out with the bathwater. By that I mean, let us keep viable those classes in the degree programs that train men and women in the activities that involve the masses — meaning choirs and orchestras. Yes, let’s prepare them for smaller groups, too, like praise teams and bands — but let it be in addition to, not in place of, choirs and orchestra leadership.

Barry: You could have been an excellent professor, clinician or composer. What are some of the things you have enjoyed most about serving in context of the local church?

Bob: One of my favorite things about being a music minister is I get to work with all ages, children through senior adults. Fortunately, I’ve always had a healthy take on the aging process, and from the very start some of my closest friends were senior adults.

This multi-generational landscape within the local church’s music ministry has been a highlight. It has also been a wonderful place for me because of my diversified interests — music (obviously), choral, orchestral, traveling with music groups, sound systems, video systems, technology, etc.

Where else could a person work and be able to delve into all these areas and more? Whether it’s rehearsing a group to make beautiful music for worship experiences, touring with groups, soldering connections in the sound system, registering the colors in a camera, building cases for speakers to tour with, or — well, almost anything!

Working in the local church has allowed me to do it all, and I’m so grateful.

Barry: Your responsibilities have covered areas other than music and worship, including pastoral care, technology and media. How has serving in these areas informed and enhanced your overall ministry and effectiveness?

Bob: Doing these non-music parts of my job allows me to network and develop relationships with those I may not get to know otherwise. It also helps me easily adopt the big picture of church work and keeps me from being tunnel-visioned, which could easily happen. Conversely, it allows the church folk to see me in a pastoral role, helping them to realize that I’m minister first, musician second.

Barry: Most ministers go through periods of discouragement. Did you ever feel like you wanted to quit and go into a different vocation? If so, how did you overcome the discouragement?

Bob: Only one time did I seriously consider leaving the music ministry; I’m so glad I didn’t! My being open to such a move was entirely related to a less-than-healthy work relationship, and not at all because of a change of heart as to what God had called me to do.

Fortunately, God made a way for that work relationship to change. As to what helped sustain me while in the valley: the counsel of good friends for whom I had great respect, and the counsel of my parents.

During this season of depression, Jeremiah 29:11 became my mantra: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Barry: What is your favorite hymn or anthem, and why?

Bob: I have many of each, but I’d have to say “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” is one of my all-time favorite hymns, speaking of God’s constant care for us and interest in us. Also near the top for hymns would be “Here I Am, Lord,” a hymn that speaks to our total surrender to God in service.

As to an anthem, I often kiddingly remark to the choir that such-and-such

song is my “new” favorite anthem — and that pretty much is right. God keeps gifting composers to write new and wonderful choral and orchestral arrangements, providing for me a moving scale.

So my “new” favorite anthem for now is “More Than Conquerors,” relating how nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, and with his presence in our lives, we can overcome anything this world may challenge us with.

Barry: As someone who served in the same church for 32 years, what do you see as the primary factors that contributed to your longevity?

Bob: What a great question — and how difficult it will be to adequately answer. I’ve kiddingly responded, “It’s not that hard, actually; you simply have to be someone no other church wants.”

Assuming one serves a church whose people can abide longevity from their staff, the greatest challenge of staying somewhere this long is simply to keep your own interest up for the long haul.

In my own case that was made easier because our great church resources music ministry extremely well, and the singing and playing participants are willing to invest their own monies to be involved in some pretty exciting projects.

In addition to leading regular Sunday worship times, we get to do some amazing activities, [for example]:

- Bringing in Christian artists like Joseph Martin, Ken Medema and Steve Green to do a combined program with our choir and orchestra;
- Taking the adult choir and orchestra and our older youth choir on international tours every two years (each group goes once every four years, offset from one another by two years);
- Touring each summer with our older youth choir throughout the U.S. and Canada;
- Budgeting adequate dollars to support our annual Christmas production;
- Investing in needed props to do the Pensacola Easter Pageant;
- Purchasing instruments to be used in our orchestra program.
- On and on I could go.

Knowing I’ve served a church like that gives you a bit of insight into the kind of people at First Baptist Pensacola.

To the person currently serving on a church staff, I would say: Stay as long as you can under God’s leadership. There are advantages and benefits you and the church get to experience that simply are not available to short-termers. I’m certainly glad I did!

Barry: What advice would you give to young adults starting out on a journey in music ministry?

Bob: Go back; go back! (Just kidding.) I would encourage them, if they are definite in their sense of call to music ministry, then go for it. In my mind, nothing will satisfy you more or give you a greater sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Second, I would advise them to place huge importance on choosing their life’s mate, for nothing can replace the synergy that will exist between you and a spouse who also senses a call. It’s a win-win for your marriage and for the church you serve.

I would also encourage them to seek appropriate training. As Southern Baptists started placing more emphasis on formal music training in colleges and seminaries, and at the local church level, the number of folks involved in choirs and such soared for several decades.

Recently there has been somewhat of a return by many churches to place less emphasis on music training, returning to the practice of simply enlisting someone who can sing and maybe play a guitar or keyboard. I personally think this is a giant step backward and will ultimately serve to degrade our music ministries and involve fewer people.

Were I advising would-be ministers of music today, I would encourage them to look seriously at some colleges with church music degrees, both on the undergraduate and graduate levels. Recent changes in some of our seminaries give me pause to confidently recommend them to a prospective church worship pastor, though I’m open to being proven wrong.

Barry: What are some of the things you plan to do in retirement?

Bob: Top of my list: spend more time with

my grandkids! Annette and I are fortunate in that we live in the same city as our grandchildren and oldest son and his wife. We even go to the same church.

Both my mom and dad attend FBCP, and I definitely plan to be more present in their daily lives.

Our youngest son and his new wife live in Boston, where he is a teaching fellow at Harvard University in music; visiting them in their new place will be exciting. So, family takes on top priority.

I also want to further develop a little side interest of mine — which also benefited our choirs for the past six years. You can find out more than you’d ever want to know about this at www.choirprompt.com.

Getting back to playing my horn is also a goal of mine. While directing groups is wonderful, by its very nature it prevents you from participating as an instrumentalist or singer. It will be fun to personally “make music” again, and not just be “directing music-makers.”

And finally, even though we’ve traveled extensively on our choir tours through the years, I think Annette and I will enjoy some travel. We both love to explore new places and things, and there’s a whole lot of the world we’ve never been to.

So, occasional travel will surely be in the picture. It’ll be different traveling without 100 of our closest friends and doing concerts, but I’m thinking it’ll be fun, nonetheless.

One of my greatest desires is to continue to be faithful to God’s calling on my life, even in retirement. I don’t know what that looks like, exactly, at this point, but that’s what I want to be.

For my entire life I’ve encouraged folks to be responsive to God’s call to serve through music, and to be faithful in that service. Now that I’m here at my working life’s conclusion, may I prove just as faithful as those in my charge for all these years. **NFJ**

—Barry Howard, retired pastor of the First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Fla., serves as a leadership coach, congregational consultant and columnist with the Center for Healthy Churches. He is editor of Call Stories: Hearing and Responding to God’s Call (*Nurturing Faith*, 2019).

Is the offering off?

Church leaders consider impact of tax law, other factors on charitable giving



BY BRUCE GOURLEY

In a *Christianity Today* interview two years ago, CPA Mike Batts of Batts Morrison Wales & Lee advised congregations “to keep a close eye on the trending in charitable giving, and to be prepared to adapt accordingly.”

His words came on the heels of the 2017 Republican Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) that raised the standard deduction for joint filing to \$24,000, effectively removing the tax incentive of charitable giving for all but upper-income families.

Two years later, policy experts and church leaders have yet to coalesce around a consensus regarding the effects of the tax law. Observations range from fear to ambivalence, and quantifiable data is elusive.

Bill Wilson, director of the Center for Healthy Churches, captures the uncertainty among church leaders: “Everyone’s scared to death about this, but I’ve not seen any documented evidence of impact.”

In striving to explain the uncertainty, Wilson echoed a common theme voiced by others interviewed.

“Most donors were unaware of the rule change last year, and this may be the first year tax advisers and others have made it clear how the change will impact individuals,” he said. “[But] every minister who has been paying attention is fearful that 2019 is actually the year the impact will be felt.”

Rich Cohen, chief operating officer of the National Council of Nonprofits, believes religious organizations often stand out from other nonprofits.

“When it comes to supporting religious institutions and religion-related organizations, more people feel a particular connection and sometimes even an obligation to give a certain amount each year,” he said. “While they may pull back

from donating as much to the local animal shelter, they still likely have the same dollar amount penciled in for the church.”

A 2019 study of “Charitable Giving and Tax Deductions” conducted by Indiana University’s Lilly Family School of Philanthropy offers a broader perspective. Although charitable giving in total reached an all-time high in 2017, the report notes that the percentage of Americans contributing to charitable causes has been declining since 2000. Tax policies may have contributed to the trend.

“Over time, federal tax policy in the United States has become less progressive, lowering the tax burden on high-income households without providing the same reductions for low-income households,” the report states. “This has the potential to further reduce giving by low- and middle-income households.”

The report also suggests that the 2017 TCJA may further accelerate the long-term drop in household charitable giving.

David King, director of the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving at Indiana University that studies giving at the congregational level, said the 2017 tax law “does decrease giving.”

“[L]ower percentages of higher net worth donors are giving to religious organizations, particularly congregations, than other causes; think universities, art museums, etc.,” said King. “So, in a nutshell, congregations have greater numbers of rank-and-file donors than some other types of nonprofits.”

However, King cautioned that “the tax overhaul has not been around long enough for us to isolate the factors that led to a decline in religious giving and kept overall giving basically flat. I think less itemizing is one, but the stock market had a very bad end to last year, and tariffs

and uncertainties in the markets were quite high.”

Congregational leaders expressed a wide range of impact and concern as well.

Pastor Jack Glasgow of Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C., believes the 2017 tax law “had a strong and negative effect on giving.” He characterized the dynamics of the church’s financial decline in 2018 as “particularly noticeable in end-of-year giving, less so in week-to-week giving.”

Noting that his church “has a significant number of givers who come in during the last 10 days of the calendar year with significant gifts,” Glasgow lamented that last year’s decline in end-of-year giving was “pretty clear” — a 24 percent reduction from 2017.

However, Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C., said: “We haven’t noticed a change in giving patterns.” She described her congregation as defying a pattern of declining offerings common among many churches.

Data from 2019 may provide more clarification regarding the loss of tax incentives in charitable giving including to church offerings. Yet, the value of the data may be uniquely affected by this year’s increased tariffs, stock market returns, and other factors in addition to the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.

Regardless, King of the Lake Institute suggests congregational leaders focus on adapting positively to long-term trends of decreased church involvement.

“With changes in religious affiliation and attendance patterns too, I think the bigger concern is for congregations to privilege the teaching about giving and stewardship of money and possessions ... as an important part of their discipleship journey.” **NFJ**

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Global Baptists affirm women in church leadership positions

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE
Contributing Editor

NASSAU, THE BAHAMAS — Women should be affirmed for their “God-given calling for service in the church” and Baptists should work to promote love rather than religious intolerance, according to two resolutions approved this summer by the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) General Council meeting in Nassau.

The “Resolution on Recognizing and Affirming the Calling of Women in the Church” was the first resolution relative to women’s roles since 1988, the last time the BWA met in Nassau. At that meeting, a resolution called for Baptists to “celebrate the multiple gifts and sensitivities women bring to the service of Jesus Christ and the work of the Baptist family around the world” and to “commend biblical and careful attention by our member bodies to the enabling of women and their gifts” — but it had stopped short of endorsing women in pastoral roles.

The 2019 resolution grew out of a three-day Baptist International Conference on Theological Education (BICTE) immediately preceding the annual gathering. The conference was built on the theme “TOGETHER: Re-Imagining, Re-Reading HERstory in the Church.”

Speakers at the BICTE conference pointed to particular ways in which women are gifted to serve the church, discussed how Bible translations have contributed to male dominance in congregational leadership, and called for full inclusion of women in church leadership roles.

The resolution calls upon BWA member bodies to “Repent from the teachings and practices” that “have prevented women from flourishing as human beings created in the image of God and full members of the body of Christ.” It calls further for members to be open to the Holy Spirit’s power to provoke transformation so that Baptists might affirm “the God-given



calling of women for service in the church.”

BWA members should also “learn and then use language that is affirming to both women and men in worship, communications and publications, including Bible translations,” the resolution states, and “work intentionally to create equal space for women in all leadership roles in the church, Baptist conventions and unions, and in the Baptist World Alliance.”

The resolution was approved by the General Council with little debate and only two opposing votes.

A second resolution expressed “deep concern over recent instances of religious intolerance and religiously-motivated violence,” citing representative examples of attacks on synagogues, mosques and churches during the past year.

The resolution decries the rise of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and the persecution of Christians, citing a recent report commissioned by the United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which found that approximately 245 million Christians are endangered by high levels of persecution.

“We stand in solidarity and sympathy with all people who suffer violence, injury and harm, regardless of religion, race, gender, culture or ethnicity,” the resolution states, calling on Baptists to live in peace with everyone and so “reaffirm that prejudice, hate, and violence cannot defeat respect, love and faith.” **NFJ**

Ninety years a servant

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Sara Ann Hobbs was a force of nature with a heart for others. When she died Aug. 28 in Silver City, N.M., in the home she shared with long-time friend Nancy Curtis, Hobbs reached the end of a pioneering journey.

It began in Anniston, Ala., in 1929, just as the Great Depression was getting underway. The family moved to a cotton farm in Cochran, Ga., where Sara Ann grew up chopping cotton and feeling “a holy unrest,” according to Curtis, that God had somewhere else for her to go other than “up and down cotton field rows.”

Hobbs’ journey took her to Judson College in Marion, Ala., and on to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where she graduated from what was then called the Carver School of Missions and Social Work. Hobbs served in Christian ministry positions in Arkansas and Kentucky before moving to North Carolina in 1958.

There she joined the staff of the Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU) associated with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BSCNC), serving as Young Women’s Director and Girl’s Auxiliary Director before becoming Executive Director of WMU-NC from 1968 to 1977.

As its executive Hobbs led WMU-NC through reorganization and the construction of Camp Mundo Vista, near Asheboro, where thousands of girls and women enjoyed summer camps and meaningful retreats. For many, these experiences sparked their own call to mission and ministry.

Hobbs also worked to achieve equal pay for men and women in equivalent jobs within the BSCNC organization. In 1977 she moved to the North Carolina Baptist



Foundation as Director of Estate Planning, encouraging women to support mission work even after death. She influenced the national WMU organization to set up its own foundation for the same purpose.

Two years later, Hobbs was tapped to become Director of Missions for the BSCNC, the only woman to hold that significant position in Southern Baptist life. Hobbs served faithfully in that role for more than 20 years (1979–91), leading an effective ministry with far-reaching effects while managing up to 30 employees and



supervising an annual budget of more than \$2 million.

Hobbs was an advocate for women in ministry, and used her considerable speaking skills toward that end on numerous occasions. She was the first woman to be ordained as a deacon at Woodhaven Baptist Church in Apex, N.C., and consistently encouraged women to follow wherever they felt God leading them.

Hobbs’ journey met a significant stumbling block in 1989, when she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage that led to a lengthy hospitalization and a hard road to recover as much function as possible. Through valiant efforts, Hobbs returned to work, but ultimately retired in 1991.

In 1993, Hobbs and Curtis moved to Silver City, N.M., joining First Baptist Church and continuing to serve through volunteerism. Hobbs joined the Hospital Auxiliary and logged more than 2,500 hours of volunteer work, often speaking to and encouraging stroke patients and senior adults. She wrote a short book about her experience, called *Journey to Recovery*.

Hobbs received many honors for her years of service, including alumni awards from Southern Seminary (1980) and Judson College (2005). She received honorary doctorates from Judson College in 1984 and Gardner-Webb University in 1985. In 1994, Baptist Women in Ministry of North Carolina recognized her with the Anne Thomas Neal Award.

Such recognition says something about a person, but not all. Sara Ann Hobbs was devoted not only to God, but to her many friends and those in need wherever they were. I was privileged to serve as Sara Ann’s pastor at Woodhaven Baptist for five years. Even through the dark time of struggling to recover from her brain injury, I felt she was ministering to me. The world is a better place because of Sara Ann Hobbs, and I am just one of many who are grateful. **NFJ**

Questions Christians ask scientists

What was the Star of Bethlehem?

BY PAUL WALLACE

There is only one passage in which the so-called Star of Bethlehem appears in the Bible: Matthew 2:8-10.

We are told that “in the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’”

When Herod heard of this he grew frightened and tried to deceive the wise men. He “sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’”

“When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”

None of the other gospels mention the star, and no other biblical writings refer to it. But this one passage has proven sufficient to drive a small industry of speculators, mathematicians, astronomers and biblical scholars to determine, as best they can, the precise nature of this celebrated celestial event.

Many explanations have been put forward, and here are five of the top contenders:

STAR — Normal stars do not appear suddenly from nowhere. The wise men, who were really magi or astrologers, were intimately familiar with the night sky and would not have been surprised or even particularly interested in the regular appearance of even the brightest of known stars.

Something more unusual must have motivated them to leave their homeland and travel west.

SUPERNOVA — Certain massive stars die in dramatic blazes of radiation called supernovas. These shine extremely brightly — a million times brighter than the original star — for a month or two and then gradually fade.

Throughout recorded history several supernovas have been witnessed by human beings with unaided eyes. The most recent occurred in February 1987. Some believe the Star of Bethlehem could have been such an event, but this theory comes with two problems.

First, there is no record in any world culture of a bright supernova anywhere near the time of Jesus’ birth, and second, such an explosion would have left behind a conspicuous telltale object called a supernova remnant.

Any 2,000-year-old remnant would be pretty easy for astronomers to find, unless the explosion occurred on the far side of the Milky Way, in which case the supernova itself would not have been particularly bright, if it could be seen at all.

In any case, no remnant of that age has been uncovered in the part of the sky visible to observers in the Near East. It could have occurred in a nearby galaxy (like the Andromeda Galaxy), but this remains a highly speculative theory.

COMET — Comets are icy bodies that orbit the sun. It is estimated that about a

trillion of them exist in the solar system, and a remotely tiny fraction of them are visible with the unaided eye.

Comet periods — the times required for a full orbit — span a vast range of values. Halley’s Comet, for example, returns every 75.3 years: It last passed through the inner solar system in 1986 and will return in 2061. But most comets require much more time to complete a single orbit.

A bright comet could have passed through the sky at the time of Jesus’ birth and it may not be back for 10,000 years or even much longer, if it returns at all. Astrologers everywhere would have noticed it and found it significant, because before the scientific era comets were considered to herald significant events.

One problem with this theory is that the gospel writer described the object as a star, and most comets appear as fuzzy blobs and have long bright tails and look nothing like stars. It’s possible, however, that the author or the ancient Greek language itself did not draw such a distinction.

Also, comets were generally seen as bad omens and portents of doom, which of course is not how the magi interpreted the star.

PLANETARY CONJUNCTION —

An image of the sky as it appeared looking east-northeast from Palestine at 5 a.m. on August 12, 3 BC, shows bright light floating just above Leo’s paws. It is not one thing, however, but two: Jupiter and Venus, so close together that they could not be resolved by the human eye.

Planets wander through the sky and occasionally pass one another; when two or more appear very close together it’s called a conjunction. This would have been notice-



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able by anyone — Jupiter and Venus are the two brightest planets in our sky — and the wise men would have known this conjunction was coming, though they would not have known precisely how close the planets would eventually come to one another.

And, occurring as it did in Leo, it may have signaled an event connected to royalty (the brightest star in Leo, below and just to the left of Jupiter and Venus, is Regulus, as in regal).

Since this conjunction happened in 3 BC, for some scholars it might not be taken seriously as a possible explanation for the Star of Bethlehem. Was not Jesus born in the year AD 1?

No. It has been known since the early 17th century, when Johannes Kepler took up the problem, that the Nativity occurred well before this date. Depending on who you ask, Jesus was born anywhere between 8 and 3 BC.

Although this particular theory has a lot in its favor, it is not without one tiny problem: Though Jesus could have been born anytime between 8 and 3 BC, calculations show that

the most likely date for his birth is 4, not 3, BC. Still, it seems quite plausible.

LITERARY TROPE — A trope is any commonly-used metaphor or symbol or literary motif. Old stories of the births of great kings and emperors often featured celestial events, whether or not these events were historical.

Many legends concerning miracles and portents were floating around the Roman Empire at the time Augustus was born, in 63 BC. Perhaps this tradition was picked up by Matthew. (Mark, widely believed to be the first gospel written, makes no mention of the star or the magi.)

Adding the star to the story would make the point that Jesus' birth was important enough to alter history. It would also help place Jesus in the category of Son of God, which was a name used by many powerful rulers in Rome and the ancient Near East.

Therefore, claims in the Gospels that Jesus was the Son of God carried political as well as religious weight. This final explanation is the one favored by most biblical scholars.

So we have several options to choose from, and we could list others too: a heliacal rising of a star, in which a bright star appears in the east just before sunrise; a double occultation that occurred in 6 BC, in which Jupiter passed behind the moon twice in a short amount of time; and perhaps even some kind of UFO.

None of these theories come without logical or scientific problems, except for the literary trope. I leave it to you to decide which you like the most. I certainly don't believe that this is a crucial point for Christians to agree on; for me it lands in the ballpark of "fun to think and talk about but not to take too seriously."

Were I to pick a scientific explanation, however, I would favor the conjunction for its predictability and regal overtones, but when I read the Nativity narrative I usually do not think in strict literal or historical terms, so the literary trope also appeals to me.

Whichever theory appeals to you the most, I wish you a very merry Christmas!

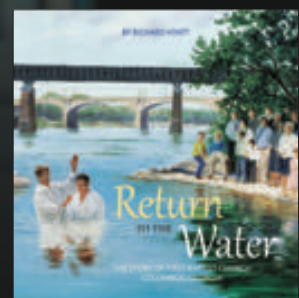
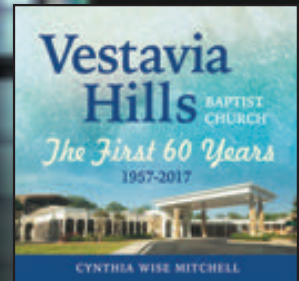
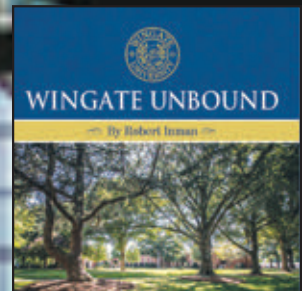
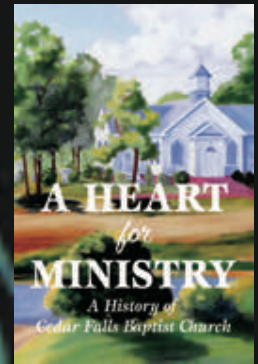
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