

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2020

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**WHAT'S NEXT?**  
*Religious outcasts  
may be changing  
nation's conscience*

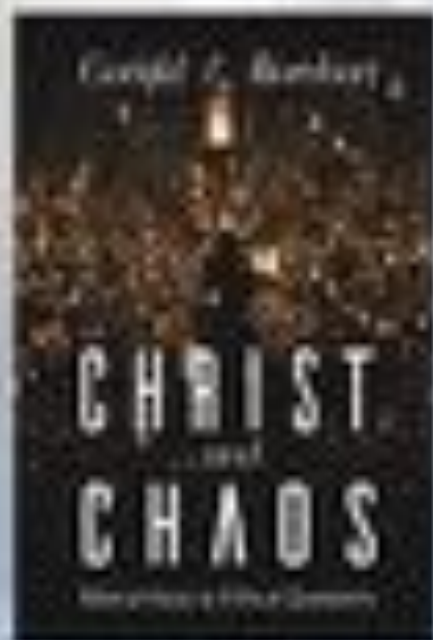
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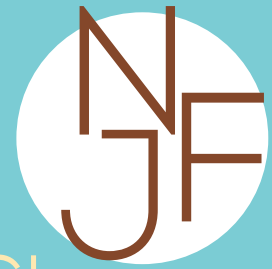
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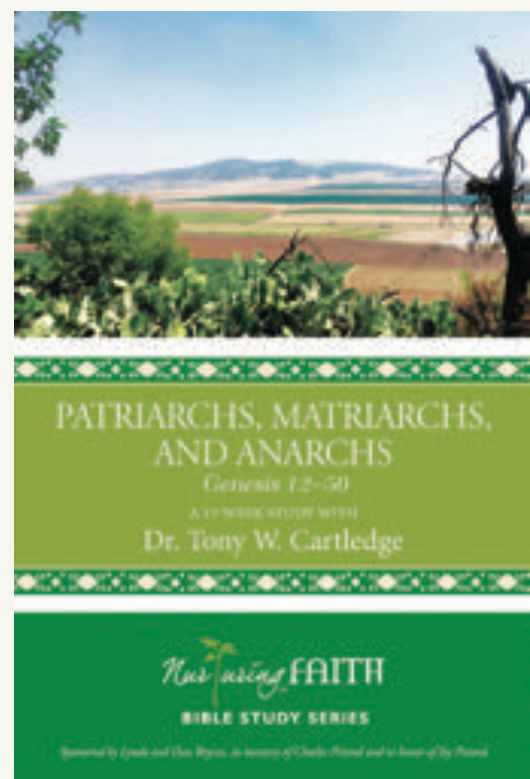
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Photo by John D. Pierce from Blood Mountain in North Georgia. The shorter, colder days of winter allow for deep spiritual reflections.

# Worth Repeating

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“Jesus did not come to change God’s mind about humanity because it did not need changing. Rather, Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.”

Katy Calloway, co-pastor of First Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga., in a sermon from Exodus 32:7-14

“As I reflect upon the church of Smyrna, I am embarrassed about how soft and easily offended the U.S. church has become. Perceived inconvenience is not the same as persecution.”

Pastor Danny Chisholm, on preaching through the seven churches of Revelation, at First Baptist Church of Clinton, Tenn. (ethicsdaily.com)

“I met Franklin Roosevelt, and I danced with Bette Davis at the Hollywood Canteen. I introduced Billy Graham to 60,000 people in Copenhagen one time.”

E. Bruce Heilman, former president of Meredith College and University of Richmond who died in October 2019 at age 93 (BNG)

“The reform of evangelicalism is probably the work of men and women of a rising generation, who have significantly different views and values from their elders... Time will work in favor of sanity.”

Columnist Michael Gerson in *The Washington Post*

“Rather than wringing our hands in anxiety that fewer people want to call themselves Christian anymore, let’s embrace the death of those expressions of our faith that do more harm than good. Then let’s roll up our sleeves and begin the work of resurrection.”

Amy Butler, former pastor of The Riverside Church in New York City (RNS)

“[T]he 19<sup>th</sup>-century pro-slavery biblical hermeneutic utilized by Baptists and other Southern Christians in support of chattel slavery is strikingly parallel to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century hermeneutic regarding the ‘male and female’ relationship in complementarity.”

Church historian Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University (BNG)

“Saints are not unapproachable figures, but regular blessed folks around us through whom goodness shines. You don’t have to be dead to be a saint!”

President Molly Marshall of Central Baptist Theological Seminary (BNG)

“Thomas Jefferson and James Madison knew that a merging of religion and state would be bad for both religion and state ... and nullify the role Martin Luther King Jr. identified for religion as the conscience of the nation.”

Larry Pullen, Alliance of Baptists representative on the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (*Connections*)

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# Which came first?

By John D. Pierce

Does the Bible shape our cultural values, or do our cultural values shape what we claim as biblical truth?

**T**his question is not as familiar as whether the chicken or the egg came first, but it is more deserving of our thoughtful consideration.

To reframe the question: Do we impose the Bible on our culture — or our culture on the Bible? Many argue for the former, but I have my doubts.

Often that question is considered only from a defensive posture that sees the prospect of change as a threat. Therefore, the *modus operandi* is to stand unchangingly for the Bible against the assault of ever-changing secular values.

Falsely assumed in such a stance, however, is that one's current "biblical stance" has not already been shaped by one's cultural understandings and personal preferences.

Particularly, when issues of justice and equality arise within society at large, there is expected resistance from within the church. That defense tends to carry the warning: "Culture changes, but God's Word never does."

Wrongly implied in that perspective is that biblical truth has always been correctly assumed — and must be defended against outside threats. Therefore, faithful religious soldiers stand against even the possibility that the living God might have some fresh light to offer.

Time and again, however, American Christians have left an extensive, tragic record of opposing history's slow march toward a biblical embrace of human value and equality. And in every case, "standing on the unchanging Word of God" has been the favored weapon of opposition.

On the surface, the warning sounds noble — that "the Bible, not culture" should dictate Christian beliefs, values and practices. However, what is defended as biblical truth is often an earlier cultural embrace that has been baptized.

And, if history is our teacher, those claims are often wrong. Yet, even when the church has been dragged by the culture into a better, more truly biblical stance on equality, there is little or very late confession, and never openness to the possibility that yet another blind spot might await.

How much healthier and hopeful it would be if the church's humble response was: "We've been wrong before, so we need to re-examine our position to see if we might have misread and misapplied the scriptures in this case."

Even in small ways we can see through the years how the church has been impacted by its culture — bringing in and out those things considered to be "sin" at one time but not the other. It helps to be more aware of how what we deem "Christian" (or "biblical") today may not have much to do with following Jesus.

That thought came to mind recently when discussing the church culture in which I was raised and nurtured. Nothing formed our identity and drew our allegiance more than being a part of that church community.

Time and talents were deeply invested. Revivals lasted a full week, and Vacation Bible School for two.

Fond memories filled my mind when recalling the excitement we felt each day of VBS with its processions, stand-up/sit-down chords, civil religion pledges, Bible and mission stories, Kool-Aid with holey cookies, kickball and crafts.

It was all lovingly guided by our moms and other volunteers — including some really old men (probably in their late 50s) with eight-and-a-half fingers who'd retired recently.

At crafts time we made manly tie racks out of wood and artistic displays of roosters formed by gluing colored corn on a patterned background. And, one time, we made ashtrays from clay.

Yes, ashtrays that we proudly showed to our parents and others who attended the VBS finale on the second Friday night.

Mine was no great work of art, and the homemade clay crumbled soon after it was brought home. It was never used for its intended purpose, as Mom didn't let Dad smoke indoors due to her asthma.

In even simple ways we can see how our understandings and expressions of the biblical faith have been shaped culturally — often for our own benefits.

Selective, culturally-shaped interpretations of the Bible have long led the church to be a part of the problem rather than the solution to the biblical call to justice. And it all rests on the great fallacy in claiming that one's "Christian" values are biblically pure, free of cultural influence and requiring no reconsideration.

Yet we still don't have it all figured out. We are like the clay that crumbles. **NFJ**



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# WHAT'S NEXT?

Religious outcasts may be changing the nation's conscience

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

**C**hurch attendance plummets year after year. Empty pews are the norm — with Sundays a time for “amusement” outside of church walls.

A generation of unchurched young people — “profoundly ignorant” of the things of God — lives out “intemperance, impurity and debauchery.” Prominent ministers lament the lack of influence “the institutions of Christianity” have on society.

Some point to natural disasters, epidemics and mass killings as signs of God's displeasure. Criticizing the government for failing to honor God, they demand political legislation to make America Christian again amid a “crooked and perverse generation.”

While these descriptions may reflect realities and familiar rhetoric in the year 2020, they are drawn from late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> century America.

## THEN AND NOW

Reporting on a recently published 2019 Pew Research study, a Christian news web site wrongly asserted: “Fewer Americans than ever before are attending church, and fewer are self-identifying as Christians.”

That is simply not the case. In reality, organized religion in America reached its lowest point ever around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an era when, according to historians, only 5 to 10 percent of Americans attended church.

By way of comparison, although religious attendance has been declining for years in the modern United States, today some 45 percent of Americans report going to church at least once a month.

## COROLLARIES

At least some causes of dramatically low church attendance in the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-



19<sup>th</sup> centuries are identifiable. And, in some instances, there are corollaries with today's ebbing interest in church.

Strict church doctrine — often absent of love and compassion — increasingly alienated Americans of the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary timeframe. The same is often said of the present-day church.

Politics of the former era disrupted the status quo and diverted the attention of the public. Today, studies indicate that the alliance between white evangelicals and the Republican Party of Donald Trump is driving many Christians away from church.

More than two centuries ago the inability of church to retain its relevance in an age of increased freedom kept most Americans from darkening church doors. Today, many American churches, faced with even greater advances in freedom, are struggling to maintain a semblance of relevance.

## UNREPENTANT

Many Christians of the late-18<sup>th</sup> century condemned the U.S. Constitution as godless. The 1791 First Amendment — that constitutionally unshackled colonial church-state alliances — angered and aggrieved many Christians all the more.

Nonetheless, the “godless” Constitution and the First Amendment paved the way for the rescue of American Christianity from irrelevance by setting the stage for the

First Great Awakening, a period of religious innovation driven by spirited, free-market competition for converts.

Church attendance in America remained relatively high thereafter until the 1960s, when another stark religious and political dynamic moved to the forefront of the American conscience. At a time when the government finally began redeeming itself — through civil rights and human rights legislation — of a century of oppressing minorities, much of white Christianity moved in the opposite direction.

Largely unrepentant of generations of racial hatred, violence and even terrorism, white evangelicals sought alliances with like-minded politicians. In response, many white young people began exiting church, leading to a decline in church attendance that continues to this day.

Black churches, on the other hand, led the Civil Rights Movement and prospered for decades, prior to also facing a decline.

## SHIFTS

Those who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” — categorized as “nones” — currently outnumber Catholics and are rapidly closing in on Protestants. The trend is pervasive.

“Nones” are growing throughout racial, gender, regional and educational categories. Non-Christian but religious Americans, meanwhile, remain relatively few in number but are slowly growing.

These shifts raise the question: Will American Christianity once again shrink in statistical relevance, as it did in the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> centuries?

Amid calls right and left for Christian renewal, fears are mounting that — despite the euphoria of white evangelicals over the political privileges being granted them by the current administration — the future of

Christianity in America is bleak.

Some scholars, on the other hand, believe a major change is underfoot. Author and lecturer Phyllis Tickle, who died in 2015, suggested that a new reformation of faith is underway, one that may ultimately be as momentous as the Protestant Reformation that emerged out of the Roman Catholic Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

But is it possible that something other than bleakness or reformation could arise and reshape Christianity of the future — something from the outside?

Stories of America's religious outcasts may offer clues to the future of not just Christianity, but of religion at large.

## CLUES

Early Baptists, condemned as non-Christian by established churches in theocratic colonial America, persevered in the face of persecution and successfully introduced theretofore-heretical concepts of equal freedom of conscience and equal freedom of religion for all persons, as well as religion-state separation.

Early Quakers, also persecuted by fellow Christians and viewed as outcasts, bore witness to humble faith and the ethics of peace in a world of violence.

Native Americans, despised by majority Christians and objects of controlling conversion efforts and mass extermination, maintained an enduring spirituality connected to the land and wildlife.

Jewish Americans brought diversity to colonial America despite bearing the hatred of many Christians.

Enslaved African Americans, their

bodies in bondage and former customs suppressed, quietly retained many of their religious beliefs. Blending African religion with freedom themes within the Christian Bible, they pushed America toward human equality — briefly embodied, following Emancipation and the American Civil War, in the Reconstruction years.

African Americans from the late-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present — while enduring hatred, persecution and systemic injustices — have drawn upon biblical themes of justice for all, inspiring many white Christians to follow in their footsteps.

Today, Muslim Americans, though small in number, bear witness to a traditional Islamic culture of hospitality to strangers coupled with a stronger commitment to religion-state separation and human equality than that of many American Christians.

## FUTURE FAITH

Emerging from this stream of diverse religious belief and practice come some shared themes that could reshape the religious landscape in America. Among them are: freedom of conscience for all persons, equal religious liberty, and religion-state separation.

These are accompanied by a humble faith and an ethic of peace, in addition to holistic spirituality and religious and cultural diversity. Also emerging is a more passionate commitment to human equality and justice — along with greater hospitality to strangers.

Interestingly, America's historical religious outcasts — for four centuries and counting — may well be changing

the conscience of a nation by putting their inclusive faith into action.

These religiously-inspired movements are among the most important contributions to American life, yet are rarely discussed or even recognized in most of America's churches.

Birthing from and nurtured by faith, they all exist above and beyond the statistical constructs of church attendance and doctrine that are the standard measures of Christianity studied and surveyed by research firms.

## REBIRTH?

By traditional measures, continued statistical decline is likely the fate of American Christianity. Meaningful reformation within centuries-old evangelicalism — often publicly tied to white nationalism that doesn't reflect the life and teachings of Jesus — seems unlikely.

The past, however, may offer a way forward. Again and again throughout American history, religious outcasts — who have been persecuted or at least dismissed by majoritarian Christians — have modeled transformative faith, spirituality, compassion and justice as taught by Christ in the Gospels.

"You must be born again," Jesus said in John 3:7 to Nicodemus, a religious leader trapped in his narrow, self-interested vision.

American Christianity, too, is in need of a rebirthing, a move away from the primacy of church attendance and strict doctrine and toward the less quantitative but far more important task of following Jesus. *NFJ*

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# Cultivate common ground regarding faith in public life

BY MELISSA ROGERS

“The course of history is directed by the choices we make and our choices grow out of the ideas, the beliefs, the values, the dreams of the people,” said Eleanor Roosevelt. “It is not so much the powerful leaders that determine our destiny as the much more powerful influence of the combined voice of the people themselves.”

The choices Americans make now about faith in public life will help to determine our course. With hate crimes and hostility toward certain faiths soaring, Americans have to decide whether we will tolerate this state of affairs or act to change it. If we truly believe all are created with equal dignity and worth, the answer is clear: Every human being deserves safety, security and religious liberty. And an attack on any faith must be treated as an attack against our own.

Government cannot stop every hate crime or heal all of our divisions. But leaders have a solemn obligation to do everything in their power to keep us safe and bring us together. Let us reaffirm George Washington’s words, written to the congregation of Touro Synagogue, that the U.S. should give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”

These are among the values embodied in the First Amendment’s religion clauses, which serve as co-guarantors of religious liberty. In the face of efforts to dismantle or diminish it, Americans should register their support for a robust understanding of the *establishment clause*, one that applies to both the federal government and the governments of all 50 states.

In an America that is rapidly becoming more diverse, it is perhaps more important than ever that the government maintain neutrality toward religion, neither promoting nor denigrating faith, nor preferring one or more religions over others.

Strong support is also needed for robust protections for *religious exercise*, including appropriate religious exemptions.

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Editor’s note: This article from Religion News Service is adapted from Melissa Rogers’ new book, *Faith in American Public Life*, from Baylor University Press.

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Exempting or accommodating religious individuals and institutions from laws and policies that conflict with their consciences is a time-honored American tradition, one that plays a key role in recognizing human dignity and protecting inalienable rights.

This same tradition, however, has also taken seriously the burdens that religious exemptions place on individuals who do not benefit from them, and coexisted with robust protections for other human and civil rights. It has also acknowledged distinctions between the commercial and nonprofit spheres.

Making lasting progress on issues

such as these will require renewed efforts to bring diverse Americans of good faith together to listen to one another and seek common ground.

In the recent past, presidents have called on Americans of vastly different political and theological stripes to seek common ground, and those efforts have borne fruit. Such initiatives have produced consensus guidance on current law regarding religious expression in public schools and the federal workplace.

Another initiative produced consensus recommendations for strengthening the partnerships the government forms with faith-based and other community organizations to serve people in need. This common-ground tradition needs to be revived.

Another piece of common-ground work should be rebuilding the U.S. refugee admissions and resettlement system. Refugees are individuals who are fleeing persecution, including persecution for their faith or beliefs.



Every year the president, in consultation with Congress, sets the ceiling for the number of refugees who can be admitted to our country. Once refugees undergo a rigorous series of security checks, they are resettled by nongovernmental groups, including many faith-based groups.

Until a few years ago, the refugee admissions and resettlement programs had been treasured and strengthened by presidents of both parties. Participating in a robust, global system of refugee resettlement has helped the U.S. to make good on its promise to protect human rights and to prevent crises and conflicts around the world.

Since 2017, however, the resettlement program has been dismantled, and the ceiling for refugees has been driven to a historic low. Leaders from across the political and religious spectrum have called for the refugee admissions and resettlement programs to be restored, noting that the U.S. can be both secure *and* compassionate.

Restoration of the refugee resettlement program should be part of a larger plan for renewed cooperation between government and a wide range of religious and humanitarian leaders. The Constitution *permits* governmental and willing religious leaders to work together to promote the common good. Common sense *requires* it.

To conquer scourges such as the Ebola and Zika viruses, end global poverty, promote racial justice, advance maternal and child health, counter violent extremism, make peace around the world and slow the climate change that threatens especially the poorest among us, government should collaborate with civil society organizations, including interested religious organizations.

Such collaboration ought to be prioritized and always conducted in a manner consistent with the Constitution. **NFJ**

—Melissa Rogers is a visiting professor at Wake Forest University’s School of Divinity and is former executive director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

# FOR THOSE WHO DARE TO CHOOSE truth over comfort

Indeed, truth can be unsettling. That's why so many ignore it in favor of false but more comfortable narratives.

For those who dare to face uncomfortable truth — since Jesus said such is the key to personal and spiritual freedom — there is a new resource worth reading: *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* by Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah (2019, InterVarsity Press).

This is not a feel-good book, but one that especially white American Christians need to read. As the authors affirm, “The absence of truth has resulted in the presence of injustice.”

Those of us raised to be patriotic Americans and devout Christians (and often conflating the two into a form of civil religion) tend to be more defensive and less self-critical than is constructive.

It is hard to admit that much of what we were told about America and the Christian church here — while growing up in church, school and home — was largely wrong.

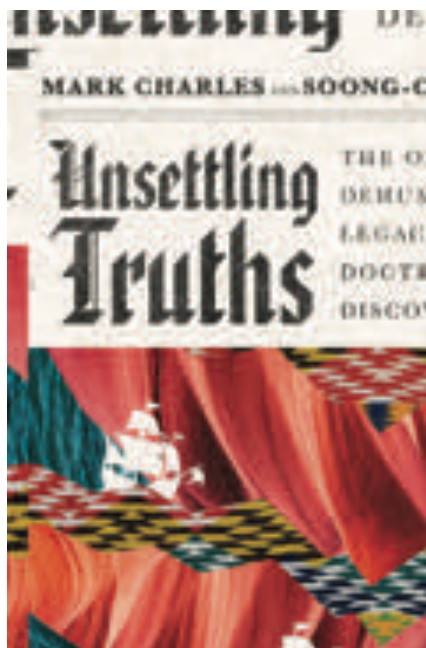
Columbus didn't “discover” America. The Pilgrims didn't come to these shores to produce religious freedom for all.

The Founding Fathers weren't a bunch of conservative Christians enshrining a church covenant and 1950s Protestant family values into the nation's founding documents.

Removing Native Americans from their lands and putting them on a forced death march was not an act of Christian charity and evangelism.

As a result of such narratives — intent on disguising greed, racism and other forms of evil — a Jesus-centered understanding of the kingdom of God gave way to a

REVIEW BY JOHN D. PIERCE



national tale of American exceptionalism and religious triumphalism.

These authors pull off the masks — offering historical accuracies and personal accounts from their own heritages. They show how the American church's “adultery is with the empire.” The lies are left bare.

“This obsession with the self-elevation of the American church and American society reflects an absence of truth telling,” they write. “The American church has yielded the prophetic voice because it has not spoken a historical and theological truth.”

In particular, the authors explore the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny — that offered divine justification for seizing lands from and committing all kinds of atrocities against non-white, non-Christian peoples — and its continuing impact on the U.S.

Therefore, there is no call for reconciliation, but conciliation — since justice based on equality and full human rights has long evaded us.

While the truths revealed within this book are uncomfortable and unsettling, they offer more than a guilt-filled flogging. There is a much-needed perspective that can lead to the conviction of sin, and a reorientation of purpose and practice — for those willing to endure such spiritual cleansing.

The path is a good, though not easy one: “We will call our nation and the Christian churches of our nation to a truth telling that will begin to shed light and open the door to a future hope.”

If anything is a biblical and spiritual exercise, it follows that well-lit, but lesser-worn path of truth, light and hope.

Consistent with Nurturing Faith's Jesus Worldview Initiative, the authors reveal “the absence of Christ within the heresy of Christendom.” Indeed, Jesus gets left behind when the religious faith that bears his name embraces a nationalistic ideology in contrast to what he taught and how he lived.

From Constantine to Franklin Graham, we find evidence of European/American Christian supremacy that has become commonplace in our church and society.

“The assumption of white supremacy took root in the imagination of the Western mind,” the authors write. “This imagination and narrative have become embedded realities in the American Christian worldview.”

Indeed it has. And, therefore, the hard path of truth, light and hope awaits us — that is, for those who dare to follow Jesus. [NFJ](#)

# Seeking clarity for our blurry 2020 vision

By Mitch Randall

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

As a child, I was fortunate to have 20/20 vision. However, as our family optometrist pointed out, 20/20 vision did not mean my vision was perfect.

It merely confirmed that I could see with sharpness and clarity at 20 feet, while other factors could impair my sight such as peripheral awareness, eye coordination, depth perception, focusing and color vision.

My optometrist also told me that as I grew older my vision would worsen. But, as a young boy, I scoffed at that idea. For goodness sake, I could see a pitcher's hand release a baseball, revealing if a fastball or curveball was on the way.



He was right, however. With my vision now no longer 20/20, I need bifocals or otherwise stare into a blurry future. My blurry vision has helped me draw some conclusions over the last decade.

As the years passed, I have grown to understand the Apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians more clearly: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

Many Christians seek and often assume a sense of absolute certainty. They want to see the world with perfect clarity, lacking any uncertainty.

Reaching that conclusion, however, often enables them to feel superior and/or cast judgments upon others who do not align with these "certain truths." They treat

the Bible as though it were a crystal ball, revealing the perfect answers for just the right moment.

While certainty sounds very appealing, a question arises: "With such ironclad certainty, where is there room for faith?"

In his follow-up letter to the church at Corinth, Paul wrote: "So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord — for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:6-7).

Confidence is not certainty. Paul used the Greek word *tharreo*, which means, "to be of good courage." In other words, walking by faith takes tremendous courage.

Certainty, on one hand, is moving forward without the presence of fear. Faith, on the other hand, courageously moves us forward even while fear attempts to hold us back.

The great South African leader Nelson Mandela once said: "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

For those choosing to follow Jesus, fear is conquered through walking by faith into a blurry future. And, as the year 2020 begins, it holds a lot of blurriness.

Not only do we face an intense and divisive election season in the U.S., but the global church faces a crossroads of sorts. Such decisions will be instrumental in how we move forward into a future that remains blurry.

We will either continue down a bitterly divided road or attempt to seek commonality for the greater good. As a country, we can no longer afford to allow the deep partisan divides to paralyze us. The problems we face are too significant to remain in gridlock.

• The climate inches closer to catastrophe.

- The world becomes more dangerous with each foreign policy blunder.
- The judicial system still incarcerates people of color at disproportionate rates.
- The wide wage gap between rich and poor grows.
- Medical costs create financial hardships on many families.

The church will also be at a crossroads in 2020. Roman Catholic and Protestant churches are facing an ever-growing call for transformation. Whether it's equality for women or the inclusion of LGBTQ Christians, the future of the church will be guided by significant decisions made during this blurry time.

Will the church move down the road of inclusion and justice, or succumb to the fear of change and the comfort of privilege?

Pope Francis has already set the tone for the future of the Roman Catholic Church. His compassion and openness have created waves that can be ridden into a brighter future. Protestants are also transforming, similar to their Catholic relatives.

However, the public rise of Christian nationalism within Protestant denominations and evangelical traditions is alarming. Protestants around the nation and across the globe — with all others committed to justice and freedom — must stand against Christian nationalism and work to keep church and state separate in order to enjoy our treasured freedoms.

Throughout this blurry year we will explore some of the ethical issues facing the church today — always seeking to follow the example and teachings of Jesus as we actively respond. In doing so, perhaps the blurriness of 2020 will give way to a clearer focus.

There are too many issues and opportunities before us — and too much at stake — to neglect our civil and spiritual responsibilities. As Mahatma Gandhi reminded us, "The future depends on what you do today." **NFJ**

## Documentary and study guide foster needed conversations

*Beneath the Skin: Baptists and Racism*, a documentary produced by **EthicsDaily**, takes an honest look at the past and ongoing challenges of racial unity and social justice. The DVD may be viewed at no charge — available at [ethicsdaily.com/feature-documentaries](http://ethicsdaily.com/feature-documentaries) — in either a 47-minute or 35-minute version.

From the trans-Atlantic slave trade that began four centuries ago to current debates over immigration, *Beneath the Skin* identifies long-held prejudices and confronts them with biblical mandates.

Those interviewed include the late preacher, author and activist Will Campbell; American Baptist leader Aidsand Wright-Riggins; and

Javier Elizondo of Baptist University of the Americas. The documentary won the 2008 Best Documentary Award at the International Black Film Festival of Nashville.

A downloadable study guide enables facilitators to engage constructive conversations around the topic of racism and the church's responses.

The documentary and study guide affirm that racism is far from eradicated — inside and beyond the church — but that many people (including many Baptist Christians) are working in proactive ways to break down walls of division and to be faithful to the Bible's moral vision.

NFJ



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# Mattress ministry provides comfort in midst of storms

BY RICK JORDAN

Most mission projects begin with a need, followed by a search for resources to meet that need. “Rest In The Lord,” the mattress ministry of Dortches Baptist Church in Rocky Mount, N.C., happened in the opposite way.

Following the destruction of Hurricane Matthew in 2016, the Dortches congregation received a check in the mail from a church in Raleigh.

“They wanted to donate to a group that had boots on the ground to ensure their funds found a home with the people who needed it the most,” said Phil Barton, the pastor of Dortches since 2010.

“I contacted local authorities and began meeting with hurricane victims in Princeville and Tarboro,” he continued. “As I drove around devastated neighborhoods, I saw mattresses stacked by the road.”

Through conversations with residents staying in the relief shelters, Barton said it became apparent there would be a great need for replacement mattresses as people began rebuilding after the storm.

The Dortches congregation found a willing partner in the city’s family-owned Southern Mattress Company.

“They willingly agreed to give us wholesale pricing,” said Barton. “Often, the owner would go down to the factory after hours and make the mattresses we needed ... to fill requests.”

Initially, the church had funds for about 10 mattresses. But over the course of a year, the requests grew to 65. But, eventually, the need slowed and the church assumed the ministry was winding down.

In 2018, however, Hurricane Florence hit. The need for more mattresses was overwhelming.

“Prior to this hurricane, I had personally helped deliver every mattress we sent out,” said Barton.

“That’s when a church member who is a business owner inspired me to start thinking like a wholesaler instead of a door-to-door salesman.”

In response, Southern Mattress agreed to ship mattresses in lots of 30 using their delivery truck and driver at no additional cost. Immediately, Barton began praying for partners and distribution points.

“I was contacted by a member of Rose Hill [N.C.] Baptist Church who had secured a tractor trailer that could be used for temporary storage,” he said. “They received the first shipment.”

Barton said he was in his office praying for a warehouse when he received a call from Ryan Clore, pastor of First Baptist Church in Whiteville, N.C. Clore asked: “Would you benefit from having access to a warehouse?”

Barton was connected to Wallyce Todd, who has a warehouse she uses to assist people in her community through a ministry called Community CPR (Connecting People with Resources).

“Between these two distribution points,” said Barton, “we have now delivered 150 mattresses and box springs to Hurricane Florence victims.”

As the church networked with more partners, the burden lessened for the church members and the ministry multiplied, said Barton.

“We have learned that we place a limitation on the potential reach of our ministry when we try to do things all by



ourselves,” he said. “Through partnering with others, we had to learn to let go of a lot of control; but as a result, our efforts have already almost tripled what we were able to do before.”

The church’s primary responsibilities now are prayer, support and growing awareness. The Women on Mission group has led an effort to provide pillows for some of their past deliveries.

The name of the ministry is rooted in a biblical story in Mark 4: “Jesus and the disciples were out to sea when a furious storm came upon them. In the midst of the storm, the disciples found Jesus ‘sleeping on a cushion’” (v. 38).

“Rest In The Lord seeks to provide that same ‘cushion’ so recipients of this ministry can find rest and peace in the midst of the storm they have been experiencing,” Barton said. “Everybody deserves a good night’s sleep. Sleep is essential to physical, mental and psychological health.”

The Bible is clear that Sabbath rest is essential to spiritual health as well, he added.

“By providing a mattress and box springs, we are not just replacing a household item. We are impacting the well-being of the entire household in a holistic way.” **NFJ**

—Rick Jordan is church resources coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.





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“BEING  
CHURCH IN  
CHANGING  
TIMES”



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

## The noise in our head and in our life

BY BILL WILSON

Recently, I've started using a tried-and-true method for pulling together groups I am leading.

As we commence, I ask those present to be completely silent, and listen to the noise in the room. After a few moments of silence, I ask: "Tell us what you hear."

Most report the hum of electronics, the mechanical sounds of the HVAC system, voices in the distance, an occasional bird or cricket, and even the sound of their own heartbeat or the constant ringing in their ears. We note that these sounds are always present, but we seldom hear them because of all the noise that life produces.

We then think about another kind of noise: the background noise in our head and in our heart that is distracting us and preoccupying our mind in the moment. I ask those present to name the "life noise" they must overcome to be fully present in the room.

"What are the things that preoccupy your thoughts, that you must push aside to be engaged in what we are about to do?"

A common litany of thoughts and concerns rushes out, nearly always including:

- physical maladies of every type, including some I never knew existed
- some form of recovery from emotional trauma or grief
- spiritual torment
- job insecurity, especially among ministers
- unmitigated joy and genuine hope
- deep despair and depression
- heightened anxiety and fears of all kinds
- frustration with church, culture, family or media

Then I observe: "And those are just the ones you're willing to share aloud with this group. Thank you for your honesty."

Everyone is dealing with a steady litany of internal noise that deafens them to whatever you are saying or inviting them to participate in. Too often, we simply look past their struggles as they enter our church or our lives, and think only of what we want them to hear/see/do in response to us.

I remember a staff member complaining about a church member who seemed unimpressed and unresponsive to his requests for help in implementing a new program idea. I happened to know some confidential things going on in this member's life that made anything that required her time or energy a nonstarter.

I suggested to my colleague that he might want to hold off on criticizing our parishioner, and was met with a dismissive look that said: "If she were truly committed, she would help me."

A few years ago, the Cleveland Clinic produced a five-minute video titled "Empathy" ([health.clevelandclinic.org/empathy-exploring-human-connection-video/](http://health.clevelandclinic.org/empathy-exploring-human-connection-video/)). Everyone should see it TODAY.

The video begins with a quote from Henry David Thoreau: "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?"

The viewer is then taken on a walking tour of a hospital. There are thought bubbles above those encountered to detail what they are experiencing that is unseen and unknown.

"Wife has had a stroke. Wonders how he will care for her."

"Just found out he will be a dad."

"Heading into day 29 of chemo treatment."

"Always wanted a child of her own."

"Seven years cancer-free today."

It is a powerful and sobering portrayal of the internal noise that every person we encounter must manage.

Too often, what people find when they come to our church is more noise, rather than a way to manage and understand their noise. We simply layer on more pressure, expectations, fears and conflict to their already-full plate.

Instead, what if we grasped the truth that what Jesus came to offer us was a way to create a life that makes sense and that brings peace, rather than anxiety?

What if we relentlessly sought to be a wellspring of calm in the midst of the raging conflict(s) in our culture? What if we pointed every person toward an organizing center that made life make sense?

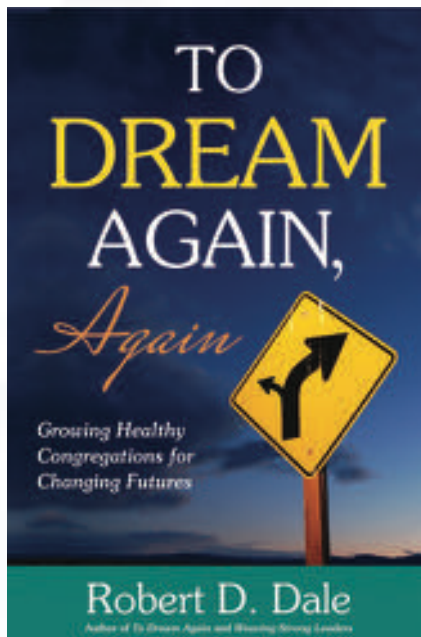
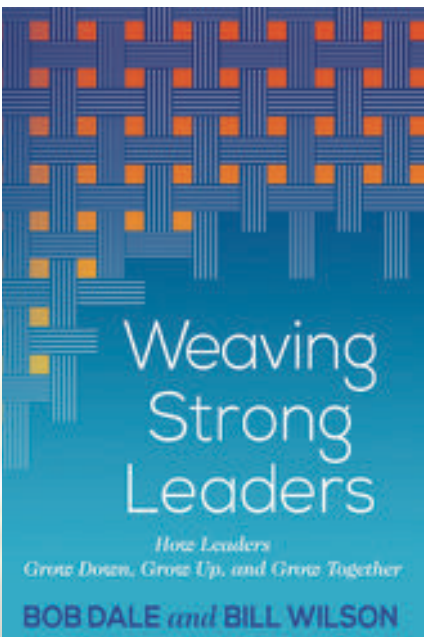
I believe that is why some churches thrive, while others barely survive or die. People need a faith community willing to bear each other's burdens, one that provides meaning in the midst of meaningless abundance, is marked by genuine fellowship, that actually makes a difference in our world, and that invites one to worship a God who transcends our "noise."

When that is what they find, they will engage, sacrifice and work for and embrace that church. Such a discovery is a grand respite in the midst of all the noise in our head and in our life. **NFJ**

—Bill Wilson is founding director of the Center for Healthy Churches.



# HEALTHY CHURCH RESOURCES



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

# Unity found in ‘Living Presence’

By John R. Franke

The Christian faith is remarkably diverse, so much so that theologian

Justo González remarked: “The opposite of a pluralistic church and a pluralistic theology is not simply an exclusivistic church and a rigid theology, but a heretical church and a heretical theology!”

Indeed, the embrace of plurality and its corresponding openness to others — especially those who are different in language, culture and custom — is one of the most basic signs of faithful Christian witness. However, this embrace of plurality and openness to others leads to an important question: What is the basis of Christian solidarity from the perspective of a pluralistic church and theology?

In examining the vast multiplicity of Christian expression throughout history, missiologist Andrew Walls has noted a common point of continuity: “There is, in all the wild profusion of the varying statements of these differing groups, one theme which is as unvarying as the language which expresses it is various; that the person of Jesus called the Christ has ultimate significance.”

It is the person of Jesus who provides the basis of unity for the church.

Yet, even here we face a challenge. If Jesus is at the center of the church and of ultimate significance, how are we to understand the unity of the Christian community in the midst of the diverse perspectives on Jesus?

Think of the numerous and sometimes competing theories of atonement that have been part of Christian intellectual history. Put another way, how do the numerous confessions concerning Christology relate

to the common confession that Jesus Christ is the one Lord of the church and the world?

Is the solidarity of the church dependent on arriving at a common formulation or at least an agreed-upon compromise among the many models? From my perspective, the answer to this question is a resounding “no.”

Shared Christological formulations, though these may be worthwhile and significant, are not the basis for solidarity in the Christian community. Rather, the unity of the church is found in the *living presence* of Jesus promised to the Christian community by Jesus himself: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).



This promise is found in the Lord’s Supper, which is a symbol of the ongoing presence of Jesus with us and our solidarity with him in his mission in spite of the different ways in which these have been understood and lived out. In this practice, Christians declare our solidarity with Jesus and celebrate his presence.

The unity of the church is not to be sought among its diverse communities in full agreement on matters related to its teaching and practices. It is not to be found in common doctrinal statements and confessions, though these will remain important in the life and witness of the church.

The unity of the church is found ultimately in the very person of Jesus. By the gift and witness of the Spirit, Jesus Christ is not only the example of Christian life and service, but also a living presence in the midst of the Christian community.

But this very presence that provides solidarity in the Christian community is also

experienced in diverse ways in keeping with the missional multiplicity of the church.

As theologian Tom Oden put it, “The circle of the Christian tradition has an unusually wide circumference without ceasing to have a single, unifying center. It is Christ’s living presence that unites a diverse tradition, yet that single presence is experienced in richly different ways.”

He goes on to say that the presence of Christ has been experienced by different traditions sacramentally, spiritually, morally, socially, doctrinally and biblically. While the living and risen Jesus has been experienced in spectacularly varied ways, it is nothing other than the living presence of Christ that “forms the center of this wide circumference.”

In relating the diversity of these many experiences of the living Christ to Christian unity, we remind ourselves of the metaphor of the church as a body provided by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. He asserts that the Spirit is at work forming one body, one church out of many parts in which a diversity of gifts and experiences are given for the edification of the whole.

In other words, it is not *our understanding* of the nature and presence of Jesus that unites us, but rather the *actual fact of his presence* that brings us into solidarity with him and each other. As we enter what looks to be a highly divisive election year, let us practice the unity we share through the living presence of Jesus in our midst and bear witness to an alternative way of life for the sake of the world. **NFJ**

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

# Lead the way in love

BY GINGER HUGHES

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)*

In October, a well-known male preacher and Bible teacher sat in front of a gathered group and belittled a well-known woman speaker and Bible teacher, drawing jeers and laughter from the crowd.

As I listened to the interviewer's baiting question, the preacher's answer, and comments from another man who joined him on the stage, I was angered.

No matter your thoughts on the "doctrine" in question (whether women should be allowed to speak/preach), as Christians, we are called to be Christlike. And Christ was never in the business of belittling others.

In fact, Jesus' own words, his perfect direction for us as his followers, are recorded in John 13:34-35. It's clear: Jesus calls us to love.

And here's the part that really hurts: While we (as fellow Christians) sit around and argue over "right" doctrine, people are leaving the church in record numbers.

While we stand around pointing fingers and throwing accusations at one another, our churches are fracturing and falling apart.

While we look at our brothers and sisters in Christ with disdain because they believe a bit differently than we do or because they interpret scripture differently than we do, there's a world of people — who have never known the hope of Jesus — watching and wondering why they'd ever want to be associated with Christianity.

No matter how strongly we may feel on any given subject, our greatest impact on this earth will never be because we've convinced someone to agree with our theological position on any particular issue.

Rather, our greatest impact will always be directly related to how well we love others and how well we point them to the ultimate example of agape love — Jesus Christ.

Each day we meet people from all walks of life — at the grocery store, the bank, our jobs, our schools. They don't believe exactly the same as I do or as you do. And that's OK.

Because those people, though different, were created by the same Holy God who created you and me. And they are loved just as much.

Tearing down others will never be the right answer; loving others always will be. And those of us in the Christian community ought to be able to discuss issues with civility and respect for one another — even with those who believe differently.

People are watching us every day: how we talk to people, how we talk "about" people, how we act toward others. It all matters.

That doesn't mean we'll be perfect; we won't. But it does mean we should always do our best to lead the way in love. Because, if we'll notice, Jesus didn't "suggest" that we love others; he commanded it. [NFJ](#)

*—Ginger Hughes is the wife of a pastor, a mother of two and an accountant. She is a Georgia native currently living in the foothills of North Carolina. Her blogging for Nurturing Faith is sponsored by a gift from First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga.*



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# Extreme Church Bingo

By Brett Younger

**L**oud people love to encourage quiet people to talk. These outgoing people enjoy icebreakers — clever games that introduce strangers, start conversations, and force those who do not want to interact to do so.

But some of us like ice. Icebreakers send the introverts to the kitchen to get more ice. These attempts to push us to get to know one another unite some of us in a shared disdain for the game.

Church bingo is a favorite icebreaker at church socials, parties and retreats where the retreat leader used to be a youth minister. Participants work their way around the room, asking people

to sign their bingo card in the appropriate squares. People enjoy learning who has a pet with a biblical name, is wearing uncomfortable shoes, or went to Dollywood.

What if we made church bingo a more soul-searching exercise? What if we made it so hard that we would never have to do this again? What if we played “Extreme Church Bingo”? **NFJ**

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

Does not like the taste of communion wafers	Has attended worship with a hangover	Would be fine never hearing another quote from C.S. Lewis	Has not put an offering in the plate in six months	Has pretended to be sick to get out of worship
Thinks the Bible is overrated	Cannot recite John 3:16	Wishes we would stop singing terrible hymns	Thinks Pharaoh gets a bad rap	Cannot name five books of the Bible
Likes the previous pastor better than the current one	Thinks the coffee at church is a sin	Still likes Mel Gibson	Has tried to pass off store-bought dessert as homemade at a church potluck	Has visited more than four churches in town in search for a better one
Used to attend a segregated church	Has grown children who do not go to church	Did not take their wedding vows seriously enough	Has a discolored toe	Voted for Richard Nixon
Believes the Resurrection is a metaphor	Has spent a night in jail and does not want to talk about it	Likes wearing a yarmulke a little too much	Is frequently jealous of atheists	Was late to this gathering in hopes of missing the icebreaker



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

## ATTENTION TEACHERS: HERE'S YOUR PASSWORD!

- > The updated Nurturing Faith web site ([nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net)) provides a fresh look and easy access to the Teaching Resources to support these Weekly Lessons. Subscribers may log into the online resources (video overview, lesson plans, Digging Deeper, Hardest Question) by using the password.
- > Simply click the “Teachers” button in the orange bar at the very top of the homepage. This will take you to where you enter the January/February password (**gospel**) 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](http://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](http://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. Carledge*

Jan. 5, 2020

John 1:1-9, 10-18

## The Word That Reveals

It seems to be universal. Throughout the ages, humans have looked beyond the bounds of observable life and experience to explain why the world exists, and why things are the way they are. Wherever we go in time or place, we find people looking to the gods – singular or plural – as their culture has come to think of them.

Christians hold to a belief that there is one and only one God, a single deity revealed as Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit. We believe that God wants to be known, and can be glimpsed through the stories, teachings, letters, and other materials that make up the Bible.

The Bible *begins* with the radical claim that God has created humans in God's own image (Gen. 1:27), suggesting that there is something godlike in us, some spark of the divine, some shadow of God's face. That is a mind-boggling idea: that God could be revealed through human flesh or personality.

The Bible *ends* with an even more remarkable claim that God and human believers will live together face to face, for in eternity "God himself will dwell among them, and they shall be his people" (Rev. 21:3).

In between, John's gospel declares that God is revealed most perfectly in

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)*

the human life of Jesus Christ. Christ not only shows us the way to God: the gospel declares that he *is* God, the very essence of God, the embodied word of God in human form. ↓

This month we begin an effort to relate our Bible studies to Nurturing Faith's "Jesus Worldview" initiative, and we couldn't begin with a better text. Every aspect of this text helps us to understand why those who are wise will seek to shape their lives and views after those of Jesus rather than social norms or so-called "biblical worldviews" that prefer prooftexts to the teachings of Jesus.

### Christ as the Word (vv. 1-9)

In the memorable and poetic prologue to the Fourth Gospel (1:1-18), the author describes Christ as the divine *logos*, the Word of God incarnate. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (v. 1). ↓

The basic meaning of the term *logos* is "word," but it could also carry connotations such as "reason," "wisdom," "matter," or even the "reckoning" of an account.

Writers have often assumed that John used the *logos* concept to make the gospel more appealing to Gentile audiences familiar with Hellenistic philosophy, but the word would communicate well with readers from a variety of backgrounds.

Jewish readers could have thought

of *logos* in terms of the Hebrew Bible's witness to God's words as a creative power that could speak the world into being (Gen. 1; Ps. 33:6, 9) or accomplish any divine purpose. Isaiah declared of God, ". . . so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11).

Greek readers could have imagined the *logos* as a philosophical principle, the projected thought of the transcendent God, giving stability to life and forming a divine-human bond of rational thought.

Early Christian readers might have interpreted *logos* as the proclamation of Christ through the preaching of the gospel as a "ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4), whose content was Christ himself (Luke 1:2, Acts 1:21-22). Jesus' very life was a sermon on the nature of God who offers the gift of relationship to the human world.

Christ the Word was not only present from the beginning (v. 2): the author insists that Christ was intimately involved with the creation of the world as the source of both life and light (vv. 3-5).

How did the world first come to know of Christ? The first witness to understand and proclaim Jesus' special nature as the Christ of God was a man named John, Jesus' cousin and the one who came to be known as "the baptizer." John is introduced in vv. 6-8 as the one who came to testify to the light. What light? To clarify, the author added "the true light that enlightens everyone" (v. 9). The light "was coming into the world" – a reference

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to the incarnation – but the connection between Jesus and the Word was yet to be spelled out.

### The power of Christ (vv. 10-13)

Although the Word created the world and became incarnate within the world, the author comments, the world did not know him (v. 10): creation did not recognize its creator. John found it heartbreaking that the people of Israel did not recognize Christ as their own long-awaited Messiah: “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (v. 11).

Still, there were individuals who did recognize Jesus as Lord, who believed in him, and who accepted him as savior. “To all who received him,” the author wrote, “who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (vv. 12-13).

To believe in Christ’s *name* is to believe that Jesus is who he claims to be – the Son of God, the Word of God, indeed, one with God. To those who believed in his name, Christ “gave power to become children of God” – the divine Son of God empowered human persons to become the mortal children of God. ↓

As the human Jesus was connected to God, the writer taught, mortals who become children of God enter the relationship “not by blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man” (a threefold reference to human birth), but by God’s will and God’s work alone. Jesus’ earthly birth by the will of God is the pattern for our spiritual birth (cf. John 3:1-16). Thus, John defines Christianity purely in terms of God’s grace: God loved the world enough to become incarnate in Christ so that we might believe and become children of God. ↓

### The glory of Christ (vv. 14-15)

The Fourth Gospel begins with Christ as the eternal *logos*, then shifts to the earthly incarnation: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (v. 14). God’s self-revelation through the incarnate Christ enabled humankind to see and appreciate God’s true glory. ↓

The human Christ reveals God’s matchless glory, and he declares it most clearly through his nature, which is “full of grace and truth.” John preserves a careful balance by coupling these terms. *Grace* is God’s free gift of love and forgiveness. *Truth* reflects God’s desire to be consistent and trustworthy in dealing with humankind. In Christ, we see the depths of God’s compassion combined with a devotion to what is right.

John offers further testimony of Christ’s glory in the parenthetical remark of v. 15, where he quotes John the Baptist as saying “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me’” (compare Matt. 3:11).

Many people expected John to reveal himself as Israel’s Messiah, but John pointed to Jesus as the true Anointed One (the name “Christ” [*Christos*] is a Greek form of the Hebrew “Messiah” [*mashiach*] which means “anointed”). The Fourth Gospel further argues that even John the baptizer did not recognize Jesus’ importance at first, but God revealed it to him (cf. John 1:25-34).

### The grace of Christ (vv. 16-18)

Since Christ is “full of grace and truth,” it follows that, for believers, “from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace” (v. 16). The grace

we receive has its source in God. Perhaps John is suggesting that our human propensity to sin always leaves us in need of more grace, which we can receive “from his fullness . . . grace upon grace.” ↓

The prologue comes to an end with a brief comparison between the way God was seen through the eyes of the law and through Christ: the law was given to humans through Moses, the writer said, but “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (v. 17).

God has been gracious from the beginning, but tablets of stone and written laws could not communicate divine grace as effectively as the human person of Jesus. Jesus was grace and truth in the flesh, the living embodiment of divine character.

Moses had once begged to see the Lord’s glory, but was only allowed to catch a brief glimpse of God’s “back” or “afterglow” (Exod. 33:23). The most interesting thing about this story is that, while passing by, God revealed the divine nature in words: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,” (Exod. 34:6).

Although the story claims that Moses spoke with God “face to face” (Exod. 33:11), it also quotes God as saying “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Exod. 33: 20). Thus, John insisted that no one had truly seen God until the coming of Christ, for “it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18).

The face Moses longed to see was the face beloved by John and Mary and Peter and James. It is the face of Christ, the living embodiment of divine grace, God with us: and the face in which we see reflected a view of the world we are called to follow. NFJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 12, 2020

Matthew 3:13-17

## A Son Who Pleases

**W**hat does it take to get your attention? Suppose your church had a guest preacher who read the sermon in a monotone. Or, let's say the guest was an academic who droned on about the political interplay between seventh century Judah and the Assyrian Empire. Would that keep you engaged?

Then again, imagine a Sunday morning when a bushy-haired wild man dressed in burlap should come dancing down the aisle shouting "Good news! Repent! Good news! Repent!" That would get your attention. It might get the Sheriff's attention. Nobody would sleep through that sermon.

### An unusual preacher

No one got drowsy when John the baptizer preached, either. John did not have to invade the quiet synagogues of Judah to get an audience: he went out into the wilderness near the Jordan River and started shouting – and people came out in droves to hear him and to be baptized by him (vv. 5-6).

John's appearance was as notable as his words. John looked like a wild man, but it was evident to any good Hebrew with a lick of learning that he also looked like a reincarnation of Elijah the prophet.

*And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17)*

The Jewish people of Jesus' day were anxiously awaiting a Messiah to come and rescue them from Roman domination and to put the promise back in the promised land. Isaiah had predicted that a messenger would appear in the wilderness to prepare the way (Isa. 40:3, Matt. 3:3). Tradition held that Elijah had been carried to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2), but Malachi had prophesied that Elijah would return to earth just before the climactic "day of the LORD" (Mal. 4:5-6).

Elijah was remembered as an eccentric prophet who wore rough clothing cinched up with a strip of leather and who lived in the wilderness, eating what the land provided (2 Kgs. 1:8).

So, when John showed up dressed in a camel's hair garment with a leather belt, living in the wilderness and subsisting on locusts and wild honey, people thought Elijah had returned.

John not only looked like Elijah, but sounded like him. He had one single, simple message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!" (v. 2). Elijah of old had called for the leaders of Israel to repent of their idolatry and return to the LORD. The word "repent," in biblical language, means to turn around. It means to change your mind and change your ways. It means to turn away from selfishness and idolatry so you can turn toward God and experience forgiveness and right living.

John called for repentance because

"the kingdom of heaven is near!" The "kingdom of heaven" (or "kingdom of God") refers not to a place but to the rule or reign of God. God rules whether we like it or not, but we can choose whether we will trust God and play an active role in God's kingdom – or not.

John's preaching took on a special urgency because the Messiah was coming, and in the Messiah God's kingdom had become incarnate in the form of a human being. Through Jesus Christ, God was about to show his people Israel just what the kingdom was all about – what it meant to know God and to be known, to love God and to be loved.

John called on people to demonstrate repentance through the radical step of public baptism in the Jordan river. His authoritative preaching led some to wonder if John was the expected Messiah, but he insisted that his purpose was to prepare the way for Jesus, the true Messiah, the one who would ultimately separate the wheat from the chaff (vv. 11-12).

### A surprise candidate (vv. 13-15)

John's odd appearance and forceful preaching had shocked many others, but he was the one caught off guard on the day when Jesus showed up, having traveled many miles from the Galilee, and asked to be baptized. The two men were cousins, according to Luke 1:36, and God had apparently revealed to him that Jesus was the Messiah, so he was baffled at why Jesus would want to join the crowds in seeking baptism.

John tried to dissuade Jesus. "I need to be baptized by you," he argued,

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“and do you come to me?” (v. 14).

We might also question why Jesus chose to be baptized. He had committed no sin and had no need to repent, or so Heb. 4:15 insists. He told John it needed to happen in order “to fulfill all righteousness” (v. 15). That simply means to do what is right, what God wants to be done. Why? What would Jesus’ baptism accomplish? One common guess is that Jesus chose to be baptized as a way of identifying with humankind, symbolizing the fullness of his humanity.

Perhaps he also wanted to indicate that baptism is important, that it matters.

What do *you* think? 🇺🇸

### A major introduction (vv. 16-17)

Jesus’ decision to seek baptism also provided an opportunity for John to introduce him to his followers, and for God’s Spirit to confirm publicly that Jesus truly was the chosen Messiah sent by God as the hope of Israel – and of the world (vv. 16-17).

Baptists typically assume that Jesus was baptized by immersion, but the text does not describe the mode by which Jesus was baptized (see the online “Hardest Question” for more). It says only “And when Jesus had been baptized” before adding “just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him” (v. 16).

The text could be read to imply that Jesus alone saw the Spirit descending, but the symbolic appearance “like a dove” and the significance of the message that followed would have been lost if others could not have seen and heard it, too. Luke added that the Spirit appeared “in bodily form” as a dove. Whether he intended to suggest that a dove was tangibly present, or only to

indicate that the Spirit appeared in the form of a dove’s body, is not clear.

An interesting word play helps paint the image: as Jesus came up (*anabaino*) from the water, the Spirit came down (*katabaino*) from heaven to meet him. In rabbinic tradition, the dove was sometimes used as a symbol for Israel. The Old Testament includes a number of allusions to doves, but none in which the dove symbolized God’s Spirit. 🇺🇸

While Mark wrote only of “the Spirit” descending (Mark 1:10), Matthew specified: “the Spirit of God.”

The Spirit is most commonly pictured as wind, and Hebrew uses the same word for both “Spirit” and “wind.” The avian image of the dove may recall Gen. 1:2, in which the Spirit of God hovered or moved over the waters of chaos as creation commenced.

The purpose of the Spirit’s appearance was not just to demonstrate divine support for Jesus’ ministry, but to symbolize the active presence of the Spirit in Jesus’ life.

While some first century Jews believed that God’s Spirit had been withdrawn following the age of the prophets, Jesus was reportedly conceived by the Spirit. Jesus’ baptism not only marked his identity with humans, but also a clear affinity with the Spirit. 🇺🇸

The visual symbol of God’s Spirit was accompanied by a heavenly voice. Matthew’s version of the story suggests that the voice spoke to all, publicly attesting divine approval of Jesus. For Mark (1:11) and Luke (3:22), the words were directed to Jesus: “You are my beloved son ...,” but Matthew changed it to a third person testimony: “*This* is my beloved son ...”

The divine speech reflects two Old Testament texts. “You are my beloved son” is from a coronation psalm used

to indicate God’s endorsement of a new king. The king was figuratively adopted by God: “You are my son, today I have begotten you” (Ps. 2:7).

The reference to Isa. 42:1 spoke of a coming Messiah, of whom God would say: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

The voice from heaven spoke few words, but with great import. By drawing inferences from Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42, Jesus was described with images of both royal messiah and suffering servant. This dual identity is reflected in differing perceptions of Jesus as he began his ministry, encountering conflict with even his closest companions (Matt. 16:21-28). Many of his followers expected Jesus to declare himself as a royal messiah and to launch a new day of political power. Jesus, on the other hand, more often described himself in the role of Isaiah’s suffering servant.

With the benefit of the New Testament as an interpretive frame, we can see how these apparently opposing roles were complementary. Jesus was indeed the Messiah, but the redemption he brought would come through personal suffering and spiritual power rather than through personal power and military action. Thus, we know that our own relationship to Jesus – lived out through sharing Jesus’ world view – is best experienced through spiritual humility and service to others.

Jesus humbly submitted to John’s baptism, and contemporary believers adopt a position of meekness when following Christ in the baptismal waters. We may not see the Spirit descending in the form of a dove, but the humility we express in baptism is an open invitation for the Spirit’s presence in our lives. NfJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 19, 2020

John 1:29-42

## A Lamb Who Leads

“**H**e first found his brother . . .” What would you do first if you heard good news, amazing news, the news you’d been waiting a lifetime to hear? Maybe the news that a universal cure for cancer had been announced, or that Israelis and Palestinians had finally reached a substantive and lasting peace accord, or that an inexpensive way to trap carbon dioxide and reduce climate change had been discovered.

Any of these things would have major, world-reaching effects. They would enhance security, save lives, and improve living conditions in every part of the globe.

Suppose you just heard such life-changing news. What would you do first?

Andrew went and told his brother, Simon.

Who would *you* tell?

### Testimony One (vv. 29-34)

Our text is concerned with three consecutive testimonies to Jesus. The first two are from John, commonly known as “John the Baptist,” though “John the baptizer” is more appropriate. The Fourth Gospel does not specifically describe John’s baptism

*He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). (John 1:41)*

of Jesus, but it contains an account of John’s testimony to Jesus in a baptism setting that has similarities to those in the other gospels, so it is implicit. ↓

John’s baptismal remarks were not his first testimony to Jesus. Earlier, in the midst of a theological discourse on Jesus’ identity, the author parenthetically noted that John had spoken of Jesus without naming him: “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me’” (v. 15).

John later testified to priests and Levites who wondered if he was the Messiah by saying that he was not the one, but had been sent to prepare the way. Quoting from Isaiah 40:2, he said “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (vv. 23).

John went on to say that though he baptized with water, another was coming who was so much greater than he that he felt unworthy to untie his sandals (v. 27). This took place, we are told, “in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing” (v. 28).

Our text begins on “the next day,” and presumably in the same setting, when John saw Jesus approaching and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (v. 29). ↓

A careful reading suggests that John’s testimony in vv. 29-34 does not mention Jesus’ actual baptism, because it may have occurred on the

previous day, and it was only through divine revelation associated with Jesus’ baptism that John came to realize that the mystery Messiah he had been preparing for was Jesus himself.

Only then could John point to Jesus and say “This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me’” (v. 30, compare v. 15).

What did John mean? Wasn’t he born before Jesus? Luke 1:26 says John’s mother Elizabeth was six months pregnant with John when the angel first announced to Mary that she would conceive. It’s clear that John had more than earthly birth order in mind. The gospel writer, who clearly believed that Jesus as the divine “Word” had existed from the beginning (1:1), apparently attributed to John the shared belief that Jesus had a prior existence in heaven before coming to earth. Thus, John could insist “he was before me.”

It may seem unusual that John, at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, would identify him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” This seems to be the sort of thing one would say in retrospect, after the crucifixion and resurrection, after Jesus had suffered on behalf of others.

It is true, of course, that the Fourth Gospel was written many years after Jesus’ earthly ministry, and so the terminology would be familiar to readers – but the author presents John as choosing that terminology early on, perhaps to identify Jesus as a different kind of Messiah. Some contemporary Jewish writings spoke of the anticipated Messiah as a powerful warrior lamb, and the Apocalypse of John (Revelation) also speaks of Jesus as the

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mighty Lamb of God, slain but victorious, who would judge the world.

Such terminology effectively looks at power in a different way: the Lamb of God would overcome through suffering and willing sacrifice, not through overt expressions of military might.

Verse 31 implies that John learned that Jesus was the Messiah only through his baptism: “I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel” (v. 31).

This is an interesting thought: though the synoptic gospels portray John as challenging people to be baptized as a sign of repentance, the Fourth Gospel implies that the ultimate goal of his baptizing ministry was the revelation of Jesus.

In v. 32 John describes having seen “the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” John apparently interpreted this as the sign that Jesus was the Messiah: “I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (v. 33).

Now, John could say, “And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God” (v. 34).

This must have been a bittersweet time for John – he joyfully recognized and testified that Jesus was Messiah, but in doing so he fulfilled his primary mission. What would he do now? And would his disciples leave him to follow Jesus?

### Testimony Two (vv. 35-40)


John’s second testimony took place on the following day, when he was talking with two of his disciples as Jesus walked by, and he declared again “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” (vv. 34-35).

If John came to bear witness to the coming Messiah, and the Messiah arrived, it was only natural that his disciples should then pledge their allegiance to him. It’s not surprising, then, that the two disciples left John and followed after Jesus (v. 37).

When Jesus noticed that they were following him, he turned and asked, “What are you looking for?” The question could just as easily be translated “What do you want?” These are the first words spoken by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: “What do you want?” (v. 38).

What do *we* want from Jesus? As Rudolf Bultmann once commented: “It is the first question which must be addressed to anyone who comes to Jesus, the first thing about which he must be clear” (*The Gospel of John, a Commentary* [Westminster John Knox, 1971], 100). Is forgiveness all that interests us, or are we interested in following Christ into a new kind of life?

The disciples’ answer seems simplistic, but it has deep implications. They asked: “Where are you staying?” That was not just a request for information; it indicated a desire to spend time with him there.

“Come and see,” Jesus said, and they followed him to the unnamed place. Was it a guest room in someone’s home? A quiet spot in the shade of a date palm grove? It doesn’t matter: it’s where Jesus could be found. The author doesn’t mention a place, but notes the oddly specific time of day: it was “about four o’clock in the afternoon” (v. 39). 

What is the significance of this? If the disciples followed Jesus to where he was staying at four in the afternoon and then “remained with him that day,” the implication is that they remained with him for a while, perhaps overnight, listening and learning.

How much time do we spend with Jesus? How often do we seek his presence and go intentionally to a quiet place where we can listen for his voice and reflect on what we believe he is calling us to do?

### Testimony Three (vv. 41-42)

The third testimony is not from John, but one of those former disciples. Only one of the two is named: Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. We are not told whether the action in vv. 41-42 took place on the following day, or after only a couple of hours with Jesus, but Andrew knew exactly what he wanted to do first.

“He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah.’” Greek did not use exclamation points, but don’t you think there should be one?

Andrew then led Simon to Jesus, “who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).”

Mark also seems to indicate that Jesus nicknamed Peter early on: “So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter) . . .” (Mark 13:6). Matthew associates the new name with a later encounter. Following Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus said “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). This may or may not indicate the origin of the name.

This suggests a different picture from the synoptics. There, Jesus seeks out the first disciples and calls them to follow. Here, it is the disciples who seek Jesus, and wisely so.

We believe that Jesus, like a good shepherd, is constantly seeking out the lost. But when we defer to the world and wander from Jesus’ view of discipleship, we can’t just sit around waiting for Jesus to find us and jerk us up by the collar. We need to seek him, too. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 26, 2020

Matthew 4:12-23

## A Preacher Who Calls

Life is all about beginnings. Each morning begins a new day. Each January begins a new year. Each step of schooling and every stage of life requires a new beginning: jobs, marriage, moves. Every task before us has to be begun before it can be completed. Every obstacle we face is the beginning of another challenge to be overcome.

Jesus' life was no different in this respect. The gospel of Matthew, which we follow in "Year A" of the lectionary, opens with a story of how Jesus' life began as an infant (chs. 1-2), then skips to his entry onto the public stage through baptism at the hands of John and public endorsement by the Spirit (ch. 3). Jesus' spiritual pilgrimage begins with the story of the temptation (4:1-11), and his active ministry begins with 4:12-25: our text for today. 📖

### Jesus preaches (vv. 12-17)

Matthew connects the beginning of Jesus' active ministry with a sharp break in John's: "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee" (v. 12). 📖 📖

Matthew gives no specific reason for John's arrest at this point, and he does not suggest that Jesus returned to

*And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."  
(Matt. 4:19)*

Galilee and settled in Capernaum out of fear that he might also be arrested. 📖 Rather, he sees it as a fulfillment of prophecy, which is common in Matthew: this is the fifth of ten times that Matthew says Jesus did something as a fulfillment of prophecy.

Nazareth was within the traditional tribal boundaries of Zebulun, and Capernaum was in the region designated for Naphtali. Perhaps this led Matthew to quote loosely from the Greek translation of Isaiah 9:1-2, where the prophet had predicted that God would cause light to break upon the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, whose people had "walked in darkness."

A branch of the *Via Maris*, a major highway known as the "Way of the Sea," ran through Capernaum, which was located on the northwest edge of the large lake commonly known as the "Sea of Galilee" (also called "Kinnereth" or "Gennesaret"). Many Jews lived in the area, but a largely Gentile population also called it home.

Matthew apparently believed that Jesus' preaching fulfilled the promise that light would dawn on those who had lived in darkness. "From that time Jesus began to proclaim 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (v. 17). 📖

The call to "repent" (from the verb *metanoia*) is not an appeal to feel sorry for one's sins alone, but to turn away from a self-centered lifestyle and turn toward God. It reflects the meaning of the Hebrew word *shub*,

commonly translated as "repent," that literally means "to turn around." The first step in adopting a "Jesus worldview" is to turn away from the world and turn toward Jesus.

Matthew prefers to use "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God," perhaps out of a growing desire among the Jews to show reference for God's name by not pronouncing it.

But what is the "kingdom of heaven"? For many years, the Jews had hoped for God to break into history and set up an earthly kingdom. Prophets like Isaiah and Micah had spoken of a day when all nations would come to Jerusalem to worship God and there would be peace on earth (Isa. 2:2-4, Mic. 4:1-4).

In Jesus' day, people were more likely to hope for a military messiah to rise up, lead them to victory over the despised Romans, and reestablish an Israelite kingdom.

In the teaching of Jesus, the messianic age had come, but not as expected. Rather than setting up a restored world or a restored monarchy, Jesus introduced a radically different notion. The kingdom of God/heaven was not a particular place, but the spiritual realm in which God is king. The kingdom of God is the rule of God, the realm in which God operates, the "-dom" (think "domain" or "dominion") in "Kingdom."

Jesus could say "the kingdom of God is at hand" because *he* was at hand. The rule of God was at work in his life and ministry. When Jesus called people to repent because the kingdom was near, he was not inviting them to go to any particular place, but to live under God's rule and so

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bring the ethics of the kingdom to bear wherever they were.

### Jesus calls (vv. 18-22)

As Jesus began his active ministry, he did more than preach inspiring sermons to anonymous crowds: he also spoke to individuals, built relationships, and challenged a small group of people to follow him as disciples. The gospels are agreed that Andrew and Simon Peter were among the first disciples called, though John tells it differently. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

As Mark and Matthew relate the story, Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee when he saw Simon and Andrew, apparently within shouting distance of shore, casting their nets.

The Greek word describes a small circular net, with weights around the outside. When thrown over a school of fish, one could pull a drawstring that would pull in the bottom and trap the fish. Modern fishermen use a similar net for bait casting. Peter and Andrew were likely to have been after shoals of sardines that often came near shore. 🇺🇸

With no prior recorded conversation, Jesus challenged the fishermen to leave their nets, follow him, and start fishing for people (vv. 16-17).

A little further along, Jesus found James and John sitting in their boat, mending nets, which were often snagged and needed constant repair lest ripped places allow the fish an easy escape. Jesus called to them, presumably in a similar fashion.

In both cases, the story says, the men responded “*immediately*,” leaving their boats, nets, and family behind. What do we make of this? Both Mark and Matthew tell the story as if the first disciples had never seen Jesus before, yet one simple command led them to leave their boats behind and follow him. Would that have been the case? Was Jesus’ call so irresistible that a

simple command on first sight was all it took to win their allegiance?

Let’s examine the clues. In vv. 12-17, Matthew indicates that Jesus had already moved to Capernaum and started preaching. Capernaum was a small village, so it’s unlikely that Jesus would have gone unnoticed, either there or in the surrounding area. We don’t know how much time passed between Jesus’ move to Capernaum, the beginning of his preaching ministry, and his call of these first disciples. Matthew is following Mark, who moved the story along at a rapid clip.

So, we may be fairly confident that Simon, Andrew, James, and John had seen and heard Jesus before, whether they had yet greeted him personally or not. They had heard his preaching, which certainly included more than “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” They were probably already thinking about how they might respond to him. Perhaps Jesus’ visit to the lakeside and his personal challenge was all that was needed to push them over the top.

Even so, the brevity with which Mark and Matthew tell the story emphasizes the power of Jesus’ charismatic personality and the forcefulness of his call. Jesus called, and they responded. Immediately.

And what did Jesus call them to do? To change their focus from catching fish to catching people. The metaphor is a little unwieldy, because when people who fish for a living make a catch, it’s usually the end of the line for the fish. In Jesus’ worldview, catching people meant living such lives that we draw others out of the world and into the kingdom, where the old life does end in a sense, but a new and better life begins.

As we wonder how well the first disciples knew Jesus, and what motivated them to leave their

livelihoods behind and follow him as disciples, we can’t help but ask ourselves what it takes to motivate us to follow Jesus and live as he called us to.

Why should any person give his or her first allegiance to God when the patterns and comforts of ordinary life are so familiar? What would attract us to a lifestyle of living and loving as Jesus taught us to do?

Would it take more knowledge about Jesus? A sense of desperation with no place left to turn, or a spiritual experience that we can’t understand? In many cases, new followers are motivated by the example of a friend whose life seems so grounded and joyful that they want to be like him or her – and thus they are “caught” for the kingdom.

### Jesus ministers (vv. 23-25)

Matthew squeezes Jesus’ early ministry and rapid rise in popularity within three verses (4:23-25). Jesus began to preach throughout Galilee, he said, teaching in the synagogues but more notably healing people of all manner of dread diseases and conditions: he ministered in both word and action. In this way, Jesus’ reputation spread and “great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

Though Jesus remained in Galilee, word about him spread and people flocked from all the surrounding areas as they came to learn about Jesus’ worldview, grounded in the kingdom of God.

With these few verses, Matthew illustrates the spiritual hunger of the people, and Jesus’ surprising manner of ministering to it.

How hungry are we, and how needy is our world? Are we ready to go fishing? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Feb. 2, 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

## A Teacher Who Challenges

On the side of a hill, the Lord Jesus sat down, and he began to teach – and multitudes of people gathered round to hear what he had to say.

Would we have been among those who came to hear the immortal “Sermon on the Mount,” which began with the curious “Beatitudes,” our text for the day?

If we’re interested in understanding and following a “Jesus Worldview,” we wouldn’t miss it for anything. ↓

Jesus yearned for people to look beyond miracles and healings and begin to understand the true demands of the gospel. So, on the side of a hill, the Lord Jesus sat down, and he began to teach the multitudes who were just beginning to understand who he was – and he turned their world upside down.

If we listen, he will shake up our worlds, too.

### Humble blessings (vv. 3-5)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus said, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3). “Blessed” translates the Greek *makarios*, which can also mean “happy.” That must have confused people who never thought of putting

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
(Matt. 5:3)*

“poor” and “blessed” in the same sentence.

Jesus’ message began with the unavoidable truth that the first step in spiritual growth is to recognize our spiritual poverty. A sense of poverty motivates us to work at improving our situation. We all have a problem with spiritual poverty, and we try to fill that emptiness in a variety of ways, many of them harmful to our health, our relationships, and our spirit. ↓

Those who would escape spiritual poverty learn to trust in God’s sustaining grace. Long-time believers learn that times of spiritual growth often begin with times of spiritual brokenness.

As if that were not enough, Jesus went on: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (v. 4). Those who mourn the loss or rejection of a loved one know what it is to feel the emptiness that follows. Where’s the comfort in that?

In our loneliness and grief, we can become deeply aware of our need for some presence other than our own. Our first tendency is to lean on other people, and sometimes our search for God doesn’t begin until we have lost all earthly support. But when the search begins, we are on our way, for God is with us. A saying I have heard from childhood states it well: “You can’t really say ‘God is all I need’ until God is all you have.” ↓

Putting our trust in Christ requires humility, acknowledging that we need

something beyond ourselves. “Blessed are the meek,” Jesus went on, “for they shall inherit the earth” (v. 5).

Some of those present might have recalled Psalm 37:11’s claim that “the meek will inherit the land, and will enjoy great peace.” The word Jesus used may have carried less baggage than our word “meek,” which may lead us to think “weak,” “timid,” “cowardly.”

That is not what Jesus had in mind. Jesus could speak of himself as “meek” (Matt. 11:29), but he was no coward. “Meekness” does not suggest fears of worthlessness, but humility. We may have strong self-esteem, but be humble enough to look past ourselves and learn to love both God and others. God has a world full of blessings for those whose confidence is expressed in kindness.

The first three “beatitudes” share similar themes of poverty. Some see the next sequence as relating to the theme of hunger.

### Hungry blessings (vv. 6-9)

Jesus could see the hunger in the eyes of those who gathered around, hunger for so many different things. He focused on the most important: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (v. 6).

People who grow spiritually do so because they want to. They have a deep hunger to know God’s way, a continual thirst to experience God’s presence, and a willingness to do something about it. ↓

One way to feed spiritual hunger and thirst is through prayer and meditation. A psalmist prayed: “As a deer pants for the waterbrooks, so my soul pants for thee” (Ps. 42:1). If we are thirsty, we

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look for water. If we want to experience the presence of God, we take time out, go inside our hearts, and discover that God is already looking for us.

We may also feed our spiritual hunger and thirst through Bible study. As we read the gift of scripture, we find much that puzzles us, and much that rewards. Working through the difficult passages as well as obvious ones helps us to develop our ability to study and learn and grow. 🇺🇸

We may also feed that hunger and thirst through worship. It is no accident that

Jesus instructed his followers to remember him as a community of believers, eating bread and drinking wine in a spirit of communion. In worship – opening our hearts to God – we can find food for our hungry souls.

Those who hunger for the righteousness of God will indeed be filled not only with the presence of God, but with a desire to serve God. Jesus mentioned three specific kinds of action:

“Blessed are the merciful,” Jesus said first, “For they will obtain mercy” (v. 7). Later on in the same sermon, Jesus taught his followers to pray, saying “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” There is no more effective stumbling block to spiritual growth than a grudge. As long as we refuse to forgive others, it is impossible for us to be forgiven, because the door is not open.

Those who are hungry for righteousness also hunger to do what is right. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus added, “for they shall see God” (v. 8). When we experience God’s gracious forgiveness, and we understand something of God’s sacrifice in bringing about our forgiveness, we also experience a desire to be more like Jesus. We do not want to cause God any

further hurt, or to experience the pain of our own shame.

Few things are more painful than the inner, certain knowledge that we are hypocrites. We have ways to mask that pain so that we do not feel it. so much, but those who are sensitive to it have a great hunger to be pure in heart, not only toward God, but for good.

The hunger for righteousness also motivates a hunger for peace. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God,” Jesus said (v. 9). Not “Blessed are the peaceful,” which we might be happier to hear, but “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Making peace can be hard work, and is not always peaceful or even appreciated, but it is needed.

Is anything more needed in our country, or in our world, than peace? Only when we can relate to one another with peace rather than hostility and division can we begin to tackle the many other issues that face us.

Peace-makers are not passive people who avoid stirring the waters, but persons who are willing to go out on a limb to bring others together. Peace-makers give themselves to helping others find peace with God, peace at home, peace in their workplace, peace in their world. No one else gives more evidence through their lives that they are truly the children of God.

### Hard blessings (vv. 10-12)

Jesus’ hearers must have thought he had gone off the deep end when he concluded his series of blessings with “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 10; vv. 11-12 repeats the same thought).

The eager listeners who covered the mountain’s slope may have listened keenly to Jesus’ insistence that the only ones who grow spiritually are

those who are hungry enough to do something about it. But many must have begun to drift when Jesus went on to insist that deep spiritual blessedness comes through the experience of hard times.

This was not a new thought entirely, for Jesus had already talked about poverty and mourning as the seedbeds of spiritual growth. He moved on to the kind of hard times that result from persecution.

Some American Christians cry “persecution” when they don’t get special privileges, but none of us have tasted the first measure of what the Christians in first century Rome endured. We’ve never felt what the Jews in Europe encountered under Hitler’s regime. We don’t know what it’s like to be a Palestinian living under Israeli occupation.

If we did, it is likely that we probably would know a deeper measure of faith than we have now. If you want to strengthen someone’s faith, just try and force them to give it up. 🇺🇸

On the side of a hill the Lord Jesus sat down, and he began to teach.

He taught about . . . humility, hunger, hard times. To human ears, those ingredients may sound like a recipe for misery, but Jesus considered them building blocks of the abundant life, of what it means to be spiritual. They are reminders of what it means to be serious about our faith, what it means to grow in grace.

Perhaps, more often we should wish each other the humility and poverty of spirit to understand our need for Christ. We could wish that each other might have a hunger for righteousness, for mercy, for purity, for peace. We might even wish each other hard times, if that is what it takes, to deepen our faith and quicken our growth in the spirit of Christ. Would we welcome such blessings as Jesus gave? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 9, 2020

## 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

### A Savior Who Died

Speech is a powerful thing. Would anyone disagree? The words people use can bring comfort or inspiration – but also pain or despair. The power of speech can be amplified by rhetorical skills known to effective speakers or debaters.

While the Christians Paul addressed in Corinth were accustomed to oral debates in the public square, today’s “debates” are more typically played out in opinion columns, blogs, and Facebook posts.

Consider the plethora of political ads that jam the airways and internet each election season. Many are based on bogus facts, half-truths, and totally misleading accusations, yet many people find them convincing – especially if the ads’ claims match their own biases or preferences. It’s a sad reminder that speech can be used for good or bad. ↓

### A testimony to Christ (vv. 1-5)

The Apostle Paul was a highly skilled rhetorician, both in writing and in speech. We can be thankful that he focused those gifts on doing good, in declaring and defending the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul lived in a time and a place where cultural expectations such

*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (1 Cor. 2:2)*

as the roles of women were different than ours, so we may not agree with him on every point. But we can always appreciate his efforts to incorporate a Jesus-centered worldview into all he said and did.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians to deal with conflict that arose from overconfident people pushing competing agendas. Paul insisted that his message was not based on human oratory, but focused on Christ alone. “I did not come proclaiming the mystery (or “testimony”) of God to you in lofty words or wisdom,” he said, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (vv. 1-2). ↓

The Corinthians were accustomed to hearing Greek orators or philosophers speak with impressive force, but Paul refused to be judged by style, polish, or rhetoric alone. He knew that the gospel of Christ does not make sense by human categories of logic, for the concept of a crucified God seems like so much foolishness to some people (1:18).

For example, sometime in the early history of the church, someone ridiculed a Christian believer by scratching a crude image into a plaster wall near Palatine Hill in Rome. It portrayed a man looking up in worship to a donkey-headed man on a cross. A crude inscription labels it “Alexamenos and his god.” ↓

Paul knew the concept of a crucified savior might seem laughable to

the world (1:18-25), but he remained determined to focus on Jesus. He did not fashion his testimony in the elegant speech of an orator, but in the wondrous amazement of a sinner who had been saved by grace and who could speak of it only “. . . in weakness and in fear and in much trembling” (v. 3).

Paul understood that rational arguments alone would be largely ineffective. He was more concerned that people experience the presence and power of God than simply gain knowledge about God. Thus, he said, “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (vv. 4-5). ↓

What convincing “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” did Paul have in mind? His preaching in Corinth must have been accompanied by an outpouring of the Spirit that manifested itself in a variety of ways, including miracles of healing, speaking in tongues, other spiritual gifts. Unfortunately, the Corinthians had managed to turn those gifts into a source of conflict, too (see chs. 12–14).

Paul would also have credited the Spirit with the outbreak of faith among the Corinthians. The growth of the church, like the salvation of the sinner, is the work of God, the fruit of God’s empowering Spirit. ↓ ↓

### The mystery of Christ (vv. 6-13)

With v. 6, Paul shifted gears, and interpreters have struggled mightily with

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understanding what follows. A surface reading suggests that Paul turned to the subject of Christian maturity, promising that he did in fact have additional mysteries to share with those who were spiritually mature.

That would contradict what Paul had written in 1:18–2:5, however, for there he insisted that believers have no need of esoteric mysteries, but should focus on the crucified Christ alone.

It may be best to read these verses as irony or sarcasm in which Paul was saying something to the effect of, “You want mystery? I’ll give you mystery!” He had already insisted that God’s secret is subsumed in the cross of Christ, and that was all the mystery anyone needed. (For more on this, see “The Hardest Question” online).

Whether Paul turned to irony or simply adopted his opponents’ terminology to bolster his own case, he may have been responding to criticism that his gospel message was too simplistic – that he had not revealed deep mysteries of Christ that others claimed to know.

Criticism of Paul’s straightforward teaching could have been fueled by the popularity of Jewish apocalypticism, which looked to ancient prophecies for secret revelations of a new age, or by the people’s familiarity with mystery religions that initiated members through clandestine ceremonies and mystic rituals.

Other critics may have promoted an incipient heresy we know as Gnosticism, which claimed that persons could ascend to higher spiritual realms by attaining secret knowledge (*gnosis*).

It is also possible that some Corinthians had been more impressed with the teaching of Peter and Apollos (see 1:12, 3:4) than with Paul’s plain-spoken version of the gospel.

So, what did Paul mean by

“Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish” (v. 6)?

Some of the Corinthians evidently considered themselves to be more mature than others, but Paul spoke to all of them as spiritual infants (3:1). Perhaps we should understand Paul’s use of “mature” to be in quotation marks, a sarcastic setup before calling them babies in 3:1.

Whether we read his tone as ironic or not, Paul insisted that the “wisdom of this age,” the human attempt to make sense out of life, was of little use.

Paul’s reference to “this age” is a reminder that he saw salvation in eschatological terms. He spoke often about the import of the cross, but not to argue for a particular theory explaining the atonement. Rather, Paul saw Christ’s crucifixion as introducing a new age. Those who still belonged to “this age,” whether wise or powerful, were doomed to perish. Those who trusted Christ, however, belonged to the new and eternal era.

Paul contended that the “secret and hidden” wisdom that God “decreed before the ages” (v. 7) was not some arcane knowledge revealed to a few, but was God’s plan of salvation for all that had been revealed and accomplished through Christ.

Jesus had made the once-hidden purpose of God manifest, Paul said, but “the rulers of this age” did not understand God’s plan, or else they would not have crucified Christ (v. 8).<sup>U</sup> There could be no greater truth or deeper secret than this, Paul argued – no more important bit of knowledge than the message that Christ died for our salvation. The Corinthians would do well to grasp this truth rather than demanding deeper knowledge.

Understanding v. 9 is problematic.

Paul introduced an Old Testament citation in his typical manner (“as it is written . . .”), but what he quoted – “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” – appears to be quite freely adapted from Isa. 64:4: “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God beside you, who works for those who wait for him.”<sup>U</sup>

We should not overlook Paul’s substitution of the word “love” for “wait.” God’s eternal gift is not for those who gain wisdom or speak with eloquence, but for those who love God. And those who understand God best are not those who learn from human teachers, but from the indwelling Spirit of God (v. 10).

Just as we know ourselves better than anyone else when we’re in touch with our own spirit, Paul added, so no one fully understands God except from God’s own Spirit (v. 11).

It is the Spirit of God, not of the world, that introduces us to deeper realms of faith and to the reality of our spiritual gifts (v. 12). Appreciating the deeper mysteries of God is not a matter of deep knowledge, but of deep faith and openness to God’s Spirit. Spiritual things cannot be communicated in logical categories, but in the common ground known to those who experience God’s Spirit (v. 13).<sup>U</sup>

We don’t live in ancient Corinth, but if we want to follow Jesus’ way, Paul’s message speaks to us, too. Have we experienced new life through the power of Christ? Have we continued to grow in wisdom and grace through communion with God’s Spirit as well as through Bible study and worship? Do we live with a “Jesus worldview?”

If we have a hard time answering, what does that suggest for our future spiritual growth? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 16, 2020

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

## Children Who Grow

**D**on't you love babies? Many love to see them and rub their little heads, but have no desire to raise them. It takes an amazing level of love and commitment to care for children and help them grow from being totally helpless to becoming mature and functioning human beings. Parents who do a faithful job of that are worthy of great admiration.

Infants can bring both transcendent joy and persistent trials to life. They cry in the wee hours and require sleep-deprived parents to feed and change and comfort them. Babies soil their diapers at the most inopportune times, spill things with great frequency, and often totter on the edge of danger, leaving their caretakers emotionally ragged.


As children grow older and approach adulthood, some accept increasing responsibility for themselves, while others seem to avoid maturity at all costs. Parenting is a challenge.

### Paul, the parent

Today's text is about infants of the spiritual kind. The Apostle Paul approached his work of growing churches as a father with his children, and often used that terminology (1 Cor. 4:14-16). He knew the prodigious joy of seeing

*For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? (1 Cor. 3:3)*

people forsake their sins and come to Christ – but he also knew the predictable frustrations of nurturing those same persons to maturity.

The letter of 1 Corinthians suggests that believers in Corinth were slow to mature, causing Paul considerable aggravation and sleepless nights as he tried to clean up some of the messes they made.  His letters mention issues such as blatant immorality, elitism, and infighting between various factions within the church. Some church members considered themselves to be more spiritual than fellow Christians, or privy to secret knowledge that others had not attained.


Paul dealt with some of these matters in the previous chapter in an ironic, almost sarcastic manner, and then focused on factionalism as a particular issue in 3:1-9. Instead of taking sides with those who considered themselves to be more spiritual or wise than the others, Paul accused them all of acting like babies.

### Spiritual infants (vv. 1-4)

Some Corinthians had complained that Paul was not introducing them to the deep mysteries of the faith, but his reply was straightforward – spiritual things can only be revealed to spiritual people, and “I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people

of the flesh, as infants in Christ” (v. 1).

Thus, Paul kept them on a steady diet of the most basic truths. Until they proved themselves mature enough to digest spiritual milk, he knew they would not be ready for more solid food (v. 2, cf. 1 Pet. 2:2, Heb. 5:12-14). Even then, Paul insisted that all they really needed to know was what he had already taught: God was at work through Christ to bring about a new age of salvation. To be faithful was to focus on Jesus and follow his teachings.

What evidence of immaturity did Paul see? “You are still of the flesh,” he said in v. 1. “For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?” (v. 3). Words such as “fleshly,” or “merely human” are awkward translations for the words *sarkinos* (v. 1) and *sarkikos* (v. 3), which carry the sense of being earthly-minded rather than spiritually directed. 

Paul charged that his readers were self-centered, “behaving according to human inclinations” (v. 3b), directed by their own interests rather than God's. They were more concerned with supremacy than service, more devoted to factionalism than to friendship (v. 4).

Paul was not implying that the Corinthians had no experience with the Spirit: there had been any number of spiritual manifestations among them, from speaking in tongues to healing and other demonstrations of power.

The problem is that they had not let the Spirit possess them. God's Spirit was alive within them just as surely as human life is present in the tiniest baby, but they had given the Spirit scant room for promoting growth.

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As long as human persons remain self-serving in their behavior and relationships with others, they cannot experience the spiritual growth that comes through humility and service. Division, strife, and jealousy are not the product of the Spirit's work, but of human nature – of the “flesh” (see Gal. 5:16-21). 📖

This is why Paul insisted that he had fed them only with milk previously, and that they were still too immature for spiritual pabulum, much less anything more substantial (v. 2).

In the opening section of his letter, Paul said he had learned that some church members claimed to follow Paul, others Apollos, and others Cephas (Peter), while another group apparently claimed to follow Christ alone (1:12). Paul returned to this problem of factionalism in 3:4 to illustrate his contention that they were still thinking and acting on a human level rather than a spiritual one.

When one claimed to be of Paul's party while another pledged allegiance to Apollos, Paul wrote, “are you not merely human?”

Faithful Christian leaders are not focused on taking selfies with crowds of followers, but on selfless service to God and “the least of these” whom God loves (Matt. 25:40).

This text challenges us to think about our own lives and the relationships we see within our church. What signs do we see of spiritual maturity, or the lack of it? When we think of how our church relates to other congregations, do we cooperate in service to others, or compete for more members to serve our cause?

If Paul were to visit our homes, where would he direct the conversation? If he were to speak in our church, what might be on his preaching menu? What worldview would he be promoting? 📖

### Spiritual growth (vv. 5-9)

Having introduced the subject in vv. 1-4, Paul spoke directly to the folly of factionalism in vv. 5-9. Why should the Corinthians align themselves with one leader or the other when all of the leaders were working for the same goal (v. 5)? 📖

Were Paul and Apollos guided by ego or the desire for fame, determined to build up a personal following and start their own television network?

No, Paul insisted. They were both servants of the same God “through whom you came to believe.” They were people who were simply doing what God had led them to do, proclaiming the gospel and the teachings of Jesus (v. 5). 📖

Paul described himself and Apollos as field hands who had worked among the Corinthians at different times, but for the same purpose: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (v. 6). We learn elsewhere that Paul had begun the work (Acts 18:1-8), and Apollos came after to build it up (Acts 18:24–19:1). 📖 📖

It was only natural that church members would feel closer to one than the other, even as any of us can name our favorite pastors or teachers. Paul, the straight-talking rabbi from Tarsus, would have been popular with many people, especially those from a Jewish background. The eloquent Apollos, from the city of Alexandria, would have been the darling of others, particularly among Greeks who were enamored with oratory.

It is unlikely that doctrinal issues were involved in the factionalism involving Paul and Apollos. According to Acts 18:24-28, Apollos knew the scriptures, taught them accurately, and had been tutored by Paul's friends Priscilla and Aquilla in understanding the way of God (probably a reference

to Christ's work) more accurately.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to get past their human favoritism and realize that both he and Apollos were nothing in comparison to Christ. They both played a role in planting and watering the Corinthian fields, but it is “only God who gives the growth” (v. 7).

Human leaders cannot take credit for God's work of grace, nor should they claim the personal loyalty of persons saved by Christ. God's servants will receive appropriate rewards in due time (v. 8, cf. 3:3, 4:5): it is not for them to organize fan clubs to sustain their egos.

Paul pointed to himself and Apollos as examples of the kind of unity the Corinthians should be pursuing. They saw themselves as God's fellow servants, working together in God's field or cooperating to construct God's great building project of the church (v. 9).

As Paul and Apollos were different persons but united in ministry, so Paul called the Corinthians to a new solidarity in faith. Unity in the congregation would have to come from surrender to the Spirit of God and devotion to following Jesus.

Only a fortunate few among today's Christians have escaped some aspect of church conflict, from temperamental tiffs over minor issues to heated disagreements that lead to division and an exodus of church members, even a church split.

While we sometimes joke about churches “multiplying by division,” Christ is not honored by infighting among those who are called to be peacemakers. Working for unity among believers is serious business, and it is the work of the spiritually mature. It is the way of Jesus, the way those who follow a “Jesus worldview” should adopt.

What kind of work are we doing?

NFJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 23, 2020

2 Peter 1:16-21

## A Message That Glows

Every person's life is marked by milestone events. Some are mostly positive, like graduations, weddings, or the birth of children. Others have a negative cast: the accident, the downsizing, the death of a loved one. Whether positive or negative, milestone events have the power to shape or influence our lives from that point on.

Jesus' life was also marked by milestone events. His baptism, for example, when he heard a voice saying "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

Perhaps the most memorable, at least to Jesus' disciples, was the evening when he led Peter, James, and John up a dark mountainside and was transfigured before their eyes, taking on a bright appearance that might have mirrored his heavenly form. In the midst of a cloud, flanked by shining apparitions of Moses and Elijah, Jesus again heard a heavenly voice affirm him while challenging the disciples: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matt. 17:5).

The story of the Transfiguration was told and retold, often with different details, as evidenced by the gospel accounts of Mark 9:2-8, Matt. 17:1-8,

*For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (2 Pet. 1:17)*

and Luke 9:28-36. The story is also reflected in today's text for Transfiguration Day, from the little book of 2 Peter. 📖

### An eyewitness account (vv. 16-18)

The letter of 2 Peter is rarely considered a favorite text among mainstream Christians, though believers who are big on judgment and hell and trying to prove inerrancy often quote it. The author was almost certainly not Simon Peter, though the first verse claims it to be so. Like many other writings of the period, it was written long after the apostle's death, possibly by a disciple of Peter, taking on the apostle's persona to add authority to his words. (See "The Hardest Question" online for a fuller explanation of this.)

The author of 2 Peter never identifies his audience, so we cannot know whether it was directed toward readers in Rome (the traditional site of Peter's death), in Asia Minor, or elsewhere. What seems clear is that some readers had been influenced by Epicurean philosophy, which taught that the greatest good was to seek a life of modest pleasure and an absence of worry. Epicureans urged others not to fear gods, death, or the prospect of judgment after death, for such concerns added stress to life.

As a result, Epicureans scoffed at

the notion of the Parousia, the return of Christ in judgment. They argued that people should live a balanced life each day without worrying about future punishments or rewards, for death would mean only dissolution. 📖

The letter of 2 Peter is concerned mainly with defending the belief that Christ would indeed return in judgment, and that Christians should find motivation in that to live just and moral lives.

The author wastes little time in getting to his main point. After the accustomed greetings and a short warm-up homily about the demands of the Christian life (1:1-11), he portrayed himself as Peter, soon to die and determined to pass on his last testament to the people. 📖 Presenting the defense of the Parousia as the primary concern of the beloved Peter's dying words would have added authority and force to the author's message. 📖

The author of 2 Peter and his readers both knew the letters of Paul, and were probably communicating 30-40 years after both Paul and Peter had died – another full generation – so it is not surprising that some had begun to doubt whether Jesus would return at all.

Epicureans considered all stories of the gods or the afterlife to be human inventions, which they called myths, so it is likely that Peter was responding directly to those influenced by them when he wrote "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty" (v. 16). 📖

The resurrection and return of Jesus were no made-up stories, the

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author insisted. Rather, in the persona of Peter, he claimed to have been an eyewitness of Jesus' power and majesty and message that he would come again.

To support this view, the author calls on Peter's presence at the Transfiguration of Jesus, though his account is quite different from the gospels. He does not mention Moses and Elijah being present, or the surrounding cloud. He speaks of God's voice as coming from "the Majestic Glory," and the message does not match any of the gospels, though Matthew's version (cited above) is close.

The gospel writers saw the Transfiguration as a second divine affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah: at both the baptism and the Transfiguration, a heavenly voice declared "This is my Son, the Beloved."

The author of 2 Peter goes further, interpreting the Transfiguration as a prophetic sign that Christ would return: "For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain" (vv. 17-18).

### A prophetic account (vv. 19-21)

Having cited apostolic authority as a witness to the Transfiguration and a defense of the belief in Christ's return, the author then turned to prophecy as a second defense. Some believers would have come to doubt the Old Testament prophesies of a day when God would come in glory to judge the world and set up an eternal kingdom.

The author of 2 Peter, however, saw the Transfiguration as a confirmation of prophecy's trustworthiness: "So we have the prophetic message more

fully confirmed" (v. 19a).

And, given the double witness of prophecy and the Transfiguration that Christ would return as judge, he added "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (v. 19b).

What prophecies did the author have in mind? We can only presume that his readers knew, and they had probably discussed them before. It is likely that texts like Psalm 2 – quoted at both Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration – would have been part of the discussion. Likewise, Daniel 7:13-14, which spoke of the coming of a "son of man," was popularly considered a prophecy of Jesus.

The writer's statement in v.20 suggests that critics had accused him of wrongly interpreting scripture, so he responded that no interpretation was necessary: one only had to read the words given by God to the prophets, for "no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (vv. 20-21).

While fundamentalist Christians often cite this verse to support their belief in a "verbal, plenary, inerrant inspiration of scripture," it is clear that this was not the author's intent. His concern was to defend prophecy as a trustworthy source of information for guiding the Christian in daily living, not to expound upon a modern debate about the inspiration of scripture.

The author goes on in the first three verses of chapter two to warn against false prophets, noting that they existed in the Old Testament world as well as the present, leading people to "follow their licentious ways" and seeking to "exploit you with deceptive words" (2:1-3). He devotes the

rest of that chapter to expounding upon various punishments and condemnations rendered to those who proved to be false.

### A passionate teaching

Why was defending the *parousia* so important to the author? It was because he saw belief in the return of Jesus and the certainty of judgment as a powerful motivator for Christians to remain faithful in difficult or tempting times.

In chapter three he warns against scoffers who would lead others to doubt Christ's return and thus face the dissolution of the present world unprepared (3:1-10). In the light of Christ's sure return and judgment, however, he asked "what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?" (3:11).

Any delay in Christ's return should be seen as a sign of God's patience, he said, allowing more people to be saved (3:15). The letter concludes with a challenge for believers to acknowledge the warning of future judgment and avoid error, choosing instead to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18).

Readers of 2 Peter today have lived an additional 1900 years with no sign of Christ's predicted return. Whether we anticipate the same sort of future scenario or not, our calling is the same. The author of 2 Peter used the fear of future judgment to motivate present behavior – but should we need the threat of punishment as an incentive to love others as Christ taught us, behaving as good and generous and kind people who try to make the world a better place?

If we can focus on following what Jesus taught in his first coming, we needn't worry about the second – we'll undergo a transfiguration of our own. **NFJ**

# Weekly Bible Study

... is more with the scholarly yet applicable  
NURTURING FAITH BIBLE STUDIES by Tony Cartledge

## 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**

Psalm 95  
A New Song

**March 22, 2020**

1 Samuel 16:1-13  
A New King

**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 Pentecost *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

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

## CLASSIFIEDS

### **Minister to Students and College-Age Students:**

Pritchard Memorial Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., is seeking an experienced, highly motivated and faithful person to effectively develop and lead dynamic ministries that reach youth (6<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade) and college-age students (18–25 years). This is a full-time salaried position supervised by the associate pastor of spiritual development and communications. To receive a full job description, contact [pmbcyouth-search@gmail.com](mailto:pmbcyouth-search@gmail.com).

### **Associate Pastor of Children and Spiritual Formation:**

First Baptist Church of Frankfort, Ky., a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregation, is seeking an associate pastor of children and spiritual formation. The ideal candidate will possess a seminary degree and have at least five years of experience in one or both ministry areas on a church staff. Résumés will be received until December 31 at [FBCresumesCSF@gmail.com](mailto:FBCresumesCSF@gmail.com).

**Senior Pastor:** First Baptist Church of Corbin, Ky., affiliated with CBF and CBF of Kentucky, is seeking a full-time pastor. FBC is a moderate church with an emphasis on community missions. The church has a proud 125-year history in Corbin and is ecumenical in its approach in reaching the communities of southeastern Kentucky. Located in downtown Corbin, the church is within minutes of I-75. The congregation of approximately 400 members welcomes all people while celebrating many gifts among its members for service and ministry. Interested candidates should submit résumés to the Pastor Search Committee at [fbcpastorsearch19@gmail.com](mailto:fbcpastorsearch19@gmail.com).

### **Minister of Spiritual Formation and Administration:**

Wake Forest Baptist Church of Wake Forest, N.C., is seeking a minister to lead the church's spiritual formation ministry and administrative operations. The ideal candidate will have a seminary degree and a minimum of five years ministry experience. Résumés may be sent to [bill.slater@wakeforest-baptistchurch.org](mailto:bill.slater@wakeforest-baptistchurch.org).

### **Associate Pastor of Missions:**

First Baptist Church at 201 St. Clair St. in Frankfort, Ky., affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is seeking an associate pastor of missions. The ideal candidate for this full-time position should possess a seminary degree and have a minimum of five years' experience on a church staff. Experience working with non-profit organizations is preferred. Résumés will be received at [fbcfrankfort-missions@gmail.com](mailto:fbcfrankfort-missions@gmail.com). For more information about the church, visit [fbcfrankfort.info](http://fbcfrankfort.info).

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## Lyndon B. Johnson (1963–1969)

By Bruce Gourley

**T**hree shots pierce the sunny autumn day in Dallas. Suddenly the nation's eyes are on Texas. Democratic President John F. Kennedy, the youngest in U.S. history, has been assassinated, his wife, Jacqueline, at his side.

A tragedy of incomprehensible proportions, Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963 shakes America to its core. Confusion ensues in the minutes that follow. The assassin is on the loose. Secret service agents fear Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson may also be in the crosshairs.

Rushed to a nearby hospital, Kennedy is pronounced dead. Quickly, his body is transferred to Air Force One, accompanied by Jacqueline Kennedy and Johnson.

Meanwhile, Lee Harvey Oswald, the shooter, is arrested. As the presidential airplane lifts off, federal agents interrogate Oswald, who denies killing the president.

Precisely two hours and eight minutes after Kennedy's assassination, Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson — while in Texas air space aboard Air Force One — is quietly sworn in as America's 36<sup>th</sup> president.

### TEXAN

The quick departure from the Lone Star State led some Americans to conjure up conspiratorial theories. Coincidentally, Johnson was born in 1908 on a ranch near the town of Stonewall, Texas, some 250 miles southwest of the site of Kennedy's untimely death.

Among the earliest Texas settlers, Johnson's forebears were staunch Confederates. As ranchers, farmers and soldiers, they made a living from and lived in allegiance to the Lone Star State.



Lyndon B. Johnson taking the oath of office aboard Air Force One at Love Field Airport two hours and eight minutes after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Dallas, Texas. Jackie Kennedy (right), still in her blood-soaked clothes, looks on.

Religion, too, was important. Maternally, Johnson was the great-grandson of Texas Baptist minister George Washington Baines Sr. A Lone Star State pioneer, Baines was pastor to eight Texas churches and to Texas hero Sam Houston. During the American Civil War, he served as president of Baptists' Baylor University.

George Washington Baines Jr., a leading member of the Blanco Baptist Church, followed in his father's religious footsteps. His daughter, Rebekah Baines Johnson, mother of Lyndon Baines Johnson, spoke gratefully of her "Baptist upbringing, sermons, prayer-meeting and Sunday School."

Paternally, Johnson's great-grandfather, Sam Ealy Johnson Sr., although raised a

Baptist, later joined the Christian Church, only to defect to the obscure Christadelphians, a millenarian and unitarian sect.

Lyndon's father, Sam Ealy Johnson Jr., was cut of different cloth. Unhappy with working the land, Sam Johnson ventured into politics, winning election to the Texas legislature at the young age of 27, a position he held for five terms. He also shunned religion in his early adulthood, although late in life he joined his father's Christadelphian Church.

### FORMATIVE YEARS

Raised in a rural, religious environment without electricity or plumbing, young and ambitious Lyndon shared his father's desire

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*This is the 36<sup>th</sup> article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith Journal, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.*

for a better life. Historian Kent Germany writes that as a 12-year-old, Lyndon Johnson made a bold prediction to his school classmates: “You know, someday I’m going to be president of the United States.”

Three years later in 1923, Lyndon cast his religious lot with the Disciples of Christ. The First Christian Church in nearby Johnson City became his “home church.”

Political ambition and religious choices aside, Lyndon’s rural upbringing with limited educational opportunities failed to prepare him adequately for college. Turned down by Southwest Texas State Teachers College, for the next three years the future president worked a variety of odd jobs, punctuated by drinking and fighting that led to an arrest.

Finally refocusing, he reapplied and was accepted to Southwest Texas, where he excelled in student government, debating and journalism.

Assigned to a small, impoverished Hispanic school for his student teaching assignment, Johnson enjoyed helping his students excel. Upon graduation in 1930 in the early days of the Great Depression, he briefly worked as a teacher of public speaking at Houston’s Sam Houston High School.

As if his destiny, politics soon beckoned. First came a 1931 appointment, aided by family connections, as legislative secretary to Texas U.S. Rep. Richard M. Kleberg. Following Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1932 election as U.S. President, Johnson, also a Democrat, embraced Roosevelt’s policies and was chosen as the speaker for a group of New Deal congressional aides.

Two years later he accepted a job leading the Texas district of FDR’s National Youth Administration, a New Deal program tasked with creating educational and job opportunities for young people.

## HUBRIS

A tireless politician, Lyndon B. Johnson displayed remarkable ambition. Later, biographer Robert Caro would speak of Johnson’s ambition as “unencumbered by even the slightest excess weight of ideology, of philosophy, of principles, of beliefs.”

Johnson’s press secretary, Bill Moyers, summarized him as a man with “an unfill-

able hole in his ego.”

Historians often speak of Johnson’s hubris. Biographer Robert Dallek said of Johnson: “Feelings of emptiness spurred him to eat, drink, and smoke to excess. Sexual conquests also helped to fill the void. He was a competitive womanizer. When people mentioned Kennedy’s many affairs, Johnson would bang the table and declare that he had more women by accident than Kennedy ever had on purpose.”

His personal shortcomings not yet fully realized, in 1934 LBJ, as he became known, married Claudia Alta Taylor of Karnack, Texas, a young woman from a wealthy East Texas family. Known by a childhood nickname, “Lady Bird” Johnson coincidentally bore her husband’s initials.

Two daughters followed, their names (“Lynda Bird” and “Luci Baines”) bearing the same initials, as did “Little Beagle” (the family dog) and the family LBJ Ranch. The marriage would remain intact despite LBJ’s chronic unfaithfulness.

Ambition led to Johnson’s breakthrough in politics in 1937 in a special election victory to the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas’ 10<sup>th</sup> congressional district. A progressive region in a conservative state, the district encompassed Austin and the surrounding hill country.

His victory secured by a New Deal platform, Johnson subsequently allied with President Roosevelt in bringing electricity, federal housing projects and other modern improvements to his rural district.

With the arrival of World War II, Johnson received an officer’s commission in the Naval Reserve. Flying in one bombing mission, he was awarded a Silver Star.

## U.S. SENATOR

After serving in Congress for a dozen years, in 1950 Johnson ran and barely won an open Senate seat from Texas. Fraudulent activity on behalf of both candidates marred the contest. Shaking off lingering criticism, Johnson schmoozed, strategized and relentlessly worked his way upward to majority leader of the Senate in 1955.

Some historians argue that Johnson was the most powerful senator in American history. Contemporaries marveled at

his tireless work effort, charming demeanor and persuasive abilities.

Exhibiting “an incredible, potent mixture of persuasion, badgering, flattery, threats, reminders of past favors and future advantages,” in the words of newspaper columnist Mary McGrory, Johnson’s in-your-face style more often than not yielded results.

A blatant racist personally and boasting an unblemished record of politically opposing civil rights, LBJ pleased many of his Texas constituents. But in 1957, even as he blocked a civil rights bill designed to increase voting rights for blacks, Johnson sensed a shifting of national political winds toward racial equality.

Strategically, the Texas senator threw his support to and helped pass the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first civil rights legislation since a Reconstruction-era 1875 bill.

Although thereafter despised by many white Texans, Johnson maintained his charm offensive. When home in Texas, he often entertained visitors. If his visitors were Catholic and wanted to attend mass, he accompanied them to services at the nearby St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Stonewall, according to Father Wunibald W. Schneider, the church’s priest.

Ever ambitious, the most powerful senator in the nation’s capital cast his eyes on the presidency.

## ASPIRATIONS

Throwing his hat into the ring in the 1960 Democratic primary, Johnson finally met his match in the person of John F. Kennedy, a young, northeastern liberal who outworked the Texan and won over party delegates.

His rise seemingly checked, LBJ faced the prospect of a stalled political career. Kennedy, however, realized that Johnson could be helpful in the general election against Republican Richard Nixon. A seasoned Washington insider, a Protestant, and a southerner, Johnson balanced Kennedy’s youth, relative inexperience, Catholicism and elite northerner pedigree.

Selected as the vice-presidential candidate in 1960, the decision paid off. LBJ helped Kennedy win Texas and the White House.

On the other hand, Johnson soon found the office of vice president far less influential and powerful than his liking. Not invited into Kennedy's inner circle and his expertise often ignored, the Texan assumed secondary roles, including leading America's space program and chairing the President's Committee for Equal Employment Opportunity.

Following two-and-a-half years of less-than-fulfilling service as vice president, the shocking tragedy of an assassin's bullet on Nov. 22, 1963 instantly ushered in a national crisis and abruptly pushed Johnson into the position he had long sought, albeit in an undesired manner.

Hours after Kennedy's death, having taken the oath of office and following the plane ride from Texas to Washington, President Johnson gave his first speech to the nation, promising "I will do my best — that is the best I can do."

## CONTINUITY

Soon Johnson's cowboy saddle replaced Kennedy's rocking chair in the White House. Kennedy's cabinet and top aides, however, Johnson chose to retain for the sake of policy continuity.

"An assassin's bullet has thrust upon me the awesome burden of the presidency," LBJ said somberly in his first address to Congress on November 27. "I cannot bear this burden alone. I need the help of all Americans, and all America."

In the speech Johnson echoed Kennedy's foreign policies of checking communism's expansion in Vietnam and beyond, pledging "unswerving support of the United Nations," a strong commitment to allies, and "the maintenance of military strength second to none."

Domestically, Johnson devoted himself to fulfilling Kennedy's unfinished goals of sending a man to the moon and enacting "a civil rights law so that we can move forward to eliminate from this Nation every trace of discrimination and oppression that is based upon race or color. There could be no greater source of strength to this Nation both at home and abroad."

"John Kennedy's death commands what his life conveyed — that America

must move forward," the new president insisted. "The time has come for Americans of all races and creeds and political beliefs to understand and to respect one another. So, let us put an end to the teaching and the preaching of hate and evil and violence."

He continued: "Let us turn away from the fanatics of the far left and the far right, from the apostles of bitterness and bigotry, from those defiant of law, and those who pour venom into our Nation's bloodstream."

The following day, Thanksgiving, President Johnson addressed the nation. Marking Thanksgiving as a "day of prayer and reverence," he said:

"Let all who speak and all who teach and all who preach and all who publish and all who broadcast and all who read or listen — let them reflect upon their responsibilities to bind our wounds, to heal our sores, to make our society well and whole for the tasks ahead of us."

## POLITICAL SKILLS

The following day Johnson created what became known as the Warren Commission, named after chair Chief Justice Earl Warren, to investigate the circumstances surrounding Kennedy's death. Ten months later, after interviewing 550 witnesses and collecting thousands of pages of evidence, on Sept. 24, 1964 the Commission presented its 888-page final report.

Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in assassinating Kennedy, the report concluded. And Jack Ruby, months earlier convicted of murder and sentenced to death, acted alone in subsequently killing Oswald. Amid a public sea of conspiracy theories, the report proved controversial.

President Johnson, meanwhile, turned his great political skills to the dual task of further advancing Kennedy's interrupted civil rights agenda while at the same time campaigning for president in 1964.

Already in motion and largely out of Johnson's hands, the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing Jim Crow-era poll taxes that effectively disenfranchised most black voters in much of the South, had passed Congress under Kennedy in 1962. On Jan. 23, 1964 South Dakota ratified the amendment, meeting the required number

of states for the measure to become part of the Constitution.

As he worked on civil rights legislation, Johnson in February 1964 addressed the annual National Prayer Breakfast. Comprised of many Christian nationalist-oriented white evangelical leaders unenthusiastic about civil rights for minorities, the event offered LBJ the opportunity to expound upon religion-state separation.

"The separation of church and state," the president declared, "has served our freedom well because men of state have not separated themselves from church and faith and prayer.... I believe that these annual prayer breakfasts serve a most useful purpose in both reminding and reassuring the people that those who hold their trust are themselves godly and prayerful men and women."

Lest he be misconstrued as supporting Christian nationalism, a movement originating in the previous decade in opposition to "godless communism" that subsequently led the Eisenhower administration to insert "In God We Trust" on currency and "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance, Johnson reminded his audience of the Founding Fathers' understanding of religion-state separation.

"Ours is a great nation," he declared, "but we must always humbly remember that much of our greatness in the world is born of the godliness that we practice in the homes that you keep. I believe, as I know you believe, that our children should be taught to pray; but I know and I believe, as I think you believe, that this teaching is our task in our homes, a task much too sacred to ever be touched by the state."

Not a person in the room could have misunderstood Johnson's implicit reference to the 1962 Supreme Court ruling *Engel v. Vitale*, a decision ruling unconstitutional government-sponsored prayers in public schools. LBJ likely knew that many people in the room disagreed with both him and America's founders on the matter of religion-state separation.

## 'GREAT SOCIETY'

Meanwhile, in the election season Johnson focused on a broad domestic agenda

of American uplift. Aware that many Americans, whatever the color of their skin, were suffering, Johnson in 1964 initiated a series of “Great Society” legislation and policies aimed at ordinary citizens and collectively positioned as a “War on Poverty.”

Echoing FDR’s New Deal three decades earlier, LBJ created a Jobs Corp to employ 100,000 poor men; work training programs to assist up to 200,000 Americans in finding jobs; and various other initiatives designed to help lift specific groups of people out of poverty, including the urban poor, farmers and parents.

Following the announcement of economic initiatives on behalf of the poor, on March 25, 1964, in the White House Rose Garden, Johnson addressed the Christian Citizenship Seminar of the Southern Baptist Convention Christian Life Commission led by Foy Valentine.

Charming as usual, President Johnson joked that evangelist Billy Graham and Bill Moyers, both prominent Baptists, swimming “together the other day” in the White House pool and realizing that all the other guests that day were already Christians, “took turns baptizing one another.”

After speaking of his Baptist lineage and lightly but cheerfully of his own faith, he spoke of the “dark days” following Kennedy’s assassination, a time that led him to “renew” his “faith in God.” Then he offered his own views of the role of religion in public life.

“I am not a theologian. I am not a philosopher. I am just a public servant that is doing the very best I know how. But in more than three decades of public life, I have seen firsthand how basic spiritual beliefs and deeds can shatter barriers of politics and bigotry,” he said. “I have seen those barriers crumble in the presence of faith and hope, and from this experience I have drawn new hope that the seemingly insurmountable moral issues that we face at home and abroad today can be resolved by men of strong faith and men of brave deeds.”

Johnson continued: “We can only do this if the separation of church and state, a principle to which Baptists have given personal witness for all their long history ... does not mean the divorce of spiritual values from secular affairs. Today we have

common purposes. Great questions of war and peace, of civil rights and education, the elimination of poverty at home and abroad, are the concern of millions who see no difference in this regard between their beliefs and their social obligations. This principle, the identity of private morality and public conscience, is as deeply rooted in our tradition and Constitution as the principle of legal separation.”

From church-state separation the president pivoted to the overarching issue on his mind: civil rights.

## CIVIL RIGHTS

“The most critical challenge that we face today,” LBJ told his Baptist audience, “is the struggle to free men, free them from the bondage of discrimination and prejudice. This administration is doing everything it possibly can do to win that struggle.”

Voicing certainty amid controversial legislation, the president continued: “We are going to pass the civil rights bill, but our efforts alone are not enough. I am proud to say that in this cause some of our strongest allies are religious leaders who are encouraging elected officials to do what is right.”

Johnson then placed a burden upon Southern Baptist leaders and preachers: “But more must be done, and no group of Christians has a greater responsibility in civil rights than Southern Baptists. Your people are part of the power structure in many communities of our land. The leaders of states and cities and towns are in your congregations, and they sit there on your boards. Their attitudes are confirmed or changed by the sermons you preach and by the lessons you write and by the examples that you set.”

Johnson’s inspiring words notwithstanding and indicative of the challenges the president faced, many Southern Baptists did not share the values of racial equality espoused by the Christian Life Commission. On the other hand, Black Baptist leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., worked closely with the president in building upon Kennedy’s legacy by further expanding equality to African Americans.

A triumph of faith in human equality took place on July 2, 1964 as Congress passed

and Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The legislation outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion or national origin; prohibited segregation of public schools and accommodations, as well as in employment; and prohibited discrimination in voter registration.

Upon signing the legislation Johnson declared: “We believe that all men have certain unalienable rights. Yet many Americans do not enjoy those rights. We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty. Yet millions are being deprived of those blessings — not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skin.”

As if to emphasize the necessity of the legislation against the backdrop of racial hatred, one month later the bodies of three missing civil rights workers, last seen two months earlier while registering black voters, were discovered in Mississippi. Members of the local Ku Klux Klan, a long-established white Christian terrorist organization, had been involved in their murder. In the deeply racist state, only one was convicted.

## POLITIC SHIFT

At the same time, Johnson’s civil rights triumph ignited a shift in the century-long loyalty of southern whites to the Democratic Party. With Johnson’s actions reflective of the national Democratic Party’s journey from racist to inclusive, many enraged white southerners turned toward a Republican Party itself becoming more racist.

Resigned to the consequences of his civil rights legislation, Johnson ruefully confided to Moyers: “I think we’ve just delivered the South to the Republican Party for the rest of my life, and yours.”

The transition would take some years to complete, but Johnson proved prophetic. To the present day, most of the 11 states of the former Confederate States of America, still seeped in racism on the part of many whites, remain reliably Republican.

Johnson’s War on Poverty, meanwhile, attracted numerous detractors. Many white southerners resented government assistance for blacks. Conservatives criticized federal assistance for poor Americans of all colors, while lamenting a progressive tax system

in which wealthy Americans bore the greatest burden. Liberals viewed the initiatives as too weak. And soon, the Vietnam War increasingly consumed financial resources that otherwise could have been spent domestically.

Winning the Democratic nomination despite headwinds, Johnson faced off against Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, a U.S. senator from Arizona and LBJ's mirror opposite. Whereas LBJ had journeyed from personal racism to public civil rights advocacy, Goldwater traversed in the other direction.

Martin Luther King Jr. did not consider Goldwater a racist personally, yet accused him of articulating a “philosophy which gives aid and comfort to the racists.” The Arizona senator's states-right platform and small-government libertarian views led him to focus on the Deep South, where he attracted large crowds of white southerners angry at federal civil rights legislation and often waving Confederate flags.

“By coming South,” *New Yorker* reporter Richard H. Rovere wrote in September 1964, “Barry Goldwater had made it possible for great numbers of unapologetic white supremacists to hold great carnivals of white supremacy.”

For their part and despite LBJ's direct appeals for their support of racial equality, most Southern Baptist leaders remained cautious about the Texan's focus on social justice.

## CHURCH & STATE

Texas *Baptist Standard* newspaper editor E.S. James, claiming that Texas Baptists' “number one domestic issue in the November election” was government aid to religious schools, asked both presidential contestants to state their position on the subject.

From Georgia to Texas during the 1960s, as the federal government expanded financial aid to colleges and universities, archival records and denominational newspapers reflect widespread Southern Baptist opposition to Baptist colleges partaking of the assistance. In at least some instances, opposition to federal funding of colleges and universities garnered more opposition than did racial integration of campuses.

Even if a bit hyperbolic, *Baptist Standard* editor James voiced the concerns of many: “The importance of religious liberty increases as the principle of church-state separation is violated more and more. Everyone knows the government has already gone much too far in providing some support for church-related institutions; and too many church groups, including some Baptists, have been too ready to accept it. Any violation is wrong, but it cannot be corrected by enlarging it. Little by little the wall of separation has been eroded by legislation intended to help the churches; but tax support for schools whose curricula are completely engulfed in sectarianism would be almost the first blow toward its obliteration.”

Righteous indignation aside, James' commentary marked a shift in Southern Baptists' defining of church-state separation. In part due to Roman Catholic efforts — often successful — in soliciting government funding for parochial schools, whether directly or indirectly, Southern Baptists had long drawn the line at tax support for religious institutions. Many also opposed government-sponsored prayer in public schools.

At the same time, Southern Baptists had long eroded Baptists' founding principle of church-state separation by embracing white Christian nationalism, first in supporting the explicitly Christian — and slave-based — Confederate States of America, and more recently in support of anti-communist Christian nationalism.

Despite Baptist inconsistency on church-state issues, both Johnson and Goldwater, recognizing the importance of the Southern Baptist voting bloc, readily answered the *Baptist Standard* editor's question.

“I believe in the American tradition of separation of church and state which is expressed in the First Amendment to the Constitution,” President Johnson stated by telegram from the White House. “By my office — and by personal conviction — I am sworn to uphold that tradition. Therefore, I would oppose any federal program — including assistance to schools — which does not strictly conform to this constitutional requirement.”

Goldwater, more politically aligned with Southern Baptists on issues of race but often tone deaf otherwise, failed to pledge the maintenance of church-state separation on the issue of government aid for parochial schools. Warned by Republican leaders that his extremist views would lead to defeat, an unapologetic Goldwater claimed moral leadership under the mantle of white supremacy by embracing a racist strategy designed to secure southern white votes.

## ELECTION

In November Goldwater, apart from securing victory in his home state of Arizona, won a mere five states: South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and



Meeting with civil rights leaders Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (left), Whitney Young, and James Farmer in the Oval Office in 1964

Louisiana. Collectively the heart of the former Confederate States of America, bastion of recently outlawed apartheid Jim Crow laws, and a Democratic stronghold for a century, the white-majority five states effectively signaled their eagerness to resist further advances in racial equality.

But in his humiliating loss, Goldwater's "Southern strategy" signaled hope for a future Republican Party built upon white supremacy.

Securing in 1964 a landslide victory against Goldwater's extremism, Johnson claimed true ownership of the White House he had earlier inherited through Kennedy's assassination. Voters also enlarged the Democratic majority in Congress.

Although Democratic control in Washington, D.C., seemingly indicated a mandate for socially-conscious legislation, foreign affairs soon cast a cloud over the White House.

Less than one month after his inauguration, Johnson faced a decision he had hoped to avoid. In Vietnam on Feb. 6, 1965, eight American soldiers, stationed in non-combat roles in that nation's civil war between communism and democracy, lost their lives in an attack carried out by Viet Cong guerrillas. More than one hundred suffered injuries, and 10 aircraft smoldered.

For 10 years reluctantly entangled in the Vietnam conflict in the form of military advisors and special operations against Soviet-backed Northern Viet Cong forces, America's democratic allies in South Vietnam nonetheless remained far from reliable.

"I've had enough of this," Johnson declared after the February attack. He ordered an air attack of a Viet Cong camp. The Soviet Union responded by moving surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) to Hanoi. Amid the escalation of hostilities, opinion polls showed overwhelming support for military involvement in Vietnam.

## HOME & ABROAD

To protect American interests in Vietnam, Johnson approved a large-scale bombing campaign, the deployment of U.S. Marines, and an expansion of the military draft. But rather than bolstering prospects for victory,

the stalemate in Vietnam remained.

Quickly, the political winds shifted. Young Americans, subject to the military draft in the face of a questionable war against an elusive enemy, began protesting on university campuses. LBJ's approval ratings dropped.

Meanwhile, as the war slogged onward with no end in sight, Johnson faced new civil rights challenges. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders demanded additional voting protections. Johnson feared such legislation would hamper other domestic agenda items.

Civil rights leaders understood the dynamics at play. Advances in civil rights legislation of the past decade had been signed by presidents only after advocates applied enough public pressure through non-violent activism. So yet another nonviolent campaign was organized, this time for voting rights. Alabama had frequently provided the venues, as the state did once again.

Some 15,000 African Americans lived in Selma, Ala. Illustrative of how effectively whites suppressed the city's minority voters, only 355 black citizens were registered to vote. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee staged a march from Selma to Montgomery, the state's capital, in protest of blatant disenfranchisement.

The protesters never made it out of town. As some 500 marchers approached the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Sunday, March 7, 1965, state troopers blocked their path. Ordered to return to their homes, the protesters instead strode up to the troopers and halted.

Named after a Confederate general, Democratic U.S. senator and grand wizard of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan, the Edmund Pettus Bridge that day came to symbolize the prevalence of white terrorism in the South.

Tear gas shrouded the scene as the troopers and local authorities clubbed unarmed, peaceful marchers. Civil rights leader and future U.S. Congressman John Lewis suffered a skull fracture. Hundreds of others, also brutally beaten, sustained major injuries.



Awarding a medal to a U.S. soldier during a visit to Vietnam in 1966

Photographers captured the horrific scenes, their images soon broadcast throughout the country. Shortly thereafter, President Johnson addressed the nation. Speaking of the evils of "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, he called for stronger civil rights legislation protecting the voting rights of African Americans.

"What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America," said LBJ. "It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."

He continued: "As a man whose roots go deeply into Southern soil, I know how agonizing racial feelings are. I know how difficult it is to reshape the attitudes and the structure of our society."

## VOTING RIGHTS

Johnson lamented that more than a century had passed since President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and equality was promised, "yet the Negro is not equal ... the promise is unkept."

"The time of justice has now come," he said. "I tell you that I believe sincerely that no force can hold it back. It is right in the eyes of man and God that it should come."

Three weeks after the violence in Selma, the president announced the arrest of four Ku Klux Klansman for the murder of a white civil rights worker near Selma. Condemning the white Christian terrorist organization in strong language, he called the KKK "a hooded society of bigotry,"

warning members to “get out of the Ku Klux Klan and return to a decent society before it is too late.”

Congress heeded his words, passing the hallmark Voting Rights Act of 1965. Johnson signed the legislation on Aug. 6 in a ceremony attended by many civil rights leaders, including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. He gifted the signing pen to King.

The legislation prohibited literacy tests used to keep African Americans from registering to vote and empowered the Justice Department to seize control of voting districts that prevented black Americans from voting. In response, white supremacist anger against the Democratic Party grew all the more.

Meanwhile, a tactical split emerged among black activists. Against the backdrop of slow implementation of civil rights South and North, some turned against MLK’s policy of nonviolent protest, deploying more confrontational methods. Racial clashes grew in racially segregated cities South and North, East and West. Riots in Detroit and Los Angeles made national headlines.

As racial tensions boiled, Johnson in 1967 appointed Thurgood Marshall to the U.S. Supreme Court, the first African American to serve on the court. His appointment visibly signified the ascendancy of African Americans into the upper strata of national power for the first time since the Reconstruction era.

## IMMIGRATION

Less remembered under Johnson’s presidency, another notable piece of legislation furthered the march toward equality in America: the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Since 1921 immigration laws had favored Northern Europeans and the reunion of families, while broadly discriminating against other countries and unskilled immigrants. America’s civil rights movement provided the background for a reexamination of discriminatory immigration policies.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 repealed national-origins quotas, broadened immigrant categories, made immigration generally more accessible, and

allowed refugees of violence and unrest to resettle in the U.S.

Far less controversial than the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the immigration legislation garnered little attention. This “is not a revolutionary bill,” President Johnson said while signing the Oct. 3, 1965 legislation. “It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not reshape the structure of our daily lives or add importantly to either our wealth or our power.”

In retrospect LBJ vastly understated the impact of the legislation. Immigration from Asia — principally from war-torn Vietnam and Cambodia — quadrupled in five years. Immigrants from communist nations rose. Within decades Latino and African immigrants represented the majority of newcomers.

Throughout America in towns large and small, growing numbers of poor, dark-skinned immigrants, some arriving legally and others illegally, filled millions of non-skilled, low-paying jobs that native-born citizens avoided, transforming the American landscape.

A rise in xenophobia corresponded with rapidly growing non-European immigration in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, reigniting a political powder keg of hate, white nationalism, racism and identity politics. Although LBJ could foresee the racially divisive consequences of civil rights legislation, there is little indication that he anticipated that the loosening of immigration policies would, in time, also contribute to a new wave of white nationalism.

## HEALTH & HOPE

While Vietnam and civil rights consumed much of the nation’s attention during Johnson’s early presidency, other social legislation championed and signed by the president also proved both transformative and controversial.

In Johnson’s words his “number one priority” in 1965, Medicare and Medicaid became a lasting legacy of his presidency. Speaking of the importance of health care in a January speech, he declared “Greatness requires not only an educated people but a healthy people.”

Focusing on elderly Americans,

Johnson insisted that seniors “be spared the darkness of sickness without hope” through government-funded health care. Former Democratic presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy had tried to pass such legislation. All had failed in the face of conservative opposition labeling government health care as socialism and tyranny.

In July 1965 and to the outrage of conservatives, President Johnson succeeded in enacting Medicare and Medicaid. Crediting Truman for starting the movement, he issued the first two Medicare cards to President and Mrs. Truman. Finally, America’s seniors were spared the indignation of abject poverty.

By 1968 LBJ had reshaped American society and culture more than any president since FDR. Like Roosevelt, Johnson used the levers and finances of government to make life better for non-privileged Americans. Going further than Roosevelt, Johnson marshaled through Congress greater equality for African Americans and other minorities, and opened the nation’s doors far wider to immigrants.

White conservatives had viewed Roosevelt’s New Deal policies as socialism or even communism. Johnson’s Great Society reforms generated similar anger among conservatives, many of whom criticized the February 1968 report from the “President’s National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.”

Identifying racism as the primary cause of some 150 riots over the past three years, the report stated that “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal.” Further racial violence could only be prevented, the report determined, by expanding federal aid to African-American communities.

Should the government not intervene to decrease the disparities between black and white, the future would consist of a “continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.”

Whereas America’s entry into World War II in the fight against Nazism largely forced Roosevelt’s critics to his side as Americans united in a clear-cut war effort,



Johnson faced a much different political landscape and fate during the escalating Vietnam War.

## VIETNAM

Johnson's domestic policies, although controversial, were moral and ethical triumphs reflective of the nation's founding vision of freedom, equality and the "general welfare" of all Americans. Vietnam, on the other hand, lacked both moral and ethical clarity.

In the abstract, two decades of anti-communist sentiments fueled America's alliance with the democratic South Vietnamese against Soviet-backed North Vietnam. In the nation's capital, political and military leaders supported the war albeit with reservations.

On the ground in Vietnam, growing human casualties, no clear road to victory, and demoralized soldiers created confusion on the battlefield and at home, the latter reflected in mounting protests and increasingly negative newspaper coverage.

President Johnson, inheritor of the war and ever doubtful about American involvement, had long privately acknowledged the intractable nature of the war.

"A man can fight if he can see daylight down the road somewhere, but there ain't no daylight in Vietnam. There's not a bit," Johnson had acknowledged privately upon initiating war in Vietnam in March 1965.

A year later, in February 1966, he said: "I know we oughtn't to be there, but I can't get out. I just can't be the architect of surrender." But in 1967 Lyndon B. Johnson personally surrendered.

An unpopular war with no end in sight, an economic downturn, a Great Society only partially realized, and public criticism of his leadership sapped Johnson's will. Even Billy Graham failed to offer consoling words.

Having visited troops in Vietnam at Johnson's request, Graham, ardent anticommunist and purveyor of Christian nationalism, nonetheless voiced concerns about the war. "I'm not going to get into the fact as to what you should do or should not do," he told LBJ. "But I agree with you that the American people are getting restless over this thing [the Vietnam War]."

## GETTING OUT

Ever ambitious yet worried about his legacy, in September 1967 at his LBJ Ranch, Johnson assembled, according to Chief of Staff James R. Jones, a handful of people for a conversation: Lady Bird, Gov. John Connally of Texas, Maria Fehmer (the president's secretary) and Jones.

"The Johnsons and Mr. Connally drove around for hours talking about whether the president should run in 1968," Jones later recounted. "The conclusion: a unanimous decision that he should not." The reason? Vietnam.

Keeping his decision private, Johnson, amid Vietnam protests and plunging popularity, quietly tried but failed to find a solution to the war. Finally, on March 31, 1968 he decided it was time.

That evening President Johnson on television spoke to the American people. He began with a lengthy discourse recounting progress made in the war, declaring that "what we are doing now, in Vietnam, is vital not only to the security of Southeast Asia, but it is vital to the security of every American."

"Peace and self-determination in Vietnam," he insisted, would "one day" be achieved. But the president, well aware that many Americans no longer trusted his leadership in the Vietnam War, admitted "There is division in the American house now."

"Fifty-two months and 10 days ago, in a moment of tragedy and trauma, the duties of this office fell upon me," the president declared. "I asked then for your help and God's, that we might continue America on its course, binding up our wounds, healing our history, moving forward in new unity, to clear the American agenda and to keep the American commitment for all of our people."

Willing triumph in the face of defeat, he continued: "United we have kept that commitment. United we have enlarged that commitment. Through all time to come, I think America will be a stronger nation, a more just society, and a land of greater opportunity and fulfillment because of what we have all done together in these years of unparalleled achievement."

The president then announced: "I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year ... Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President."

Leaving office on his own terms, Johnson could take consolation in many accomplishments on behalf of ordinary Americans: civil rights victories, Medicare, Medicaid, increased federal funding for poor schools, immigration reform, and the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts. Looming over all, however, were his failures in Vietnam.

## LOSSES

Effectively a lame duck president following his March 31, 1968 announcement, LBJ thereafter remained captive to the escalating national divisions he abhorred. And a mere four days after his surprise announcement, another political assassination rocked America.

Martin Luther King Jr., seeking to navigate fissures in the restless black community while simultaneously toning down white racist anger, focused his attention on protesting the Vietnam War and advocating for better jobs on behalf of all poor Americans. Long under death threats by extremist detractors, on April 4, 1968 in Memphis the Baptist minister and civil rights leader fell to an assassin's bullet.

His death stunned and unnerved America. Riots erupted nationwide, including in Washington, D.C. Amid the chaos President Johnson praised the life of the civil rights leader.

A week after King's death and invoking his memory, LBJ signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968. The legislation prohibited discrimination in federally-funded housing, in addition to levying enhanced penalties for individuals threatening or injuring persons exercising their civil rights.

Two months after King's death, America felt the sting of yet another political assassination.

Perceived by many as the sole American capable of uniting the nation from the divisions Johnson lamented, U.S. Senator



Wearing a western hat at his ranch in Texas, 1972

Robert Kennedy, campaigning in California for the Democratic presidential nomination, fell to an assassin's bullet.

Quickly arrested, the shooter, Palestinian Sirhan Sirhan, confessed and later identified the late senator's opposition to Palestine during the military ascendancy of the Jewish state as the reason for the killing.

Robert Kennedy's assassination brought America to its knees. African Americans grieved the loss of a prominent civil rights advocate. Young Americans grew more disillusioned and restless. Democrats lost their strongest presidential candidate. American Israeli and Palestinian relations grew ever more complicated in the wake of the previous year's 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

And yet the Vietnam War continued. Unresolved and divisive, it would soon be handed over to a new president.

## LEGACY

Largely confined to the political sidelines and increasingly ill during his final months in office, the troubled president gratefully returned to his ranch following his departure from the White House.

Shortly after Johnson's presidency ended, the Rev. George R. Davis, pastor the Washington's National City Christian Church, Johnson's "home church" while in

D.C., in an oral interview reflected upon Johnson's religious faith.

According to Davis, Johnson "seemed to feel that his religion primarily could be worked out through his chosen profession. He may not have been a church-goer every Sunday ... but he felt his religion was a practical thing and that more naturally worked out through his chosen profession."

On July 20, 1969 the former president joined the nation in watching the success of NASA's Apollo 11 landing that put the first men on the moon, the fulfillment of Kennedy's promise and Johnson's leadership.

From his LBJ Ranch and with the assistance of Harvard graduate student and young historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, the former president focused on his memoirs.

Kearns later recalled Johnson's post-presidential enthusiasm for his domestic victories on the one hand, contrasted with his struggles in coming to grips with his biggest failure, Vietnam. The biographer recalled him declaring "there's nothing worse than going back over a decision made, retracing the steps that led to it, and imagining what it'd be like if you took another turn. It can drive you crazy."

Johnson's efforts to make himself "look like a statesman," according to Kearns, overarched his memoirs. Yet "never fully

engaged in his memoirs," according to Kearns, Johnson knew "his presidency had not been all he hoped for." Resigned to the fate of being remembered as a failure, he found comfort "in the one thing they cannot take away from me — and that is my ranch."

Less than four years after his departure from the nation's capital, America's 36<sup>th</sup> president, his former ambition having given way to a resignation of failure in the public's memory, on Jan. 22, 1973 died from a heart attack, his third.

Following his funeral at the National City Christian Church in Washington D.C., Johnson was buried in the family cemetery at the LBJ Ranch.

A decade later Billy Graham, in an oral interview with the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, when asked about LBJ's religious faith, characterized the former president as "complex" and difficult to understand.

"I think that he had a conflict within him about religion," Graham recalled, delving into popular Christian terminology about salvation. "[H]e somehow felt that he had never quite had" the "experience" of being "born again."

Five days after Johnson's death the Vietnam War, which had vexed and brought an end to his presidency, concluded with the signing of a Jan. 27, 1973 peace treaty. Brokering a stalemate, the treaty left no one a winner but more than 1,600,000 dead, including 60,000 Americans.

The following month the U.S. Senate renamed NASA's Houston spacecraft center the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center.

President Johnson — ambitious, powerful and the architect of transformative Great Society programs and the moon landing — had proved unable to quell troubling national currents quickened by controversial civil rights legislation and the failed Vietnam War. In his wake conservatives' suspicions of government programs, fueled by racism and enabling religious structures, portended even greater national divisions than LBJ could have imagined.

Even as his body rested in the freshly turned earth on his LBJ Ranch, an emerging scandal in the White House ensnared his successor and threatened to become a national crisis. **NFJ**



*“Any student who graduates with an undergraduate degree from any school with any major should graduate with an understanding that every human being is shaped by religion and that every human being shapes religion in some way or another.”*

# Suggested Guidelines

## What college students need to know about religion

**BY YONAT SHIMRON**

*Religion News Service*

[The American Academy of Religion has published a broad set of guidelines outlining what every undergraduate student should know about religion.](#)

**T**he three-year effort by members of the AAR, the century-old association of scholars, is an attempt to provide a baseline for religious literacy in hopes of challenging undergraduates at two- and four-year colleges to better understand belief systems and worldviews different from their own.

The AAR identified the rise of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, as well as the increasing number of people with no formal religious affiliation, as reasons for undertaking the project.

It follows on a similar project in 2010, in which the AAR provided guidelines for grades K-12.

“As the learned society that established the study of religion as a field we felt our obligation and responsibility to provide some grounding in these guidelines,” said Alice Hunt, AAR’s executive director.

But since the AAR can’t tell colleges and universities how to teach about religion, its committee and advisory board settled on broad guidelines.

For example, the guidelines recommend that students know how to find accurate and credible information about diverse religious traditions and that college graduates be able to recognize the internal diversity within religious traditions.

It also recommends that students learn to distinguish between prescriptive statements about religion — a faith’s dogma or theology — and statements that are descriptive or analytical.

The guidelines do not name particular religions or offer any definitions.

Recognizing that not all colleges require a course on religion, the AAR guidelines are intended to be adapted to other disciplines.

For example, an astronomy class might require students to identify whether the astronomers studied in the course belonged to a religious tradition and if so, how those traditions shaped their astronomical findings.

An introductory nursing class might explore how religious traditions have shaped various understandings of health and healing.

“Any student who graduates with an undergraduate degree from any school with any major should graduate with an understanding that every human being is shaped by religion and that every human being shapes religion in some way or another,” said Hunt.

The guidelines also distinguish between different kinds of religious instruction, such as faith-based, interfaith, experiential and quantitative data-focused, among others.

The AAR itself is not faith-based. Established in 1909 as the Association of Biblical Instructors in American Colleges and Secondary Schools, it today consists of 8,000 scholars worldwide dedicated to the academic study of religion. **NFJ**

# An intriguing find amid political drama

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

**D**oing archaeology is hard work under any circumstances, not only in the physical labor of uncovering ancient layers of civilizations, but also in walking the tightrope of ethical propriety.

Such an issue is plaguing a newsworthy excavation in East Jerusalem: an ancient stepped street with a large drainage channel beneath that leads from the Pool of Siloam through the Tyropoean Valley and to the southwest corner of the Temple Mount. The walkway might have been authorized by Pontius Pilate and traveled by Jesus.

That's exciting. So what's the problem? The excavation is sponsored by the Zionist-promoting Elad organization, which is supported largely by UltraOrthodox Jews in Israel along with American Zionists and fundamentalist Christians who think every sign of an ancient Jewish presence gives authorization for current Israeli ownership — never mind the evidence that other residents were there before the Hebrews arrived.

The excavation is on and around the "Hill of Ophel," the site of the city that David conquered, according to 1 Samuel 5. It is now part of the village of Silwan, a crowded Palestinian neighborhood that is legally part of the West Bank.

It just happens that Silwan is built over many layers of ancient civilization going back through the Ottoman and Roman periods to the time of David and before. Looking for David's palace or Roman remains sounds attractive, but requires destroying Palestinian homes, or tunneling under them.

Portions of the street in question, a popular walkway for pilgrims coming to the temple, have been known for more than a century, but excavations over the past 14 years have uncovered more than 350 yards of it. Until recently the stepped street was described as Herodian (that is, built by



Part of the stepped stone street leading from the Pool of Siloam to the Temple Mount. Photo by Kobi Harati, from the City of David website

Herod the Great, who died around 4 BCE), but no more.

In a recent article published in *Tel Aviv*, the Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, researchers have demonstrated numismatic evidence that the road must have been built between 30 and 41 CE. Of the 100-plus coins found, the latest of those sealed beneath the mortar leveling the large stone slabs of the street dated to year 30/31, and the oldest coins found above the street dated to 41 CE.

That puts the construction well after Herod the Great's building programs, and during the period in which Pontius Pilate ruled as the Roman prefect over Jerusalem. It's likely, then, that one of the most despised people in Christian history built the street on which Jesus would have walked and interacted with the people of Jerusalem.

That's something of interest to both Christians and Jews. Unfortunately, in excavating the street, which lies well below ground level, archaeologists and construction workers have tunneled beneath a number of private homes in Silwan, with or without permission.

Homeowners have complained of foundation cracks and other damage as a result of the tunneling below. Elad would be happy to purchase their homes with American donations, but that only contributes to the removal of Palestinians from the area: a primary goal of Zionists.

Contributing to the problem, the tunnel and the excavated street were recently opened to the public in ceremonies led by right-wing politicians, including the wife of indicted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In a nod to American supporters, U.S. envoys were among a select few chosen to break through the temporary mud brick wall with small sledgehammers to ceremoniously open what Elad is calling the "Path of Pilgrims."

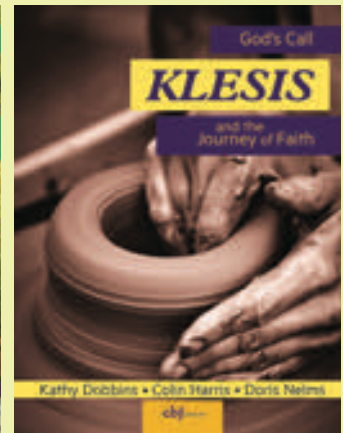
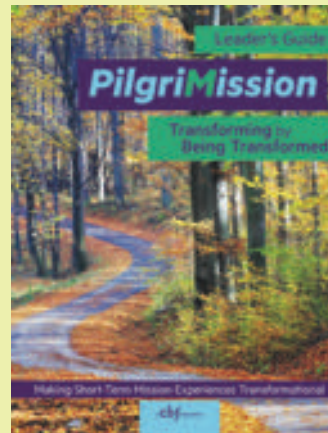
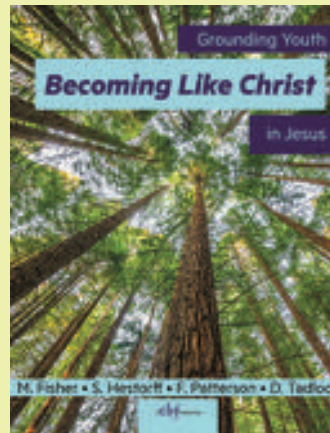
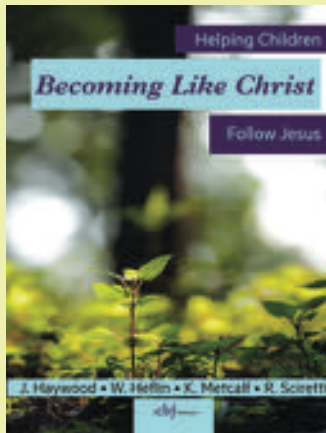
The American officials' presence was clearly another move by the Trump administration to undermine Palestinian sovereignty and support Israel's desire to claim East Jerusalem as its own and declare Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, even though such actions are at variance with international agreements when the modern State of Israel was founded.

Underscoring U.S. involvement, Ambassador David Friedman said, "This place is as much a heritage of the United States as of the State of Israel." American casino magnate and donor Sheldon Adelson, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham and Middle East Envoy Jason Greenblatt were also present.

Archaeology is a wonderful science, but seeing it weaponized for political ends is discouraging in a major way. Like Pontius Pilate, it can be tempting to sell out the innocent for the sake of popularity with the crowd. **NFJ**



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# BREAD APLENTY

## The Canaanite woman and the humanity of Jesus

BY ALICE CATES CLARKE

As a good churchgoing teen in the 1990s, I had different colored WWJD bracelets for different outfits, and one on the zipper of my backpack. They were constant reminders to ask myself: How would Jesus respond were he placed into the different scenarios in which I found myself day to day?

Jesus would show patience with this frustrating peer; Jesus would make a wise decision and take time to study for this test; Jesus would welcome the new kid and invite her to sit at his lunch table; Jesus would stand up for justice and report that bully to a trusted adult!

Yet, apparently, Jesus would call a desperate young woman a dog and ignore her pleas for help — according to this account in Matthew's gospel.

In Jesus' defense, he has just come off a frustrating encounter with Pharisees who are on his case yet again — this time because his disciples have been busted. They haven't washed their hands before lunch.

Surely it is one of those times that leaves Jesus grumbling to himself, "This is not why I went into ministry!"

These petty "gotcha" moments from temple leaders pull his time and energy away from his true calling — to save the children of Israel. So, frustrated, he starts walking away — from town, from people.

Jesus begins walking toward Gentile territory, not in any kind of theological or political move per se; it seems that Jesus just



EDITOR'S NOTE: Alice Cates Clarke is associate pastor for youth and community engagement at Derbyshire Baptist Church in Richmond, Va. This article was adapted from her sermon (based on Matt. 15:21-28) given during a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia gathering on Sept. 17, 2019.

wants to get away to a place where he might have a shot at anonymity and a chance to refocus on his divine purpose.

But while walking, Jesus and his disciples hear a woman's voice behind them, crying out: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon."

How long she follows and shouts is not clear. What *is* clear is that Jesus flat out ignores her. He just keeps walking.

Again and again, "Lord, my little girl is suffering — please, show mercy!" And Jesus says nothing — no word of kindness or compassion for this suffering mother. Still, she persists: "Son of David! Have mercy!"

Does Jesus ignore her because she is a gentile or a woman? These things have not stopped Jesus from healing others earlier in Matthew's gospel. Is Jesus just having an "off" day — frustrated and emotionally

spent after sparring with the Pharisees?

Whatever Jesus' motivation, it starts to have an effect on the disciples: "Send her away." "Get rid of her." "Why don't you just heal her kid so we can be free of this nuisance?"

Are the disciples annoyed? Probably. Moved? Possibly. Whatever their motive, they become advocates for this loud, demanding woman.

And Jesus shocks us yet again. As the woman continues crying out, pleading for assistance for her child, Jesus replies — rather callously, it seems — that he isn't there for her kind. He continues ignoring her, but to his disciples he explains, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Now I have to imagine Jesus is filled with anguish as he says this. Based on everything else I know of him, based on every other encounter he's shown us with others, I have to believe it pains him to hear and reject this mother's pleas.

But throughout the Book of Matthew, Jesus has made it clear: He is there for the children of Israel, not to get into arguments with Pharisees or to waste time and energy spreading himself too thin among the gentiles.

Now this woman comes insisting that he veer from his mission. But his decision has already been made, and it seems that he will not be moved. So, his reply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Even more emboldened, the woman — who has been trailing behind the entourage — now runs directly into their path and falls kneeling on the ground before Jesus. This desperate mother will not be ignored. If Jesus will not give her his attention, she will make him see her.

She sets herself as a human roadblock, demanding response. Matthew uses the word *proskyno* here, which means “to kneel.”

But it also means “to worship.” And the imperfect use of the verb tells us the woman worships and continues to worship and worship and worship.

This outsider — a gentile woman — continually calls out to Jesus in the language of his own people, the language of Jewish faith and prayer, calling Jesus “Son of David,” and pleading to him with absolute certainty that he can heal her suffering daughter.

The desperation and anguish in this mother’s words and actions are heart-wrenching. We, the readers of the story, are at this point pleading on her behalf: “Please, Jesus, do something!”

And finally, Jesus addresses the woman directly. But it isn’t what we’re hoping for or expecting. The Jesus who has healed by faith from a distance, who has lovingly touched the sick — men and women alike — who looks on his people with compassion, looks at the woman kneeling before him and says, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

I wonder if those words stung this woman the way they sting me when I read them today. Was she shocked to hear them, or was she so accustomed to being spoken to harshly that Jesus’ words didn’t dent her hardened shell?

But with equal parts gumption and humility, she responds, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

In this quick-witted response, the Canaanite woman brilliantly reveals a truth about Jesus that it would seem he himself has not yet fully understood.

She says, yes, Jesus your people — the children of Israel — are your priority and, of course, should be fed. But Lord, I know your table is so bountiful there are leftovers enough to feed even the dogs like myself.

And Jesus responds with what I perceive as a mix of shock, relief and joy: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!” And her daughter is healed instantly.

It would seem that Jesus is changed.

For the first time and arguably the only time in the four Gospels, Jesus has his mind changed by someone else — someone who should not even be speaking to him at all: an outsider, a woman.

Does this Canaanite woman have more faith in him than he has in himself?

This change of perspective does not affect just this woman and alter just this situation; it becomes a powerful, pivotal moment in Jesus’ ministry.

Consider the bread here — symbolic of God’s grace and mercy that sustain life and satisfies hunger. This passage is sandwiched in between Matthew’s two miracle stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes.

However, these almost identical stories have one major difference: the first feeding miracle (Matt. 14:13-21) is performed as Jesus heals and teaches a crowd exclusively of Jews.

*I pray to God that we —  
the church — are not so  
stubborn that we cannot  
receive epiphany.*

But the second one (Matt. 15:29-39) — immediately following Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman — gives this small clue about the crowd: they “praised the God of Israel” (v. 31).

That Matthew would clarify this fact tells us this is not the God to whom this crowd typically prays. These people are not Jews!

It seems that in his encounter with the Canaanite mother, Jesus has an epiphany. For indeed, there is enough bread — enough mercy and love — to spread far beyond the children of Israel.

Ultimately, we will hear this echoed in the great commission at Matthew’s conclusion, when the resurrected Jesus commands his followers to “go and make disciples of *all* nations.”

This is a stark pivot from his instructions in Matthew 10 where Jesus tells them not to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans.

It could be argued that the salvation of generations flowed from the faithful voice and extraordinary faith of this desperate Canaanite mother.

So, maybe it *is* okay to call upon this story as we ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?”

Because Jesus — who was passionately focused on his very noble and important mission — was not too stubborn to learn. He wasn’t too prideful to experience a faith bigger than his expectation.

I am taken by the nuance this reveals about the humanity of Jesus: as God in the truest human form, who grew in stature and wisdom — and did not reach a point and say, “I have finished learning now.”

In the story of the Canaanite mother, we see a depth of character in our Lord. We meet a Jesus who felt a heavy burden to care for the lost sheep of Israel, but who also was moved when he saw the suffering of children outside of his own flock.

We meet a Jesus who experienced the humbling gift of one who sees the depth of his ability more clearly than he had been able to see it himself. The Canaanite mother’s faith was astounding. Her voice was undeniable.

She demanded that Jesus be the savior she knew he was. And because of her faith, Jesus was freed to fully become the healer, the teacher and the provider of salvation he came to this earth to become.

And if Jesus — in his infinite perfection — was able to grow and to learn, then shouldn’t our minds and hearts be humble and open to revelation as well?

I pray to God that we — the church — are not so stubborn that we cannot receive epiphany; that when we are confronted with questions of who is “in” and who is “out” — who is worthy or unworthy, clean or unclean — that we will dare to hear the prophetic voices of those whose faith is bold and mighty; that we will remember we serve a savior who was perfect, even in his willingness to learn and grow.

So, God, deliver to us those whom we have excluded from your bounty. Open our eyes that we might know faith in a God whose bread of life, whose mercy and grace, whose bounty knows no limits. **NFJ**

# How do you grieve when nobody died?

BY MARION D. ALDRIDGE

America gets an A-plus for our rituals following someone's death. Churches and funeral homes undergird a mammoth industry built around providing memorial services to honor the deceased and offer comfort for the bereaved.

Americans know how to say "Goodbye" to the dead — in style!

Funeral homes and related services account for at least \$20 billion of economic activity — caskets, cremation urns, cemeteries, hearse rentals and newspaper obituaries. Those who have never had to pay for a funeral are often startled by the cost.

More than 130,000 men and women are employed in the rituals of burying the dead — gravediggers, casket makers, embalmers and other employees of the funeral home (or "funeral parlor"). There are articles and books written with titles such as *The High Cost of Dying*.

In other cultures the provision for rituals after a death are no less formal or comprehensive. They range from funeral pyres (in which the body is burned in a public ceremony) to "sky burials" (in which the corpse is recycled by allowing carrion birds to feast on the remains).

However, mourning our losses when no death occurred is more challenging. Maybe such occurrences are what the Bible refers to when the Psalmist says we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23).

Grief is an area in which doing what comes naturally or intuitively may be exactly counterproductive. As a young man, prior to seminary training, I assumed the goal was to cheer up those who were grieving, to make them smile, to forget their troubles.

I was wrong. Masking pain is a sure way for it to worsen, just as ignoring an infection

or cancer will allow a disease to grow.

I was guilty of another common error. Supposing the only events worthy of genuine grief were the deaths of human beings, I was amazed to learn that people mourned all manner of losses.

Examples include such things as: the theft of a wedding ring, a house fire, the amputation of a limb, discovering your child is an addict, the prison sentence of a spouse or child, the closing of a business or community group or church, job termination, the transfer of a favorite neighbor to another city, being a victim of sexual assault, the diagnosis of a terminal disease in yourself or someone you love, a natural disaster.

There are hundreds of other causes for grief. For many of these, there is almost no public acknowledgement, much less helpful rituals or remedies.

What does a person do when a divorce is finalized other than to go out with friends and get drunk?

What does a woman do after a miscarriage other than to go home and cry?

What do parents do when their last child leaves home for college and their new reality is an empty nest? Rather than grieve their own loss, or celebrate a new chapter in the adolescent's life, some lonely parents attempt to hang on indefinitely by calling their child much too often.

What do other parents do when their child is arrested and incarcerated? Most go home and sit in silence, the subject of their child's imprisonment being taboo among family and friends.

Grief arrives in all shapes, sizes, lengths and depths. There is no single correct way to grieve.



Bereavement is rarely seamless, a natural part of one person's life experience. More often, it is utterly disruptive.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross correctly named predictable stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). These can vary immensely in length and intensity from person to person and circumstance to circumstance.

As a pastor, I have helped hundreds of individuals and groups work through various kinds and stages of grief. The first necessity is always to acknowledge you're in pain.

There's not much help for someone who won't admit his or her loss: "I'm fine." "I'm not one to complain." "Not my problem."

But, *if* you have suffered a loss, and *if* you've experienced any of the symptoms of grief (anger, depression, etc.), and *if* you don't want to live in unnecessary anguish, there are steps to move the process along.

One can't undo death or a rape or fix a drug-addicted child, but there is good news. Just as there are medical interventions for some types of disease, there are social, psychological, spiritual and practical interventions to avoid endless agony as a result of your loss.

The purpose for rituals of grief, even when there has been no physical death, is to mark and validate the loss and the accompanying sorrow. By doing so, the risk of endless obsessing about the loss is reduced.

Temporary depression is a natural aspect of grief, but persistent or permanent depression is emotionally, physically and spiritually dangerous. The goal is not closure, but acknowledgment.

Naming a problem, it's often said, is half the battle. Pretending there is no issue permits and even encourages the sufferer to extend the painful experience needlessly.

"Different strokes for different folks," as they say, and also for different degrees



of suffering. What may be an appropriate response to the loss of an heirloom may make no sense for a total lifestyle change such as your spouse being diagnosed with dementia.

Consider these options for dealing with grief:

- Ask your pastor or spiritual advisor to pray with you specifically about the loss and your grieving process. Don't be bashful. This is what clergy are most glad to do.
- Begin a journal to record your emotions, setbacks and progress. Be honest.
- Get counseling.
- If you feel guilt in any way for the loss ("I wasn't a good-enough parent."), write on a piece of paper what you believe to be your errors and then destroy the list. Or, throw rocks off a bridge into a stream to symbolize letting go of those mistakes you believe you made.
- Volunteer as a means of moving your life in a new direction.
- Spend time with people who like you and make you feel better about yourself.

- Read a self-help book that speaks to the issue you are struggling to cope with; if there's not one, write one.
- Don't try to control your grief. You may not cry at your retirement, but then you'll cry without knowing why when your cat dies — and you didn't even like your cat.
- Go to sacred spaces for quiet, meditation, retreat and reflection. Spend time alone in a church sanctuary or monastery, or kneel at an altar, or sit with your own thoughts for a while in the forest.
- Do nothing. Relax. Disengage from reality for a few minutes, a few hours or, if possible, for a few days.
- Beware of replacing what you lost too soon. The best decisions are not made in the midst of pain.
- Go with friends who will make you laugh to a funny movie or a comedy club. Do something upbeat to break the cycle of depression.
- Join or start (if one does not already exist) a support group for people who have similar difficulties.
- Take a trip. If there's a place you've always

wanted to visit, go there.

- Begin a new hobby or undertake a new discipline. Walk, run, swim, garden, paint, learn to play bridge or pickle ball.
- Give yourself time. Grief has no timetable. Some events are like an amputation: you never get over them. Your life can adjust to their absence, however. You learn to live without what you had.

If, by the time your alcoholic husband dies, all you feel is relief, that's okay. You've been grieving for him a long time already. That's called "anticipatory grief."

American culture may do more than enough to console the bereaved after a death, but we tend to pretend other losses, no matter how devastating, are less important. For this, our grade at best is a C-minus.

We can do better. **NFJ**

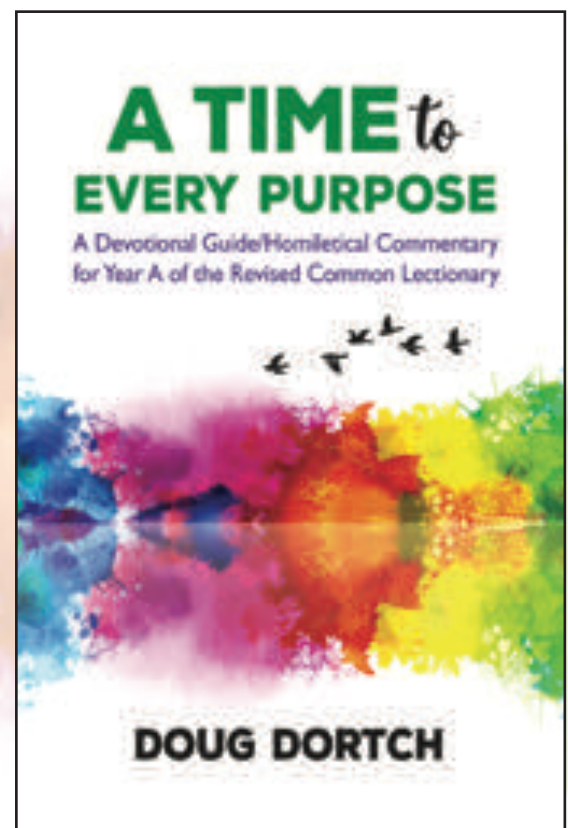
—*Marion Aldridge is a writer and minister living in Columbia, S.C. He retired as coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina.*

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# Perspectives on hope and despair

BY LARRY HOVIS

In October 2019, I had an opportunity to participate in the second annual Civil Rides. This experience, sponsored by Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Together for Hope ministry, featured a two-day, 150-mile organized bicycle ride in Alabama to raise awareness about the connection between rural poverty and racism in America.

The 2019 ride started in Montgomery. The day before the ride, my wife and I took the official tour of Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King Jr. was pastor. We arrived a little late for the tour and entered the sanctuary about halfway through the tour guide's presentation.

The tour guide, an African-American woman in her 60s, was warm, engaging, gregarious and enthusiastic. She not only described the history of the church and how it had been an important center of the Civil Rights Movement, but also how proud she was that the city of Montgomery had just elected its first African-American mayor.

She acknowledged that her community and our country still have much work to do when it comes to civil rights, but she expressed deep gratitude for the tremendous progress that has been made in the past five decades. Though she was not a member of Dexter Avenue, she heaped praise on the church and its current pastor, describing its vibrant ministry in the community today.

Because we missed the first part of her presentation, we decided to stay for the next tour slot to hear her again. As it turned out, the next tour was not led by this woman, but by an African-American man in his early 20s, a recent college graduate.

When asked about his experience of race relations in Montgomery today, his

assessment was much different from that of his older colleague. He said he is discouraged by the racism he encounters on a daily basis.

He described the activity of the Ku Klux Klan in the community, the prominent displays of the Confederate flag, and the fear that he and other young black men have of the police. In general, he was discouraged by the lack of progress his community and our country have made with civil rights since the time of Dr. King.

He also had a negative assessment of Dexter Avenue. He said the congregation is old and dying, and predicted the church would only be a museum within 10 years. He said fewer and fewer of his friends go to church, and those who do attend a megachurch.

These two tour guides couldn't have been more different. The older woman was grateful for the progress that has been made in race relations. The younger man felt that little progress has been made.

The older woman was hopeful about the future of civil rights and the traditional church. The younger man was pessimistic about both. One presentation was characterized by hope. The other was characterized by despair.

The next day we started at our hotel and rode our bikes the short distance to Dexter Avenue, where we were led in worship by the current pastor. Between the two locations, we passed the site of Montgomery's slave market, which is now a beautiful fountain.

We followed the parade route for the inauguration of Jefferson Davis as president of the Confederacy. We rode the 50 miles to Selma and crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where in 1965 peaceful demonstrators' first attempt to march to Montgomery was thwarted by police violence.

Our ride that day ended in the town of Marion, site of the original violence that prompted the march to Selma, and where today Together for Hope has a ministry



site, Sowing Seeds of Hope, that is transforming lives in its community for the better. Poverty is still rampant in Marion, but change is happening.

We live in complex times. We face huge challenges as a nation and world. There are still massive problems. But we also live in wonderful times in which tremendous progress is being made in many areas.

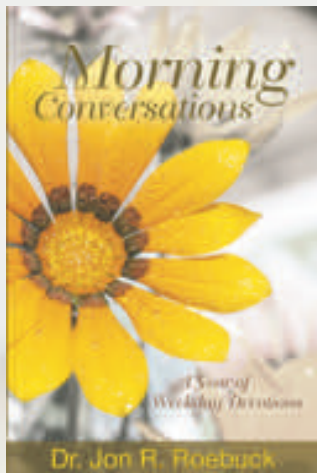
I am much closer in age to the first tour guide than the second. Like the second one, I sometimes have moments of despair about the future of the church and other societal problems. But most days I choose to follow the lead of the first guide, giving thanks for progress that has been made and maintaining a posture of hope about the church and our country.

Sin still has much power in the world, but the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ has changed, and continues to change, our world for the better. And the church of Jesus Christ is still the primary steward of that gospel, lifting up its message of hope for others to experience.

Sometimes all we can do is sow seeds of hope in fields of despair. But that is enough. And with the perspective of time, we can see the difference it makes. **NFJ**

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

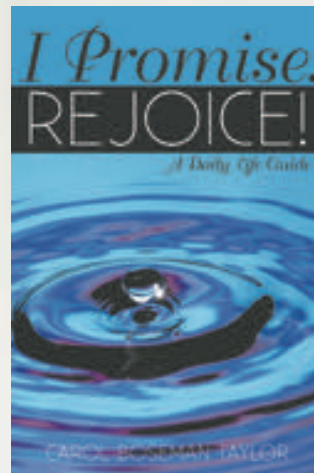
# Inspirational Reading for Your Lenten Journey



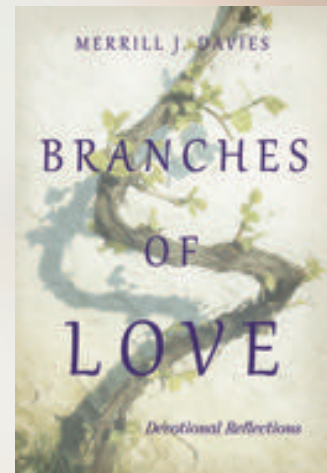
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# ‘What about Jesus?’

BY JIM WALLIS

*Religion News Service*

I remember a breakfast conversation with a member of Congress in Washington, D.C., in 2017 about the relationship between faith and politics. He asked, with deep puzzlement in his eyes, how so many Christians could justify accepting and even supporting so many fundamentally immoral policies, statements and behaviors.

It really wasn't a partisan query. He just couldn't understand, so he asked me respectfully and quite sincerely, "What about Jesus?"

This lawmaker, as a committed Christian himself, is also concerned about how too few of his colleagues, on both sides of the political aisle, are willing to seriously grapple with this same question, or even care to ask it at all.

For many years I have said, "The right gets it wrong and the left doesn't get it."

That would seem true now more than ever — especially with the departure of so many white evangelicals from many of Jesus' core teachings, which is genuinely baffling to many people beyond my lawmaker friend and to people like me who are from the evangelical tradition.

Even other Christians all over the world are asking the same question: How have American Christians forgotten about Jesus?

In particular, many American Christians of color and a new generation of young people of all colors and creeds who are trying make their own decisions about faith are shaking their heads in confusion and even disgust.

We are indeed in a crisis, and the disorienting and dangerous state of our nation's present reality is rapidly being normalized, which is even more frightening.

Many people experience an ongoing crisis of safety and lack of opportunity in communities of color; many women and marginalized people feel afraid in the United States and around the world.

And many of us — across the political spectrum — are alarmed at the lack of public civility and decency; the growing dangers to the protocols, procedures and practices of governance; and even threats to the rule of law, which collectively put both the common good and even democracy in jeopardy.

Going beyond and deeper than politics, many across the ideological spectrum sense the sharp decline of values, health, and human flourishing in our cultural and civic lives, which morally undermines the quality of our public life and society. By morally accepting things that we should not, we help to undermine the spiritual fabric of our personal, family and social lives.

As many have pointed out, the symbol for the word "crisis" in Chinese is a combination of the symbols for two Chinese words: "danger" and "opportunity."

The dangers of the present crisis are obvious and growing by the day — especially for those people on the margins, such as immigrants and their families; young people of color, especially in relation to our

policing, criminal justice, economic, educational and electoral systems; all the poor and vulnerable among us; people who face cruelty, oppression and violence because of who they are, how they worship, who they love; and women in every category.

Democracy itself, the rule of law and the very idea of objective truth are all in danger now, as our nation and world face an emerging and spreading autocratic style of leadership.

What is the opportunity? Most fundamentally, reconnecting to the person and teachings of Jesus.

Christians, in other historical moments, have often remembered, rediscovered, returned and gone back to their obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ — both personal and public — in times of crisis. It's called coming home.

Even Americans of other faiths hunger for this return. Muslims and Jews regularly tell me how grateful they are when Christians start talking about Jesus again, as that makes them feel safer!

People who don't identify with any faith system wonder why Christians are not talking about the actual person and teachings of Jesus more and wish they would.

Reclaiming Jesus is not about making more Christians as much as it is about making Christians more genuinely and redemptively human, as God made us and as Christ calls us to be.

I believe two things are now at stake: the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith. Who we are and want to be and what we truly believe about God and our purposes in the world must be made clear in a time such as this. **NFJ**



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



—Jim Wallis is the founder of *Sojourners*. This article is excerpted and adapted from his book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* (HarperOne, 2019).

# Taking the gospel seriously *without taking ourselves too seriously*

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Entering a new academic pursuit during my campus ministry years in the late-'80s, I would make regular treks across metro Atlanta. My routine was to leave in the early morning hours to avoid traffic, and settle into a never-closed Denny's for breakfast.

With a continuing flow of coffee, I would read until the sun came up fully and the library opened at Columbia Theological Seminary. This routine worked well as my educational exploration would wrap up in time for the afternoon and evening activities in which campus ministry occurred.

The first assignment upon entering this degree program was to write a lengthy philosophy of ministry paper. After wrestling with such personal and theological reflections, I was feeling pretty good about the results — except for the ending.

Before submitting the paper to professor Doug Hix — and his colleagues from other Atlanta area seminaries collaborating in this initial seminar — I wanted to find a fitting summary statement.

One afternoon, while driving back from the Decatur campus to the Marietta

one where our student ministry was based, my mind continued running through all kinds of ways of wrapping up my writing. Then it hit me.

My philosophy of ministry was summarized in this way: to take the gospel seriously without taking myself too seriously.

While I've not always lived up to that needed balance, it is a worthy and constant goal.

To err on either side is to get out of balance — missing the primary calling to humbly follow Jesus. And God knows what happens when we take ourselves too seriously — and start acting like God is looking to us to carry out what uniquely belongs to God.

Conflating taking the gospel seriously with taking oneself too seriously is how we end up with pompous religionists such as John McArthur telling Beth Moore to “go home” — assuming he has the divine authority to determine whom God calls to what tasks.

The lack of humility makes arrogant

gatekeepers out of us — as if we are charged with guarding the kingdom clubhouse.

Taking the gospel seriously without taking oneself too seriously is more than a good balancing act. It is also a freeing experience.

That perspective allows for us to mess up — and even laugh at our human failures. It helps us to realize that God loves us in all the humanity in which we were created — but is not dependent upon us to straighten everyone else out.

Admittedly, much of my theological understanding has changed throughout my lifetime — including the decades since writing that initial paper and many others that followed, including the extensive dissertation required for graduation.

But, overall, my philosophy remains the same:

To take the gospel seriously — which is demanding in terms of the compassion, love, discipline, justice and sacrifice required. Following Jesus is very hard, though it is not complicated.

To avoid taking ourselves too seriously — which calls for constant reminders that not as much weighs on our shoulders as we might think. **NFJ**



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BY ADELLE M. BANKS

Religion News Service



Beth Sholom Synagogue, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, opened 60 years ago near Philadelphia. Photo by Darren Bradley

# WORK OF ART

*Only synagogue designed by Frank Lloyd Wright marks 60 years*

ELKINS PARK, Pa. — Sixty years ago, members of a Conservative synagogue processed into their new sanctuary, just before the Jewish High Holy Days, marking a new era in their congregational life and in modern religious architecture.

**T**he only synagogue designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Beth Sholom Synagogue still stands six decades later in this suburb north of Philadelphia as both a house of prayer and an unusual, functioning piece of art.

Recalling in its design the place where Scriptures say the Ten Commandments were given to Moses, Beth Sholom is lesser known than the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Fallingwater or Wright's other landmark creations. It nevertheless attracts those who are aware of its connections to

the famous architect, and Wright himself saw it in cosmic terms.

"The design for Beth Sholom has taken the supreme moment of Jewish history and experience," said Wright at the time, "the revelation of God to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai, and translated that moment with all its significance into a design of beauty and reverence.

"In a word, the building is Mount Sinai, where Israel first encountered God."

The synagogue's exotic geometric shape, which appears atop a rise and around a bend as drivers approach it along Old York Road, was suggested by Beth Sholom's then-Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen as "a dream and hope in my heart" to Wright in a 1953 letter.

Wright responded to Cohen, whose letter included a rough sketch of his idea, beginning a close bond the two men developed mostly through correspondence.

"They had a very long, sustained dialogue about this building over a six-year period,"



The interior of Beth Sholom Synagogue, featuring an installation exhibit by artist David Hart titled "The Histories (*Le Mancenillier*)". Photo by Michael Vahrenwald

said Joseph M. Siry, author of the 2011 book, *Beth Sholom Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright and Modern Religious Architecture*.

Wright would eventually grant Rabbi Cohen the title of co-designer. The architect, a Unitarian whose uncle was an organizer of the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, also referred to the rabbi and himself as "congenial workers in the vineyard of the Lord."

Siry said Cohen, in turn, said: “I found in Mr. Wright a genuinely spiritual person who responded in his unique way to the great teachings of my religion.”

The building was dedicated, and the rabbi’s dreams were realized, just months after Wright’s death, on Sept. 20, 1959.

Cohen showed in his original sketch that he did not want a traditional longitudinal design. Rather, he desired a space, Siry said, with “a much more collective, in-the-round feeling.”

That idea continued in the slant of the floor.

“It slopes down toward the front but it also slopes in toward the center,” said Siry, an art history professor at Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

For his part, “Wright wanted to create the ‘kind of building in which people, on entering it, will feel as if they were resting in the hands of God,” the American Institute of Architects notes in its online description.

Siry said the building, with its 108-foot-tall sanctuary, achieves the “mountain of light” Wright was hoping for with the synagogue’s tetrahedron design.

“It has this translucence, which is very special both from the inside during the day and from the outside at night when it’s lit from the inside,” said Siry of the two-layered wall of glass and plastic that makes up the surface of the tent-like structure. “It’s very striking and pronounced at night when the synagogue is lit from within.”

Just before night falls, said Helene Mansheim, director of the synagogue’s visitor center, the light from the sunset can turn the sanctuary a golden color.

Designated a National Historic Landmark in 2007, the synagogue is listed by the AIA as one of 17 buildings designed by Wright that are examples of “his architectural contribution to American culture.”

Recently, new sights and sounds were added to the synagogue, whose name means “House of Peace.”

In part to mark the building’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in September 2019, Beth Sholom’s preservation foundation commissioned a multimedia installation by

*“The design for Beth Sholom has taken the supreme moment of Jewish history and experience, the revelation of God to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai, and translated that moment with all its significance into a design of beauty and reverence.”*

—FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Philadelphia artist David Hartt that evoked the Jewish and African-American diasporas.

The exhibition, titled “The Histories (*Le Mancenillier*),” featured orchids and other tropical plants, along with tapestries, videos and the music of composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk.

The composer, who was born to a Jewish father and Creole mother, wrote a piece called “Le Mancenillier,” the French word for a manchineel, a sweet, poisonous tropical plant.

Cole Akers, curator of the exhibition that ran from Sept. 11 to Dec. 19, 2019, except for High Holy Days, said the installation reflected how Beth Sholom’s congregation, now a century old, had related to urban development.

The congregation began in north Philadelphia in a building that has become the location of Beloved St. John Evange-

listic Church in a community that is now predominantly African American.

“The relationship between these two congregations led Hartt to consider the constant movement of Black and Jewish communities as a result of political, economic and social currents,” said Akers.

Herb Sachs, president of the Beth Sholom Preservation Foundation, said Hartt’s exhibition also reflected the practical realities of the building.

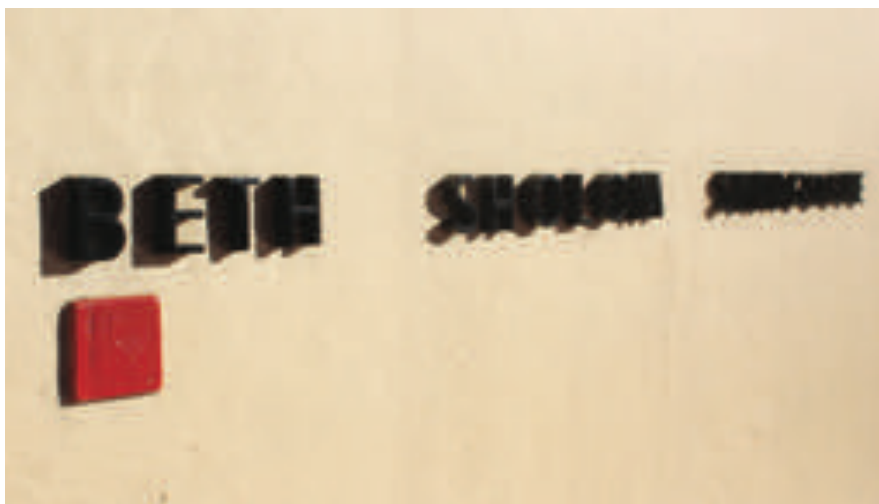
“Most Frank Lloyd Wright buildings leak and ours is no exception,” he said. “He maps where the rainwater tended to be collected and he’s placed orchids in each of those locations.”

The recorded music that played throughout the show was arranged by Ethiopian pianist Girma Yifrasheva, who created it using nine microphones inside and outside of the instrument, which makes for an ethereal sound.

“When one is sitting in the sanctuary you feel as though you’re sitting in the middle of a piano,” Sachs said. “And then observing these orchids and tropical flowers, it’s a very peaceful feeling and I think visitors are enjoying it.”

The exhibition, said Mansheim, director of the visitor center, was a fitting addition to the nontraditional house of worship.

And the building itself, she said, “is a work of art.” **NFJ**



Frank Lloyd Wright’s signature red tile on the Beth Sholom Synagogue. Photo by Adelle M. Banks

# Love & Quasars



Moon Pies, Milky Ways and Starbursts added to the astronomy-themed, October release of Paul Wallace's new book, *Love and Quasars*, sponsored by Georgia Center for the Book and hosted by First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga.

A conversation with astrophysicist/minister/writer Paul Wallace about reconciling faith and science

**D**ECATUR, Ga. — Paul Wallace, who writes the “Questions Christians Ask Scientists” column in this journal, has written a new book, *Love and Quasars: An Astrophysicist Reconciles Faith and Science* (Fortress Press).

With a Ph.D. in nuclear physics from Duke University, Paul teaches physics and astronomy at Agnes Scott College. And with a theology degree from Emory University, he teaches seminary classes and serves on the ministerial staff of First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga.

For this issue of the journal, his usual column gives way for a conversation with Executive Editor John Pierce about his latest book.

**NFJ:** First, thanks for continuing to write the faith/science column for this journal. Readers often express appreciation for your insights. Now, regarding *Love and Quasars*, how does this book differ from your first one?

**PW:** To see how *Love and Quasars* differs, I should first say how it is the same. It, like *Stars Beneath Us*, attempts to reconcile faith and science. But it does so in a completely new way.

*Stars Beneath Us* is really an extended meditation on the biblical book of Job and therefore approaches the question through

the universal human experience of suffering. It takes a rather dark and indirect look at the perennial questions of faith and science and in some ways leaves the issue unresolved, just as the question of suffering is itself unresolved in Job.

*Love and Quasars*, however, is a direct answer to a direct question. Last year a student found out that I’m a pastor as well as a physics professor. She stopped still in the hall and stared at me hard.

You could nearly see the question mark floating over her head. “How does THAT work?” she asked.

*Love and Quasars* is my answer, written as simply and directly as possible. In contrast to *Stars Beneath Us*, it approaches the question of faith and science through the universal human experience of love. It is simpler, more direct, and offers an actual resolution to the problem.

It is written on a simpler level, with more direct language and less poetics. It is brighter and more joyful and optimistic. But it was harder to write because, for me, darker topics are often easier to address. So *Love and Quasars* feels like a bigger risk to me personally.

**NFJ:** I wish all books, especially the Bible, began with: “Introduction: What this book is about and how it works.” Why did you start the book in such a way?

**PW:** Because I worked hard to make the book simple, user-friendly, direct and structured, starting right up front with the introduction. I believe, as author Brené Brown puts it, that “clarity is kind.”

**NFJ:** You advocate for an evolving faith — when, in fact, most of us were encouraged to have a strong faith. Is part of the problem that “strong” was interpreted as “rigid,” not allowing for needed critical analysis and change?

**PW:** Yes! This is an important distinction. If early Christians had valued rigid faith over strong faith, Christianity would have crumbled centuries ago.

To not collapse in an earthquake or storm, skyscrapers must be flexible. Bones have strength because they bend. To survive in a changing world, life must evolve.

All of this is true for ideas and practices as well: they must grow and develop and change, or they will die. What is sometimes not appreciated is this can happen while maintaining and even deepening the roots of faith.

**NFJ:** You write that, during high school and college, you thought you had to choose between faith and science. How does the church create that unnecessary dilemma, and what is a more constructive approach?



PW: Overall, today's church seems to be better at providing answers than it is at developing questions. Answers are not unimportant, but you have to work for them.

Answers that come too easily act like patches; they cover the territory temporarily but don't address the deeper needs.

Teenagers (for example) have flexible, adept minds and can memorize and quote answers quite easily. And sometimes it's good to have an answer even though you don't really understand it.

But if we don't allow teens to take ultimate responsibility for their answers, their faith's roots will remain shallow and they'll wither at the least challenge. Like the building that won't flex because it's not built correctly, they will crumble.

And there's no way to get to the point of strength with flexibility without asking a lot of questions and sitting with them long enough to feel their urgency, which is uncomfortable for a lot of people. Teenage minds can handle uncertainty; adult church leaders need to handle it too.

**NFJ: Related to that question, what have you discovered in teaching science to college students who come from a strong church background?**

PW: I have had very few students, if any, come to me conflicted about faith and science. This may be a function of what I teach (physics, which most students don't have a problem with) and where I teach it (an almost completely secular institution).

**NFJ: Your book is filled with personal stories and analogies rather than exclusively scientific theories and theological jargon. I find it effective. But why did you choose this approach?**

PW: I am above all else a teacher, so I'm interested in reaching people who are not experts. If you need jargon to teach a topic, then you're not really teaching it.

Translation of technical scientific and theological language into everyday terms leads to a loss of some nuance — that is unavoidable — but to reach a larger audience, you need to be willing to suffer that loss for the sake of others.

A writer must begin where the reader



"I think both faith and science begin in wonder," said Paul Wallace (right), author of *Love and Quasars: An Astrophysicist Reconciles Faith and Science*, at the book's October release in Decatur, Ga. Wallace discussed his book before an engaged audience, with Keith Pierce (left), his brother-in-law, as host.

actually is, and I strive to remain aware of my audience and what they do and don't know.

**NFJ: Your résumé is impressive, but shouldn't "household dinosaur expert" get more prominence? How did that childhood obsession impact a church-going kid?**

PW: It made me pretty sure that God was larger and stranger than I could imagine. If God so loved the world, as I was taught, and if dinosaurs were part of the world, which they *very much* were to me, then God must have loved the dinosaurs.

This is not a thought many people consider very seriously, but I thought about it quite a lot (and quite seriously) as a child. It opens up your view of God.

**NFJ: You give specific examples in the book, but how in general does the way the Bible is approached either harm or help in reconciling faith and science?**

PW: The more you insist that scripture, and Genesis in particular, is historically accurate, the more trouble you will have with what science has to say to us. This goes back to the issue of rigidity and strength from your previous question.

Genesis 1, for example, is a straightforward description of God creating a flat earth. Now we know, despite some who claim otherwise, that the earth is spherical. So, how rigidly do you plan to hold to a literal surface-level reading of that book?

You just can't do it, and no one actually does it. If the Bible were meant to be a science book, we'd have thrown it out centuries ago.

In my experience the most helpful way to read Genesis is *relationally*. Three major players — God, humanity and creation — are introduced, and three relationships are established.

These relationships are God-humanity, humanity-creation and God-creation. Once they are in place, all three relationships are ruptured and much of the rest of scripture is an account of God's (and our) attempts to restore them.

When you read the Bible in this way, the whole question of how the world was made — creation versus evolution — becomes much less urgent and also less complicated because the possibility of both/and opens up where before there was only either/or.

**NFJ: How much of an obstacle to healthy faith-science understandings are young-earth creationists such as Ken Ham of "Answers in Genesis," whom you mention in your book? Isn't it odd that those who call for a strong faith actually appear to have a very fragile faith that can't withstand scientific discovery?**

PW: I think they're a huge obstacle and hugely off-putting to many young people who might otherwise be attracted to Christianity. Ham, for example, is focused on one thing above all: being right.

His organization is called “Answers in Genesis,” and it really is all about answers — the perfect right ones. Of course, it’s nice to be right occasionally and none of us want to go through life making error after error, but their emphasis on the right answers seems to admit no room for grace, creativity or real dialogue.

I know several people personally who, once they realized they didn’t have to reject science to be a Christian, felt a great burden fall from their shoulders. My only comfort is that, as I mentioned above, such a rigid brand of faith really can’t flourish too long on a large scale.

**NFJ: You are also critical of atheists who treat the Bible in the same way they approach science. What do you mean by the statement, “When science lines up against faith, it makes its own mess?”**

PW: Oftentimes scientists see faith (including the Bible) as little more than science done badly. For them, science stands as the one true source of knowledge and all other ways of knowing have value only

insofar as they mimic science.

Now some points of overlap exist between faith and science, and I talk about them in the book, but they really are distinct ways of knowing the world.

Compressing faith into a box called “science” does it no justice, and neither is it helpful to say things like “it really takes faith to believe in science,” because that is just making the opposite mistake.

**NFJ: Despite your vast scientific understanding (which few of us share), you often reference simple encounters with nature (such as walking in the woods and bird watching) as bringing you meaning. It doesn’t take much, does it?**

PW: No it doesn’t, but I would never say that my knowledge of physics and astronomy doesn’t have a powerful effect when I’m out in the field birding. It sits in the background to be sure, but it’s not unimportant.

What a full scientific education will do for you is make you appreciative of *every single facet* of the natural world. I know a little physics and astronomy, and I don’t use

the word *little* in a self-deprecating sense.

I’m simply stating a fact: there is *so much* more to know even in my own field. How much more then do I *not* know about biology, a much larger discipline and one that I have not studied formally since high school?

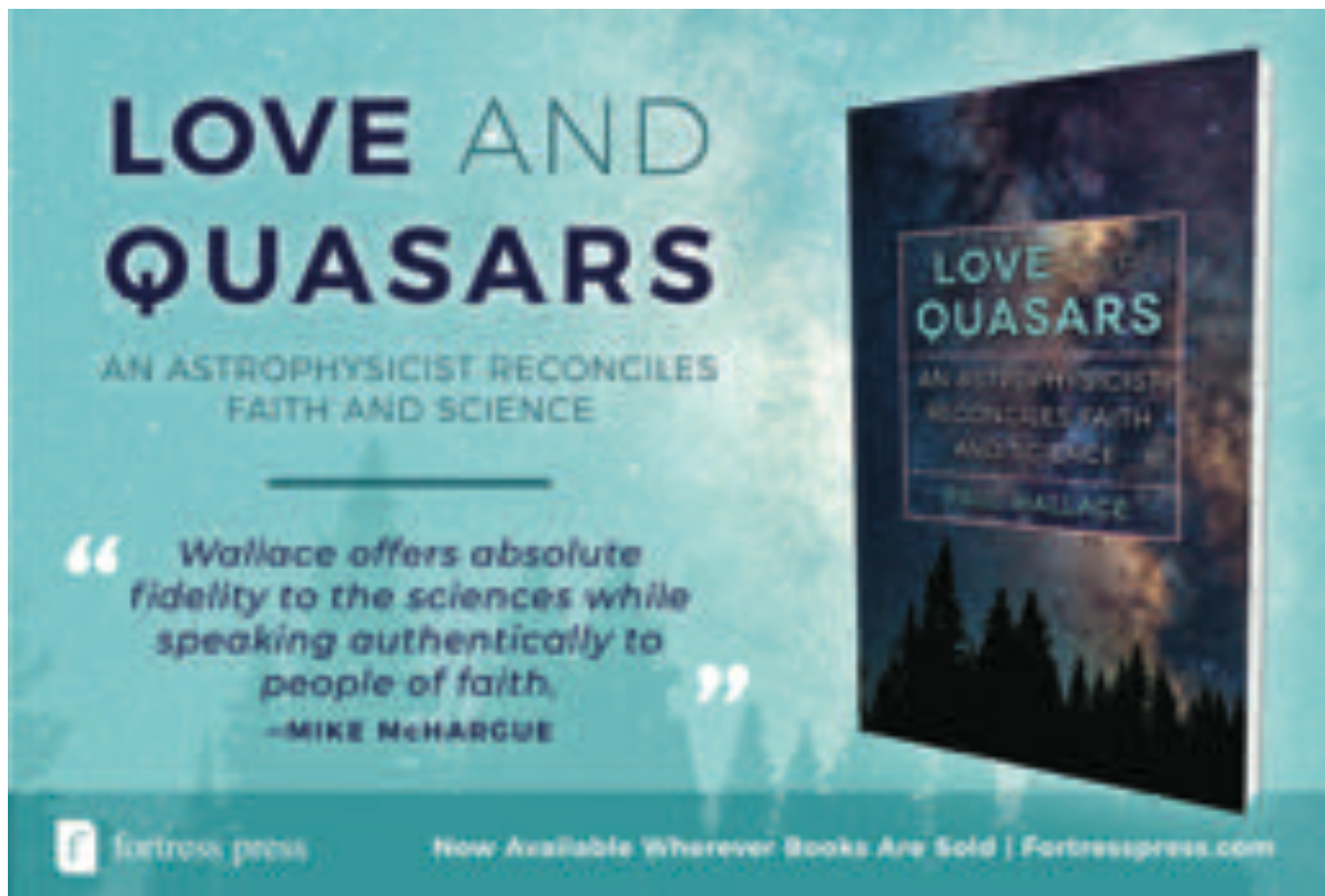
How much do I not know about geology? About chemistry? About atmospheric science? About the ocean? About birds?

So when I go birding, all this awareness of *not-knowing* is sitting just under the surface and it makes me feel like creation is a cathedral I could explore my whole life, and for many lifetimes beyond that.

It makes seeing something new so much more exciting, like a true and lovely gift!

**NFJ: If a church, college, theology school or other group wanted you to speak about these issues, how would they contact you?**

PW: They can write to me at [pwallace@agnesscott.edu](mailto:pwallace@agnesscott.edu) and I will get back to them directly. **NFJ**



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