MARCH-APRIL 2020

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Journal & Bible Studies

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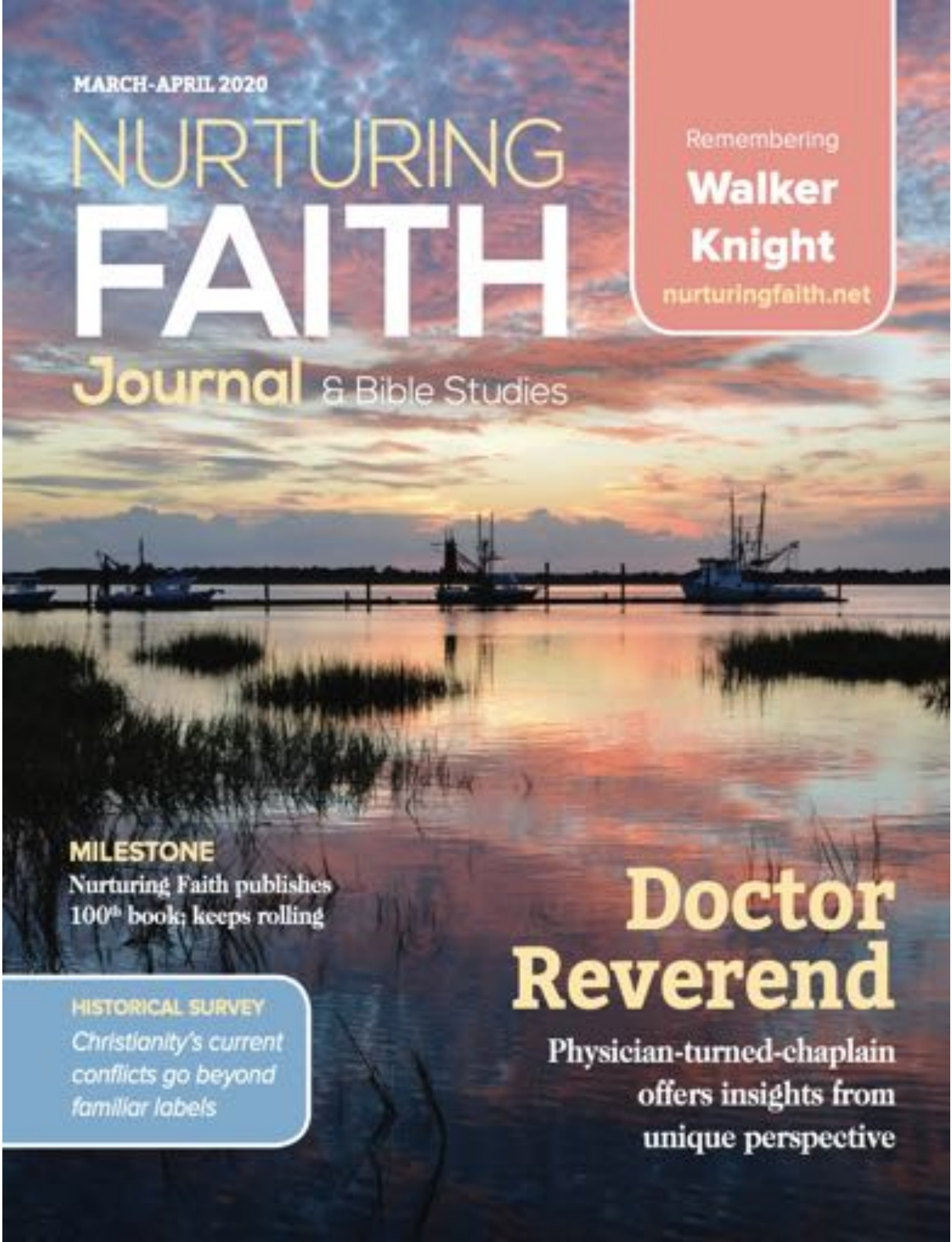

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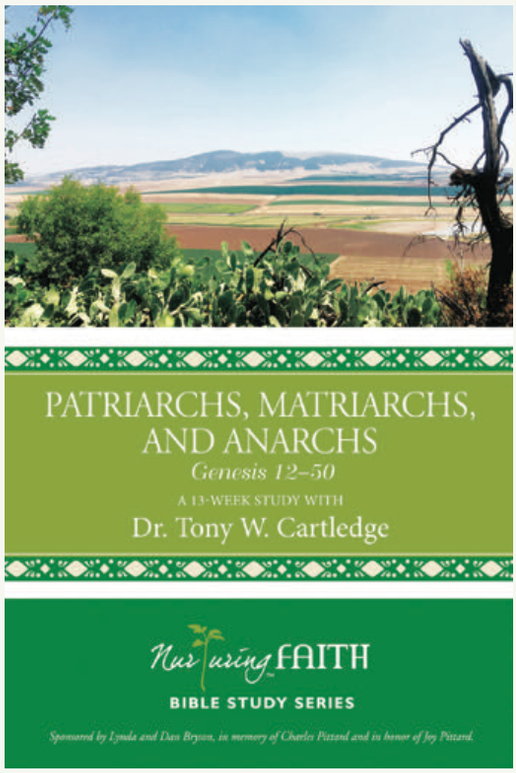

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THE MISSION of *Nurturing Faith Journal* is to provide relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for reflective Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

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THOUGHTS

FEATURES

Fishing Boats at Sunset, Jekyll Island, by Bruce Gourley

Worth Repeating

"We can argue over values and political philosophies. But we have to stop lying, and we have to stop accepting complete falsehoods..."

Michael McFaul, foreign policy professor and advisor (Twitter)

"That was the command from the ordination, to be ordained as an evangelist and continue his work in television and the media with families and children."

Joanne Rogers, 91, on her late husband Fred seeing the space between the TV and viewer as "holy ground" (RNS)

"Decreasing stigma happens all the way from the sermon on Sunday to the way we interact with people who arrive at our church."

Kristen Kansiewicz, founder of Church Therapy that provides low-cost mental health services in churches (RNS)

"People have always traveled for spiritual reasons, but it's been tied to religion. Today people are seeking purpose in life, but not always within that religious structure."

Daniel Olsen, a geography professor at Brigham Young University, on the rise in religious tourism (*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*)

"Truth-telling, a once noble ethic, now twitters on the edge of cultural, governmental and perhaps ecclesiastical oblivion. We are, all of us, locked collectively in a truth-crisis so perilous that distinguishing 'fictional' from 'actual realities' has become a 24/7 confrontation across every segment of our national life, churches included."

Historian Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University (BNG)

"Risk is a secular word for faith. Are you able to 'faith' your way beyond stuck-ness and into the future?"

Bob Dale, author and consultant with Center for Healthy Churches

"Religious freedom understandably makes the rich and powerful nervous: It is one of the most liberatory and revolutionary ideas in the history of the world."

Frederick Clarkson, senior research analyst at Political Research Associates (EthicsDaily)

"We've found that parishioners play an important role in clergy well-being... [A]sk your pastors about their family, their interests, their vacation plans. Suggest that your pastor have a guest preacher any time a month has five Sundays."

Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, research director of Duke Divinity School's Clergy Health Initiative (RNS)

"When I asked students who they thought was the TV minister who had the all-time largest viewing audience, the replies, according to the decade, would range from Billy Graham and Robert Schuller to Jim and Tammy Bakker to Joel Osteen, among others... Eventually, we'd get around to discovering the answer was the ordained Presbyterian minister whose congregation included any child with access to a television."

Colin Harris, professor emeritus of religious studies at Mercer University, on Mister Rogers (EthicsDaily)

Jesus is full of truth and grace. Are we?

By John D. Pierce

There is a familiar biblical affirmation from Christmastide that travels well into and through the Lenten season as well. It is the revelation that the one who became the incarnation of the invisible God was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

This does not appear to be a passing thought for the fourth gospel writer. It is an important descriptor of Jesus.

Somehow, over time, much of the Americanized Christianity familiar to us has placed nearly exclusive emphasis on John's later affirmation (3:16): God's promise that belief in Jesus will keep us from perishing.

That is a welcomed promise! But the ongoing call to follow Jesus draws our attention to emulating his life and teachings — and seeking to reflect his nature of grace and truth.

It seems there is a shortage of those two important elements of following Jesus in much of the Christianity on display today. It is worth asking why.

TRUTH

Oftentimes, comfortable untruths are preferred to uncomfortable truths. There is less concern with what is right — or righteous — than embracing that which affirms one's preconceived ideology.

The era of "alternative facts" and mounds of unchallenged lies in the public arena has devalued truth — even (or especially) for those who affirm allegiance to one who said truth sets us free.

Truth and truth-telling matter. We cannot advance that which is demonstrably false without creating a false witness.

Jesus provides comfort to our hurts — but not misrepresentations of God that make us more comfortable in our preferred beliefs, priorities and deeds.

It's odd that many of us have grown up in homes and churches where we heard repeatedly, "Tell the truth," and then discover later in life that truth is not so important to Christian leaders.

Truth must never be sacrificed or deprioritized by a personal desire for comfort from that which is feared.

GRACE

Honestly, grace in its purest form tends to make us uncomfortable. So we seek to add limits.

Grace doesn't fit with what we've been taught: that anything worth having is worth working for. We don't value freeloading. People should get only what they deserve.

But grace doesn't play by those rules. And seeking to restrict grace leads to redefining it apart from what makes it amazing.

The late Baptist leader and religion professor Charles Wellborn compared grace to the liberal serving of grits at a Southern diner. When his Yankee guest in Tallahassee, Fla., once told the waitress that he didn't order grits, she responded: "You don't order grits; you jus' get grits."

Wellborn said he had never heard a better illustration of grace. It is not ordered or earned — but extended freely by God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps in addition to our accountability groups we need grace groups to remind one another that we are loved and affirmed in our failures, differences and imperfections — keeping in the forefront the reality that none of us has it all figured out.

While Paul testified that God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9), we often act like it needs some help. So we add restrictions and requirements — confusing firm faith with rigid, exclusive beliefs.

Then we start playing defense on this favored "Christian" team, with all others seen as opponents. Sadly, this is the kind of "apologetics" that needs our apologies.

Too often the witness conveyed comes across as, "We've got it all right and must defend our ideology against all challenges (which are surely wrong)" — and then recruit others to accept our sense of rightness.

As we move through the seasons of life and faith, it is worth reconsidering our faithfulness in following Jesus — who clearly and abundantly was "full of grace and truth" — and asking, "Are we?" NFJ

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Editor's note: Walker L. Knight, founding editor and publisher emeritus of this journal, died Dec. 1, 2019, at age 95 in Decatur, Ga.

INTEGRITY *in ink*

Trailblazing editor Walker Knight left his mark on Christian journalism

Publisher emeritus Walker Knight and editor emeritus Jack U. Harwell. Both died in 2019.

Storytelling is ineffective, even misleading, if detached from its social context. So believed Walker Leigh Knight.

Therefore, the veteran journalist told stories of Southern Baptist missions in America within the changing cultural shifts of the 1960s and '70s. Many Baptists of the South, however, were not welcoming of such changes — or of someone bringing them to their attention.

Yet Walker stood firm, showing the personal and journalistic integrity that marked his life. Such Christian faithfulness was reflected among family and friends, within Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., and as the founding editor of this publication.

KNOCK, KNOCK

Walker guided *Home Missions* magazine to address such relevant topics as gender inequality, racism, poverty, mistreatment of Native Americans and other injustices. In 1972, he put the image of a woman minister on the magazine's cover, said Catherine Allen, who worked with the SBC-related Woman's Missionary Union.

Knight, she said, brought "a prophetic voice to make missions more Christian."

For a denomination rooted in defending slave ownership, however, those stories by Walker and the talented writers and photographers he recruited, weren't well received by pastors and pew-sitters who preferred "leaving well enough alone" and protecting cultural dominance.

For denominational executives, it was more about protecting the free flow of offerings that supported their work. So Walker would hear knocks on his office door, followed by strong suggestions that nicer, safer topics be addressed — apart from the biblical commands to do justice.

OAKHURST

Walker was a 60-year member of Oakhurst Baptist Church and a vital voice in the congregation's decision to open its doors and hearts widely when the surrounding community experienced sociological change.

The church's firm, often-groundbreaking commitments to social justice came at a high price. In his book, *Struggle for Integrity*, Walker gave account of that time of transition and conviction that resulted in heavy membership loss.

Dismissal from long-held Baptist affiliations followed — with the fellowship-breaking message often delivered by denominational leaders whose own congregations had fled to the whiter, quieter suburbs.

The Oakhurst congregation heard and responded overwhelmingly when Walker "sounded a call" to start a new, national, autonomous publication in 1983 — then known as *SBC Today* — and provided much-needed human and physical resources.

INK IN HIS VEINS

Walker's remarkable life story is told in *From Zion to Atlanta*, published by Nurturing Faith in 2013. John Nichol, who served as pastor of Oakhurst during its transitional times, referred to the volume during a Dec. 14, 2019 memorial service.

Nichol said that even though it was

impressive to read about all that Walker had experienced and accomplished, "you never got the feeling he's bragging about it."

Walker was well accustomed to adversity and challenges — which began early in his Kentucky upbringing in the village of Zion and nearby city of Henderson along the Ohio River. He was the oldest of nine children.

His mother was the family anchor while his father struggled with alcoholism that eventually led to the desertion of his family. The mystery of his father's disappearance haunted Walker through much of his life before a startling discovery in 1999 as detailed in his memoir.

Yet through his father's work in the newspaper business, Walker at a young age was drawn to the profession. From selling papers on the street, to answering newsroom calls on Friday night to convey football scores, Walker was hooked.

In his memoir he wrote: "I could not wait until I was old and smart enough to work with the newspaper in any capacity."

The attack on Pearl Harbor during Walker's senior year in high school emptied the newsroom of young men readying for war. Walker's father called him to duty as a full-time reporter — doing school assignments on the side.

Walker's journalism skills were honed during his military service and at Baylor University. After working with a weekly rural newspaper in Texas, he joined the staff of the Texas Baptist newspaper, *Baptist Standard*, in 1950.

A decade later he moved to Atlanta to head the editorial service of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and serve as editor of *Home Missions* magazine. There he tackled the relevant but often-resisted social and ethical issues at play in the nation.

EDITORIAL FREEDOM

Walker was getting restless with the constant efforts to restrict his extensive coverage of carrying out the mission of Jesus in the varying and often challenging American landscape.

Fundamentalism raised its ugly head among Southern Baptists in the late '70s. A strategic effort — that proved to be successful — was launched by fundamentalist powerbrokers to seize control of Southern Baptist Convention agencies.

With more knocks on his door and efforts to subdued editorial warnings from other denominational journalists, Walker dreamed of a truly independent, national publication to address cultural shifts that impact church and denominational life — and to responsibly report on and respond to the rising fundamentalism.

Word of his dream reached a handful of leaders also concerned with the threat to the SBC. They met Walker in Atlanta on the day after Thanksgiving in 1982.

Sharing Walker's dream was Nell, his beloved wife and mother of their four children. They had met during Walker's Army Air Corps assignment in Tyler, Texas, and married there in 1943. Nell died in 2008.

With a few promises and a lot of sacrifice on Walker and Nell's part, he left his denominational position at age 59 and the first issue of *SBC Today* (which evolved into *Baptists Today* and then *Nurturing Faith Journal*) rolled off the presses dated April 1983.

The new publication, he assured, would properly balance freedom and responsibility. In the inaugural editorial Walker noted, "Too often we have loved the Bible but hated its demands."

That first issue reported on a recent gathering of 33 women in Louisville, Ky., that led to the formation of what is now Baptist Women in Ministry.

Baptists Today / Nurturing Faith has received gifts

IN MEMORY OF WALKER KNIGHT

from

Kelly and Philip Belcher
William and Carole Jackson
William and Judy Neal
John and Teresa Pierce

SETTING THINGS RIGHT

As a young man, Walker heard a sermon on Jesus' beatitude: "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6).

The preacher for the conference in Ridgecrest, N.C., was C. Oscar Johnson, pastor of Third Baptist Church in St. Louis. He noted that the verse could also be translated: "Blessed are those who want to see things set right, for they will help accomplish it."

David Sapp, right, then pastor of First Baptist Church of Chamblee, Ga., served as the first Board chair. Others on the initial Board of Directors were Dallas M. Lee, Jack U. Harwell (then editor of *The Christian Index*), T. Melvin Williams (Oakhurst pastor), William Self, Charlene W. Shucker and Earl Davis. Editor Walker Knight (center) was designated as secretary-treasurer. Nell Knight (left) was a faithful volunteer.

The weapons of peace are love, joy, goodness, longsuffering.

In his memoir, Walker said of those words of Jesus: "At that time I had no idea this verse would characterize my life from that time on."

At the memorial service, Amy Greene — a journalist turned minister — said her mentor and friend held himself to a high standard, had a hunger for truth, and "would always ask what can we do to set things right and what are we doing about it."

Don Hammonds said his friend of 52 years "lived what he said and what he wrote." Dallas Lee, one of the journalists Walker recruited, called him "the real thing" with "the guts of the investigative reporter."

Lee said the world needs the wisdom, integrity and faith of those like Walker Knight.

Editor Walker Knight (far left, front row), his committed staff and eager volunteers proudly displayed the first issue when it came off the press marked "VOL. 1 NO. 1" and dated "April, 1983."

WAGING PEACE

In a poem called "The Peacemaker," Walker coined the phrase, "Peace like war is waged." That line ended up in President Jimmy Carter's remarks at the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty signing.

Years later, someone brought Walker a magnet from Israel emblazoned with the widely traveled phrase. Some of those words from Walker's mind and heart were echoed in his memory at his memorial service:

It is not just loving peace, wanting peace, sitting back
and waiting for peace to come…
Peace gathers its weapons and pierces the defense.
Peace, like war, is waged.
But Christ has turned it all around:
the weapons of peace are love, joy, goodness, longsuffering;
the arms of peace are justice, truth, patience, prayer;
the strategy of peace brings safety, welfare, happiness;
the forces of peace are the sons and daughters of God. NFJ

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The Judson-Rice Award was created in 2001 by Baptists Today *news journal (now* Nurturing Faith Journal*) to commemorate the great contributions of early Baptist leaders Adoniram Judson, Ann Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice, and to recognize current Baptist leaders who have shown significant leadership while maintaining the highest integrity.*

PREDICTIONS FOR THE 2020S

BY LARRY HOVIS

Road cycling is my hobby and my preferred method for maintaining physical fitness. One of the cycling blogs I read regularly contains an entry titled, "Predictions for the 2020s." It inspired me to reflect on my predictions for Christianity in America in the new decade.

Here are my ideas for 10 developments the next decade will bring for the congregationally-centered, denominationally-oriented Christian communities I know best.

Larger and Smaller Congregations

For two decades or more we have seen the rise of the very large church, or "megachurch." In many ways, megachurches have become their own denominations and have greatly influenced our religious landscape. That trend will continue, though the oldest of them will begin to face the same challenges as older, more established congregations.

Also, the development of very small Christian communities, or "micro-churches," will accelerate. Just as people are less likely to join social groups (e.g. civic clubs), more Christians will seek spiritual community in very small groups that meet in homes or other small spaces.

New Expressions of Church

Not limited to micro-churches, new expressions of church will become mainstream in the 2020s. Falling broadly under the umbrella of the "Fresh Expressions" movement that began in the Church of England, and now has spread to the U.S., these faith communities will become a more significant part of American Christianity, along with traditional churches.

Right-sizing Facilities

The 2020s will bring a wave of older, established churches that reduce the footprint of their current physical plants. They will follow the example of First Baptist in Winston-Salem, N.C., and others, and remove facilities that are too expensive to maintain as they discover ways to effectively minister to their congregations and communities with less square footage.

Diversifying Income Streams: Part 1 (Congregations)

Most churches have historically been financed through the offering plate, along with the occasional bake sale or pancake supper. In the coming years, congregations will discover additional streams of income such as rent, usage fees and partnerships with local organizations (e.g. businesses, nonprofits, schools).

Diversifying Income Streams: Part 2 (Ministers)

Most ministers (since the mid-20th century, in the kinds of churches I am most familiar with) have drawn their income exclusively from their churches as full-time employees. Increasingly more ministers will become bi-professional or seek other additional ways to support their families.

Theological Education

Most ministers (see caveat above) have pursued college degrees followed by seminary education, most often the Master of Divinity degree. It is becoming increasingly difficult for aspiring pastors to leave home for three or four years to pursue a degree for which they incur large amounts of debt to accept a position that will pay a small salary with no health insurance.

New approaches to theological education are emerging that will become more widely accepted in the coming decade. The most effective theological schools will adapt both the curriculum and delivery system to address these changing needs. Those that don't, except for those with the most generous endowments, will die.

Narrowing Focus: Part 1 (Congregations)

The mid-20th century witnessed the rise of the "program church," which provided "something for everyone," in the form of multiple programs, several days per week, on the church campus. That model is neither asked for by the culture nor sustainable for the congregation.

Churches that thrive in the next decade will discover that "less is more." They will choose one form of worship they can offer with excellence, and they will reduce the number of programs to the few that are relevant and sustainable.

Narrowing Focus: Part 2 (Denominations)

Like congregations, denominational organizations are no longer able to provide every service a constituent congregation needs. Those that survive will do fewer things but do them better than they have done them before, and better (or at least as well) as the "para-denominational" mission and church resource organizations that have become their competition.

Pastoral Care for Dying Congregations

Even with these shifts, many congregations will close their doors during the next decade. They will need pastoral care and administrative guidance from their denominational communities. Death does not mean defeat. None of the churches named in the New Testament are in existence today. Like all living things, churches have a life cycle. The most mature and healthy churches will die a good death and leave a lasting legacy for others to build upon.

The Church Lives On!

Even though some churches will die and those that survive will need to change, the Church (big "C") will live on. The churches of the New Testament may not be around anymore, but their offspring are. God's mission, through an identified people and structure, will flourish long after the next decade is over. NFJ

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

MILESTONE MET

Nurturing Faith publishes 100th book and keeps rolling

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Three-time author Jon R. Roebuck's latest book, *Creating Space*, marked a milestone for Nurturing Faith. It was the publishing ministry's 100th title.

It all began as a casual conversation with veteran publisher David Cassady, founder of the creative services firm Faithlab, about the changing technology of publishing and the continuing demand for both print and digital books.

That 2011 conversation led to a new collaboration and the formation of Nurturing Faith, Inc. as the book-publishing arm of the non-profit Baptists Today, Inc.

"Book publishing seemed a natural fit for Nurturing Faith, given that one of its gifts is giving exposure to other voices, enriching our conversations around faith and ministry," said Cassady, now-president of Baptist Seminary of Kentucky. "The way Faithlab and Nurturing Faith work together can also be seen as a model for how organizations can choose to collaborate rather than compete."

The first Nurturing Faith titles emerged in 2012, and the publishing venture has never slowed.

Lynelle Mason's moving personal story titled *Tarnished Haloes, Open Hearts* was among the first books to emerge. She is Nurturing Faith's most prolific author.

"I will soon publish my seventh book with Nurturing Faith and am delighted to say I find their entire staff to be informed, reliable and supportive," she said. "In fact, they have become part of my extended family — beloved and treasured."

Roebuck, a former Nashville pastor and current executive director of the Rev. Charlie Curb Center for Faith Leadership at Belmont University, said his first publishing experience with Nurturing Faith was so positive that he returned with even greater trust.

"One thing I like about Nurturing Faith is I know you all want the book to be a quality product as much as I do," said Roebuck.

Carol Boseman Taylor of Rocky Mount, N.C., penned a devotional book titled, *I Promise. Rejoice!* Her daughter went searching for a publisher.

"When she decided to submit it to Nurturing Faith, the magic began to happen," said Taylor, who considered her experience so positive that she gives the proceeds from the sales to the publishing ministry.

Some Nurturing Faith publishing efforts are collaborations with other organizations, including: Center for Healthy Churches, The Baugh Center for Baptist Leadership at Mercer University, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Global, CBF of North Carolina, Baptist Joint Committee, The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies, Pinnacle Leadership Associates, and Alliance of Baptists.

"The Alliance of Baptists is pleased to have found a publishing partner in Nurturing Faith, and we join them in celebrating the milestone of having published 100 books," said Paula Dempsey, the Alliance's director of partnership relations.

"Our collaborations on *Reimagining Zion* and *Believe the Women* have allowed the Alliance to help tell our story and enable our authors to find an outlet for their work," said Dempsey. "We look forward to working with Nurturing Faith on more projects to facilitate our individual missions and further this important partnership."

Jim Dant's small but bestselling book, *This I Know: A Simple Biblical Defense for LGBTQ Christians*, continues to draw interest across denominational lines as a valued resource.

"It would be an understatement to say I'm proud to have one of my books among the first 100 to be published by Nurturing Faith," said Dant, pastor of First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C.

The book's wide appeal has led to his receiving correspondence from readers on every continent but Antarctica, and participating in book signings and other personal appearances in Georgia, the Carolinas, Florida, Arizona, California, Washington, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas and Washington, D.C.

"Honestly, the publication and promotion of this book have been — and continue to be — a great ride," he said. "None of this would have been possible without the attentive collaboration offered by Nurturing Faith Publishing."

Dant praised Nurturing Faith for its involvement with his book from the earliest editorial work to ongoing assistance with marketing to timely fulfillment of orders to presence at many related events.

Additionally, beautiful hardcover commemorative books have been published as church or university histories along with other special projects. For more about book publishing, book purchasing and the broader publishing ministry of Nurturing Faith, visit nurturingfaith.net. NFJ

God's call for creation caretakers

By Mitch Randall

We witnessed with horror as fire took hold of Australia. Quickly, deadly flames swept over 14 million acres across the country's six states. Just one week into a new year, approximately 480 million animals had already perished thus far, with the country's koala population reduced by one-third.

More tragically, 24 persons died in the same brief time frame due to the fires.

Australian volunteer firefighter, Jennifer Mills, provided both comforting and scathing words in a *Washington Post* opinion column on January 5: "Australians see ourselves as tough characters who take care of each other in a crisis."

However, she noted her nation's policies that ignore climate change and benefit the fossil fuel industry: "Australia is not just dragging its feet on climate change; it is actively making things worse."

Mills added that while Australia produces only 1.3 percent of the world's greenhouse emissions, her beloved country is the world's largest coal exporter. She concluded: "No longer can the climate emergency be posed as a problem of the future. We are moving beyond denial and into a hazy twilight of blame."

For Australians, and much of the world, climate change is becoming more and more problematic. From escalating fires to the increases of storm-intensity, global populations are experiencing changes in the climate and weather that are both devastating and deadly.

While wealthier nations are not immune to the results of climate change, they do not experience the immediate suffering that climate change brings. The poor, however, experience the results of climate change immediately and crushingly.

Heifer International cites that developing countries around the world are at risk of losing ground as a direct result of climate change. In 2018, more than 18 million people were forced out of their homes — with many of these displacements directly due to increased natural disasters.

As compassionate Christians, we must hear the call of God to be creation caretakers. Now more than before, Christians need to fully understand what the Bible says about our role as residents in God's creation and to accept responsibility for ecological justice.

Some Christians believe we are to rule over the world, based on Genesis 26. The Hebrew word used in this passage is *radah*, which means to rule over or to have dominion.

However, to rule over or to have dominion should never mean to rape. Ruling over has a deep responsibility for care and stewardship.

In the second creation narrative of Genesis (2:4-25), we witness the Creator placing humanity into a garden with instructions for "cultivating" and "keeping" it (2:15). The Hebrew word translated "to cultivate" is *'abad*, which literally means to work or to serve.

These two accounts and concepts complement each other, as humans are called to cultivate and care for the world as its ruler and steward. We are not given the right to do with it what we want, pilfering its resources for our gain without any regard for consequences.

Like us, the earth was created by God and deemed good. Therefore, it too is a living organism.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann argued that we live in a "community of creation" that accepts our role within God's creation as one of caretaker within a symbiotic ecological environment. In other words, we are created and living beings who exist within another created and living being.

Because of this reality, how we treat the world, as a created and living being, matters a great deal. If any created and living being feels threatened, a natural response will be to defend itself from harm.

Moltmann raises the possibility that climate change is the world's defense mechanism, reacting to a harmful invader — humanity.

If we take the Bible seriously and our role as caretaker instituted by God, then we must make choices and support laws that protect God's creation from further harm.

In doing so, we might reverse damage already caused. The hour is late, however, and the fires continue to rage.

Let us hear and pray the words of the prophet Isaiah: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth" (65:17).

The earth can be redeemed through the repentance of sin, the acceptance of our role as caretakers, and a new worldview that we must learn to live harmoniously with God's creation. If can accept these truths, then a new earth is possible. NFJ

—Mitch Randall is executive director of EthicsDaily.

Redemptive Reconciler

John Perkins on race, relationship and finding 'the language of love'

BY ADELLE M. BANKS
Religion News Service

KELLER, Texas— When longtime reconciliation advocate John Perkins took the stage at a conference of multiethnic church leaders last year, they gave him a standing ovation and kept standing as he counseled them.

"You will find me in the so-called white church; you will find me in the so-called black church. But I'm there to be redemptive," he told them. "It's intentional, being a reconciler."

At almost 90, Perkins, a civil rights activist, advocate for the poor, and worker for inclusivity in evangelical churches, told hundreds of people attending a Mosaix conference in November 2019 that he's "almost finished" with his work but there is more ahead for them.

"I want to be encouraging to this generation: This generation, don't give up, don't give up," he urged. "Let's love one another."

In an interview the day before his brief address to the conference, Perkins said he's planning the final book in a trilogy that will be the "centerpieces of my theology."

The first, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love,* has been followed by the second, *He Calls Me Friend: The Healing Power of Friendship in a Lonely World.*

He talked to Religion News Service about the importance of friendship, overcoming hate with love and his hopes about heaven. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

"You will find me in the so-called white church; you will find me in the so-called black church. But I'm there to be redemptive."

You are a veteran in the realm of race relations in church and society. What concerns you most about the current state of those relations?

I don't think we're developing authentic friendship. Our discipleship is not going there. I think our racial reconciliation continues to antagonize each other.

I don't meet many white folk who want to be a racist and we're calling them a racist. I don't think that's affirming their dignity. I don't think that's receiving them.

I don't meet many black folk who want to be called a n____ again. That's not affirming our dignity. So we haven't found a language of accepting each other.

We don't have the language for the conversation. Even if we have the conversation, our language itself is already bad.

Integration and racial reconciliation is that space between when the first black moves in and the last white moves out. Now the whites are moving back and the blacks say, "We don't want you in here with us and we want to stay like we were. Y'all taking our land."

We haven't decided about getting together and loving each other. The church hasn't made that decision.

In speaking to people attending Mosaix, a multiethnic church conference filled with people who are from the generations that follow yours, what advice do you have for clergy seeking to create or maintain churches that are inclusive of a variety of ethnic and racial groups?

We're trying to be a prototype. We're trying to find the model that can reflect that dignity within humanity. We don't quite have it, and if we have it, we haven't found the peace that surpasses all understanding.

We haven't found that peace. We've still got too much hate in there. Hate is still winning and hate is of the devil and love is of God. So we got to find that language of love. We're trying to be intentional. We want that to happen. We ain't there.

Your mother died in poverty when you were still an infant, your brother was killed by a police officer, and you were jailed and beaten as you fought for civil rights. How did you move from what could have been a life of anger and hate to one that has focused so much on faith and love?

I didn't find that liberation until I came to know Jesus Christ, until I realized that Christ had died for me and that God loved the little children, all the children of the world — red, brown and yellow, black and white — they're all precious in his sight.

I knew that before I was beaten in a jail but when I was beaten in the jail, I think something happened out of that beating that gave me determination to do this. I think after coming out of that jail, I found authentic love from blacks. I found authentic love from whites.

I think blacks thought I wasn't just a do-gooder, a token black, that I wanted to live for them. I think white folk came and washed my wounds. I think real reconciliation is washing each other's wounds.

In your new book, *He Calls Me Friend*, you say that friendship can help people overcome what you call "the sin sickness of ethnic hatred and prejudice." Can you briefly explain what you mean by that?

I mean that friendship is the outliving of the good Samaritan story that said, you can get into the kingdom of you can be like that good Samaritan. That's an oxymoron. That's a complete change of behavior.

Those Jews — and they were the religious Jews — they left that Jew there. This mixed-bred guy, this guy who saw beyond racism and color, he saw there was a human being and he affirmed, he invested in him and he invested in his future and he said, I'll invest some more if I come back.

He became a friend, and Jesus said, go and do likewise. He called us to be friends. I'm changing my name. I'm telling you all to call me friend. My name is friend.

You and your wife of almost 70 years founded what is now called the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation in Jackson, Miss., in 1983. What was the goal?

The goal was to create (Christian Community Development Association) and to plant within it the biblical mandate. I would come every time we would meet in the morning and anchor people in the Word of God.

This is our guidebook. This is our blueprint. And where I would take them would be into the incarnation, looking at the first purpose for which God came: They shall call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sin.

They got a housing problem but they need to be saved too. Do you wait 'til they get saved to do that? No. If they're poor, if they're hungry, feed them.

If they're naked, clothe them. If they don't have shelter, bring them to your house. You don't wait until they're saved to do that. Doing that might show somebody else our good work and (they may) say I want to be a part of that group.

You are turning 90 in 2020. It doesn't appear, though, that you've really retired. What are your goals at this stage?

To finish my manifesto and I want to write one more book. I want to put these three together: *One Blood, He Called Me Friend* and the thought is why did James say count it all joy when you fall into suffering?

I want to learn more about the vicariousness of suffering and the value of suffering, so I can get ready and get the people ready to die, to welcome his return, but also welcome death if it's for a noble cause.

You mentioned in your new book that you yearn for heaven. How does that desire relate to your concept of friendship?

I think if we're going to join our friends forever, we will never be separated again. I had a little theological trouble with it because (Jesus) said somebody in heaven, he won't be married or given in marriage because I wanted to be in heaven, around the throne, I want to have Vera Mae's hand.

So how do you deal with that?

Heaven will be so much greater. NFJ

"BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES"

CHC
Center For Healthy Churches
Cultivating Hope and Health In the Spirit of Christ

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

Resistance or resilience: A critical distinction

Two of the more important words for a congregation to ponder in the 2020s are **RESISTANT** and **RESILIENT**. The word that better describes your congregation (and you) may determine whether your congregation is viable in the next 10 years.

Observers of the church in America may differ on the specifics, but generally agree that a turning point of sustainability is coming for most congregations in the near future. Our dependence upon the financial support of aging members, our aging physical facilities, and the trends of church attendance in the population at large portend a looming crisis of viability.

If one excludes mega-churches and church plants, which have their own crises of sustainability to manage, the likelihood is that older, traditional congregations will face a window of viability that culminates in the 2020s with immense pressure to merge, close or radically alter congregational life.

At the risk of sounding alarmist, I believe wise leaders must take seriously the warning signs and respond proactively to this crisis.

Now back to the two words: Some congregations and leaders are **RESISTANT** to the reality of the day. Resistance takes many forms.

In some cases, it is passive and primarily marked by lethargy and loss of energy. We prefer to ignore the data and choose to continue our methods and practices.

Over time, however, such resistance to reality produces a church in which there is awareness that something is lacking and metrics are failing, but there is little energy or motivation for facing the facts.

In others, resistance is more visible and outspoken. Shifts in congregational life in the 21st century are cause for anger and frustration. Our first reaction is to find someone or something to blame. Much energy is given to condemning American culture, politics, denominational life, clergy, seminaries, etc.

Usually there is a call for a return to traditional methods and programs that were successful in prior eras. We often employ a "work harder at the tried and true" mindset. Sadly, the decline usually continues unabated.

Resistance to innovation and change marks many traditional congregations as we consider our future. Far too often we find ourselves resistant and unwilling to consider the fundamental shifts in thinking that must happen if we are to remain vibrant and alive. Without a deep awareness of the depth of the crisis, receptivity to a new way of being and doing church remains elusive.

If **RESISTANCE** is our primary reaction to the new realities, rather than receptivity to innovation and change, we face a very uncertain future. To be more direct: by the year 2030, if you continue to resist facing the facts and learning from them, your church will very likely be in a crisis of survivability.

The other key word to consider is **RESILIENT**. In the face of tremendous odds in a multitude of cultures and settings, the church of Jesus Christ has survived nearly 2,000 years. One can make a good case that God's people do some of their best work when the odds are longest.

There is no doubt the good news of Jesus Christ will survive and thrive. The question is whether our churches will also.

When compared to the plight of the church in other cultures, the challenges faced by American congregations pale in terms of persecution and hardship. Our challenges are more insidious than straightforward, more covert than overt, more internal than external.

The opposite of resiliency is inflexibility and rigidity. Our ability to be resilient and survive will be determined by how well we reconnect with our reason for being and a deeper understanding of the place of the gospel in our culture.

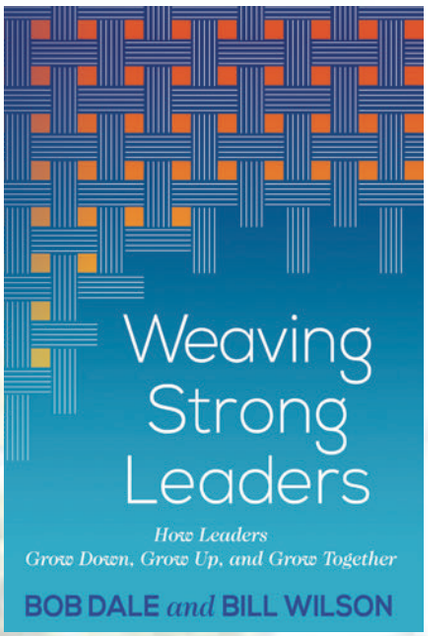
As we think about the future, resilient congregations will look to our past, not to replicate prior methods, but to reconnect with our spiritual DNA. We will look carefully at the present so that we can know our current setting and accurately assess where our methods and practices are succeeding and where they are failing.

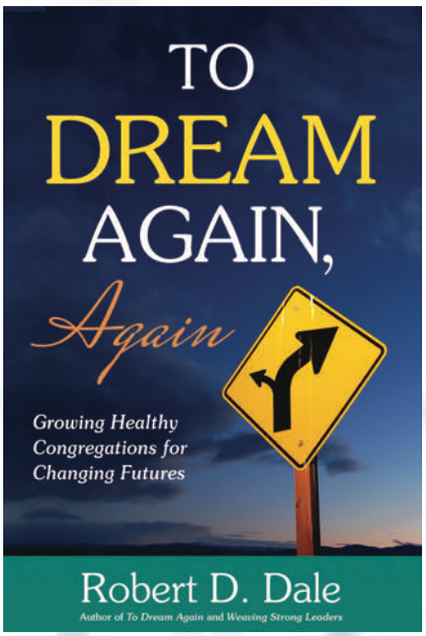
We will then look forward in hope, believing that God inspires imaginations and creativity in every generation to make the Truth relevant in our context. Our resiliency will be marked by fidelity to the gospel, optimism, hope, flexibility, innovation, creativity, clarity of mission/vision and an enduring receptivity to the Spirit's leading.

Perhaps we will find ourselves living a God-sized dream for the 2020s. Nothing is more vibrant and alive than that! NFJ

—Bill Wilson is the founding executive director of 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.

Shared mission

By John R. Franke

In my last column I suggested that the ultimate unity of the church is not to be found in agreement on matters related primarily to its teaching and practices, particularly since these are disputed, but rather in the living presence of Christ in its midst.

The reality of this presence is one of the promises Jesus makes to his followers at the end of Matthew's gospel after commissioning them to make disciples of the nations (Matt. 28:20b): "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

While this is the most basic element of Christian unity, another important aspect is shared mission.

Jesus sends his followers into the world to continue his mission after the pattern by which the Father sent him (John 20:21): "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'"

Followers of Jesus understand that the good news Jesus proclaimed is not a message simply for themselves, but rather a message and an approach to life to be shared and lived out among all the people of the world.

The essence of this mission is captured in the words of Jesus found in Luke's gospel at the beginning of his public ministry (Luke 4:18-19): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

While the means by which this mission has been communicated and performed have been much debated and embodied in different ways throughout the history of Christianity, the followers of Jesus are committed to the extension of this mission in the world and find solidarity with Jesus and with each other as they participate in it.

This shared commitment to mission accounts for the cross-cultural activity that has shaped the life of the Christian community through the centuries.

Jewish Christians took the gospel to Greek Gentiles. The classical Greek or Hellenistic culture in which these Gentile Christians lived shaped the conception of Christianity that became dominant in the Roman Empire.

With the collapse of the Roman world and its institutions and intellectual traditions, Christianity continued on in Ireland, whose monks evangelized Europe. In turn, the European evangelization of the world shaped the most recent phase of Christianity: the emergence of the world church.

While this history of mission and evangelization is characterized by failure and tragedy as well as the transmission of the gospel, it does point to the common theme of mission among Christian communities throughout history. These communities share an abiding sense that they exist not simply to serve their own ends but for a purpose in the world related to the calling and intention of the God made known in Jesus.

In addition, they share a remarkable continuity of consciousness with each other. Christian communities think of themselves as having some sort of solidarity with other such communities, even those different in time and place, despite the fact that they are often characterized by great differences with regard to their principle teachings, commitments and practices.

Missiologist Andrew Walls concludes that this missional solidarity is reflective of an essential continuity that exists among the diverse communities and traditions that make up the history of Christianity even as he acknowledges "that these continuities are cloaked with such heavy veils belonging to their environment that Christians of different times and places must often be unrecognizable to others, or indeed even to themselves, as manifestations of a single phenomenon."

He suggests that both the continuity and diversity of the church can be accounted for by the nature of the gospel itself and its affirmation of the principles of indigenization and transformation.

The indigenization principle is rooted in the core gospel affirmation that God comes to us where we are and accepts us as such through the work of Christ and not on the basis of what we have been, are, or are trying to become.

The transformation principle reminds us that while God meets us where we are and as we are, it is also true that God does not leave us where we are. The intention of the gospel is transformative change for participation in the mission of God in the world.

In the words of missiologists Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, the Christian community comes to unity "as it continues Jesus' mission of preaching, serving and witnessing to God's already-inaugurated yet still-to-be-consummated reign, growing and changing and being transformed in the process."NFJ

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

Doing good — for free

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

As a campus minister (my earlier vocation), I would often warn students that if they consider themselves "too busy" to do good at that stage in life it will be an even easier excuse when they have full-time jobs and families.

I was using that line once again during a Bible study luncheon in the mid-'80s to rally volunteers for some community mission project.

One wisecracking student (among many) responded in his usual loud voice: "You do good, but you get paid for it."

His critique stuck with me as I returned to my office. Earlier that morning I had dismissed an effort to get me involved in a local project.

A woman I did not know at the time, Chrys Street, had called to say she recently met Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller at a friend's house in the Georgia mountains. They discussed how Cobb County, Ga., did not have an affiliate — and probably should.

Our Kennesaw State-Southern Tech Baptist Student Union gang was quite involved with Habitat on a national level. I had taken groups of students to Americus, Ga., when homes were still being constructed near the organization's headquarters.

One labor-intensive spring break we poured the concrete slabs for seven homes in Charlotte, N.C., ahead of one of the earliest Jimmy Carter Work Weeks.

So, Millard suggested that Chrys get in touch with me.

However, I'd been less enthusiastic about her appeal than I should have been — prior to the student's scolding. So, I called Chrys back that afternoon to be more supportive, and soon we were meeting in the living room of the creatively designed home she occupied with her architect husband John.

Chrys knew local Episcopalians well, and I knew lots of Baptists. Together we knew those from other faith traditions. So, we compiled a list of people to invite to an initial gathering to gauge interest in forming Cobb County Habitat for Humanity.

The first two homes — built onsite at Marietta and South Cobb high schools and then moved — gave great visibility. I spoke to more churches and Kiwanis clubs than I can count.

I even addressed a motorcycle club that met for breakfast on Saturdays. Their arrival at the worksite was less than subtle.

Early on, we had about as many volunteers as nails at workdays.

Chrys and others continued to carry the load long after I moved from the area — and today the renamed Northwest Metro Habitat for Humanity continues to build much-needed homes across three Atlanta-area counties. The sweat and sacrifices (and credit) are all theirs.

But the lesson — even when reinforced by a wisecracking student — is for all of us: We're never too busy to do good — for free. NFJ

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

The gospel for short people

By Brett Younger

I had been at our church for two Sundays when I said, "The podium is tall and I'm not. Do we have other pulpits?"

The response was sarcastic: "It was good enough for Martin Luther King Jr. when he preached here. But if you want something better, we'll start looking immediately."

I later learned that our pulpit is five years old, so it was not in the sanctuary in 1963. I also wish I had been quick enough to point out that Dr. King was 5′7″— not embarrassingly tall.

The world keeps sending short people to the end of the line. Yogi Berra, who at 5′7″ should have known better, told his players to "Line up alphabetically by height."

We hope Randy Newman was being ironic when he sang, "Short people got no reason to live." Sometimes we feel like we are in way over our heads. Overhead compartments, for instance, are way over our heads.

We know the frustration of being trapped behind big hairdos. We prefer concerts where everyone sits. We show up early for the parade or miss most of it.

We get stuck in the middle backseat. Keep-away is a cruel game, as is basketball. Short people are even paid less.

Rodney Dangerfield said, "I feel sorry for short people. When it rains, they're the last to know."

We should not add "and a half" when someone asks our height, but we feel like we have drawn the short straw.

The world needs to be more short-sighted. Pundits make a big deal out of the height advantage in presidential contests. The taller candidate wins 58% of the time. In the last 100 years no president has been as short as I am.

The three presidents who have been impeached were Andrew Johnson (5′10″), Bill Clinton (6′2″), and Donald Trump (6′2″). None of our three shortest presidents — Martin Van Buren (5′6″), Benjamin Harrison (5′6″), and James Madison (5′4″) were impeached. And yet, Kamala Harris (5′2″) was out of the race before the first vote was cast.

The church participates in this prejudice against the vertically challenged. Pews should not be so tall. Everyone's feet should reach the floor. No child should be afraid of drowning in the baptistery.

The Bible is biased *in favor* of short people. When God chooses David to be the new king, God tells Samuel, "Do not look on the height of his stature. For the Lord does not see as mortals see" (1 Samuel 16).

David is chosen to replace King Saul, who was "more than a head taller than anyone else in all Israel" (1 Samuel 9) and a failure. When the appropriately sized David challenges nine-feet-tall Goliath, Goliath's story is severely shortened (1 Samuel 17).

Mary sings, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." This could be loosely paraphrased, "God has brought down the tall, and lifted up the short" (Luke 1).

Jesus blesses the poor, hungry and those who weep (Luke 6). Archaeologists have yet to find it, but somewhere, hidden on a top shelf, is the ancient manuscript *Codex Shorticanus*, which includes this Beatitude: "Blessed are the short in stature, for they will be down to earth."

In Luke 19: "A man was there named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature." Some assume that the last "he" is Zacchaeus, but in the Greek it is just as likely that the "he" who was "short in stature" is Jesus. Based on average heights in the first century, scientists estimate that Jesus was 5′1″–5′5″.

God loves short people. Somewhere in the Bible it should say, "A person's a person no matter how small." Tall people can be caring, but it is harder for them.

Life is good for fun-sized people. Short people have a reduced risk for cancer, blood clots, and heat exhaustion. Short people are less likely to get a divorce. Short people live longer.

We maintain a great perspective because we are always looking up. We excel at gymnastics, sit in the front row in group photos, and enjoy more legroom.

Life is short — and so are we. Thank God for our lack of loftiness. Pray for tall people that they will feel God's love, too. NFJ

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

Nurturing FAITH™ BIBLE STUDIES

LESSONS FOR
MARCH / APRIL 2020

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

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

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

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

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

March 1, 2020

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

A New Choice

Was it really Eve's fault? Would sin never have entered the world if Eve had not chosen to eat from a forbidden tree and share it with Adam? Would none of their descendants have ever chosen to do wrong?

No, we can't blame our own sin on the story found in Genesis 3: The author responsible for the story was making the point that humans have sinned from the beginning. Whether we regard Adam and Eve as historical characters or literary metaphors, the lesson is the same: humans have always been tempted to step out of bounds, and are always prone to do so.

A curious conversation (vv. 1-6)

The book of Genesis begins with two starkly different but equally inspiring creation stories (Gen. 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-25), both of which describe God's creation of the earth and of humankind as being good in every way.

Both accounts portray humans as the crown of God's creation, but the following story suggests that they constitute a thorny crown.

Many people call Genesis 3 "the story of the fall," but the word "fall" does not appear in the story, nor does

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> *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:6)*

"sin." The notion of a "fall" from original perfection is more at home in Greek philosophy than the Hebrew Bible.

Despite the prominence of this story in much Christian teaching, the remainder of the Old Testament never refers to it, suggesting that it was hardly known among most Hebrews. The prophets often criticized Israel's worship of other gods or failure to keep the law, but they never mentioned Adam and Eve or the serpent's temptation: they believed every person is responsible for his or her own sin.

The story is a narrative continuation of Genesis 2, a charming account of creation with special attention paid to the creation of a man and a woman whose names are symbolic of humankind. The Hebrew word "*'adam*" is a generic term meaning "man" or "humankind," and the word is used with the direct article ("the man") until Gen. 4:25, the first time *adam* appears as a name. The name we render as "Eve" is *havah*, which means "life" or "living one," but she is not given the name until Gen. 3:20. Prior to that she is called "the woman" (*ha-'isshah*).

God remains present in ch. 3, still portrayed in anthropomorphic terms as one who appears in human form, walking in the garden and talking to the man and woman.

The fourth character in the story is a talking serpent. Despite our common notions of the serpent as being sinister, evil, or identified with the devil (all later interpretations), the story does not portray it that way. Indeed, the serpent is not only a part of God's good creation, but the cleverest of all the wild creatures "that the LORD God had made" (3:1). The serpent is not described as evil, but as crafty and mysterious.

Tradition leads us to think of the serpent as a tempter who deceived the woman in hopes of leading her astray. In the story, however, the serpent functions as a prompt for Eve to have thoughts of her own, and those thoughts led her to want more than God had allowed, to the point of questioning God's instructions.

The serpent's questions led the woman to realize that God was holding something back from them by forbidding them to eat from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," in the center of the garden.

Would she really die if she ate of the fruit? The woman told the serpent that God had promised death if they ate from the tree, or even touched it, though the command in 2:17 says nothing about touching. The threat of death suggests a logical inconsistency: in the freshness of the garden, the woman would have never encountered death. That does not concern the narrator, who is writing from the perspective of people who do know death.

The woman was curious: she wanted to understand more of life and of what God knew (vv. 4-5). "Good and evil" should probably be understood as a merism, a literary device that names two opposite poles but includes every-

thing between. Thus, "the knowledge of good and evil" could imply far more than discerning right from wrong.

Was it worth the risk?

As the story is told, the woman would have known no more of evil than of death, but she wanted to know more of what God knew.

Would we have been any less curious?

As she thought about it, the text says the woman saw that the tree was "good for food, a delight to the eyes, and to be desired for making one wise." Everything about the mysterious fruit was appealing, so she chose to take the risk and eat. The man, who had been with her all along, appears to have given the matter little thought. When she offered the fruit to him, the text says only: "he ate."

A surprising answer (vv. 7-13)

After risking that first taste, according to the story, the pair did gain new knowledge, but it came in the form of shame, experienced as a perception that their nakedness was no longer acceptable. Garments made from leaves might have covered their genitals, but could not hide their actions (v. 7).

Some scholars see this account as a "coming of age" story in which the man and woman lose their innocence, clothe themselves, and discover what it means to be really human. The concern about nakedness has clear sexual overtones, but no sexual activity is mentioned until after they were expelled from the garden (4:1).

The man and woman were still trying to hide when they heard Yahweh walking in the garden that evening, asking "Where are you?" (vv. 8-9). The couple knew they had done wrong, but neither wanted to accept responsibility. When God confronted them, the man blamed both the woman and God: "The *woman*, whom *you* gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (v. 12).

The woman also sought to pass the buck: "The *serpent* tricked me, and I ate" (v. 13b). Only the serpent had no one to blame, or as it is sometimes said, didn't have a leg to stand on.

The story is testimony that humans have sinned from the beginning and have always tried to hide their sin or deny responsibility for it. Paul's later implication that "the one man" Adam was responsible for human sin (Rom. 5:12) sounds like a further attempt to shift the blame for our failures to someone else, but Paul also understood that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Does this sound familiar? Haven't we sought to deny our wrongdoing, blame it on others, or offer countless rationalizations? Don't we also know what it is like to feel shame and separation when confronted by our bad choices and actions?

The story is not all bad news, however. God did not leave the man and the woman in hiding, but pursued them with concern and gave them an opportunity to repent: *"Where are you?"*

A painful judgment (vv. 14-19)

Part of the storyteller's purpose is to offer a divine explanation for various aspects of life as it was experienced in the ancient world.

Why does a snake have no legs? Because God cursed it, saying "upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life" (v. 14).

Why are humans so inclined to fear snakes and desire to kill them? Because God said "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (v. 15).

Why is it that women must suffer so much in giving birth? For the Hebrews, it was because God said "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing, in pain you shall bring forth children" (v. 16a).

Why then would women allow themselves to get pregnant again and be dominated by men? Because God said "yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (v. 16b). The ancient writer understood that God created humans to live in joyful unity, but that ideal was corrupted. Men came to dominate women in society, even though it was unfair and painful for them.

But there were other consequences. Food would no longer be easy to come by, and the man would have to toil in hard soil while battling weeds and thorns to raise crops from the earth (vv. 17-18).

Moreover, humans would not live in the sacred garden forever, as the writer believed God intended. The decision to follow their way over God's way would lead to a hard life and a certain death: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (v. 19).

Things looked bad, but the narrator did not believe God had given up on humans. Acting with compassion in light of their shame, Yahweh made garments of skin for them (v. 21), presumably from a living animal. It's natural to assume this means that living blood was shed in response to human sin. It would not be the last time.

When we look at this story through a Jesus-centered lens, we are reminded that Christ offers forgiveness for our sins, but also calls us to obedience. Following Jesus is not a matter of avoiding forbidden information, but of gaining new knowledge as we learn to love God and to love others as God loves us. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

March 8, 2020

Genesis 12:1-4a

A New Start

Have you ever watched an episode of a TV series that included so much conflict or violence that you couldn't wait for it to end, hoping the next episode would bring resolution or happier days?

The story of God's call to Abraham is not unlike that, appearing like a bright light at the end of a long tunnel. The first 11 chapters of Genesis (often called the "Primeval History") begin with the marvelous story of creation, but quickly move to describe a downward spiral of human rebellion and divine cursing.

Adam and Eve followed their own wisdom, and the earth was cursed so that it would not produce as easily as before (Genesis 3). Farmer Cain killed his shepherd brother Abel and was cursed to become a homeless wanderer (Genesis 4). The world became so wicked that a grieving God sent a flood to cleanse it, but even faithful Noah's family soon fell into disharmony and cursing (Genesis 5–9). Genesis 10 claims that Noah's descendants obeyed God's command to spread throughout the earth, but Genesis 11 relates a separate story of how humans chose instead to concentrate their population and efforts in one place, building a monument to their pride (Genesis 11).

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> *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. (Gen. 12:2)*

They also fell under the curse, and a scrambling of languages forced them to scatter.

So it is that Genesis 1–11 describes humanity's beginnings as a whirlpool of sin and rebellion, spiraling down the drain of history with no hope in sight – until Abraham. With God's call to the future progenitor of Israel, the cycle of cursing gave way to the possibility of blessing.

A radical call (v. 1)

We are familiar with the idea that Abram grew up in "Ur of the Chaldees" before his father decided to move the family to Canaan, but stopped instead in the northern Mesopotamian city of Haran (11:31-32; see "The Hardest Question" online for more on the location of "Ur of the Chaldees").

Terah must have liked Haran, a large city by the Balik River (now in southern Turkey), and the family remained there until he died. After Terah's death, the Lord spoke to Abram and called him to renew the trek to Canaan, promising to bless his family in remarkable ways.

We may wonder how Abraham recognized the voice of Yahweh (the name for God used in this text) when he would have grown up worshipping other gods. The text assumes that God had no difficulty in communicating.

Note the progressive nature of the call account. God instructed Abram to leave his *country*, with all of its many deities and attendant cultural practices. Then, he was to leave his *kindred*, the large tribal unit to which his family belonged. Finally, God told Abram to leave his *father's house*, his own immediate family.

Thus, God called Abraham to leave behind all that was familiar to him – but didn't tell him where he was to go. There was just this: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house *to the land that I will show you*." The fact that Abram responded obediently to such an ambiguous call is testimony to tremendous trust. It is no wonder we, like the writer of Hebrews, look to Abram as a model of faith (Heb. 11:8-16).

Put yourself in Abraham's sandals. How do you think you would have responded to God's call? What would it take to convince you that it was really God?

Radical promises (v. 2)

God offered impressive promises in response to Abram's obedience. First was the promise to show Abram a new land. The promise implied continued protection and guidance along the way. Abram was assured that God would travel with him and show him where to go.

God also offered promises that were more explicit and remarkable in their scope. According to the story, God told a 75-year-old man with no children that "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (v. 2). The reader already knows that Abram's wife Sarai was barren

(11:30), so this seems to be an unlikely promise indeed. How could Abram become *a great nation* when his wife was unable to bear a single child?

God did not tell Abram *how* the promise would come to pass: that Abram trusted God while knowing so little about what God expected is a further testimony to his faith. God had promised both guidance and blessing, and that was enough.

The narrator says that Yahweh also promised to bless Abram with *a great name*. That may be a purposeful contrast to the preceding story, in which the builders of Babel set out to "make a name" for themselves (11:4). Despite their many resources, their prideful effort resulted in a scattering of the people and a loss of their name. Abram had little with which to build, but Yahweh promised to make for him a great name, and countless generations have looked up to "Father Abraham" as the progenitor of Israel and a model of faith.

A radical blessing (v. 3)

God's intention was not only to bless Abram, but also to make him a blessing to others (v. 2). The thought is expanded in v. 3: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Abram would become a channel of blessing to *all the families of the earth*. The blessing was not just for Abraham's descendants, but for all who might learn from or be inspired by them. The promise was not unconditional, but rife with potential. Those who recognized Abram as the servant of God and the source of blessing could experience the blessing of knowing God, too. In contrast, those who opposed Abram were also opposing the work of God, and they would experience the consequences that accompany such rebellion.

Some modern versions translate the last phrase of v. 3 as "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (RSV), meaning that his name would be used in blessings. This is possible because the *niphal* form of the verb can be translated either in a passive or reflexive sense as context demands. The NRSV translation (along with NET and NIV11) favors the interpretation that Abram would become a source of blessing to all persons.

The promised stream of blessing would become evident in many ways. The text makes it clear that Lot, Abraham's nephew, was richly blessed through their association. Laban (a descendant of those who remained in Haran) was later blessed through his affiliation with Jacob, Abraham's grandson. This blessing was not limited to other family members: the Egyptian official Potiphar prospered from his association with Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson. Prophetic hopes centered on a day when all nations would come to Jerusalem to seek God's wisdom and blessings (Isa. 2:2-4). The greatest blessing to the world, in time, was the birth of Jesus Christ, born as a descendant of Abraham.

Gerhard von Rad, a leading Old Testament scholar of the 20th century, described the resultant blessing in another way: "The promise given to Abraham has significance, however, far beyond Abraham and his seed. God now brings salvation and judgment into history, and man's judgment and salvation will be determined by the attitude he adopts toward the work which God intends to do in history" (*Genesis*, p. 160). In von Rad's view, the blessing is not so much through the promises to Abraham, but through the new channel of response to the God who promises.

The Apostle Paul later interpreted the life and work of Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to make Abraham a blessing to all people (Gal. 3:6-14). What are ways in which you have seen God continue to bless others through the heritage of Abraham today?

Radical obedience (vv. 4a)

Verse 4 begins a new section, but today's text includes the first half of it in order to indicate Abram's response. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him" (v. 4a).

Surely Abram must have had many questions, but the text says nothing about them. It tells us only "So Abram went …." The note that his nephew Lot traveled with him will become significant later on, as Lot plays a role in several stories that highlight Abram's character and faith.

What happens when we look at this text through the lens of Jesus' life and teachings? Through Christ, has God not also called us to follow him in lives of obedience and service? God did not tell Abraham in advance where he was going, but challenged him to go in trust "to the land that I will show you."

When Jesus called Peter and James and John, he didn't tell them where they were going, but said only "Follow me." When the spirit of Christ appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, he gave the crusading rabbi no hint of all the places he would go. When saints through the ages have heard and responded to God's call, they did so without knowing what lay ahead.

Have any of us been given a detailed map of where our life will lead when we responded to Christ's call to repentance and faith and following? No, but we can trust that when we choose to follow Jesus, we are not alone. The Spirit goes with us, leading us to places of blessing and growth. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

March 15, 2020

Psalm 95

A New Song

Many moons ago and two years into the pastorate of a mountain church in western North Carolina, I had a visit from a former deacon who had recently rotated off the active list. The elderly gentleman sat in a chair across from my desk, looked me in the eye, and said "Brother Tony, we both know there ain't no preachin' goin' on around here, and I think it's time for you to seek another place of service."

There was preaching going on every Sunday, but it wasn't the sort of preaching he admired. I didn't get hot under the collar, hold parishioners' feet to the fire, or use hell as a club.

I suspect my visitor would have enjoyed reading Psalm 95, however. The psalmist begins with a big bang of praise (vv. 1-7c), then shifts to a stern sermon condemning those who fail to follow God faithfully (vv. 7d-11).

We may not like being called to account and challenged to change, but sometimes that is precisely what we need.

The king of all gods (vv. 1-5)

Prefacing criticism with praise serves as a metaphorical counterpart to Mary Poppins' happy advice that "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."

> *For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. (Ps. 95:3)*

The psalm begins with three exhortations to "come" and worship (vv. 1, 2, 6). Though English translations obscure it, each call to "come" uses a different verb.

The first is an imperative of the verb *halak*, which can mean "to walk" (v. 1). The second is a form of *qadam*, meaning "to come before" or "to meet" (v. 2). The third "come" is an imperative form of the word *bō'*, which can mean "to go," "to come" or "to enter" (v. 6).

As arranged, the verbs suggest walking toward the sanctuary, coming into God's presence, and entering sacred space.

We can envision worshipers approaching the gates of the temple as a priest, temple singer, or other worship leader shouts "O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!" (NRSV).

The verbs suggest an exuberant, almost raucous service of singing and shouting praises to Yahweh, "the rock of our salvation." The image evokes more than a big stone. Mountains in the southern part of Israel are largely rock, and the word *tzur* usually refers to a large formation such as a prominent outcrop that might serve a defensive purpose.

The connection of "rock" and "deliverance" may recall Israel's covenant with God, made by the rocky slopes of Mt. Sinai, as well as God's provision of water from a rock during the wilderness wandering, which will be recalled later in the psalm. Rock formations also connote thoughts of stability, security, or protection.

From a procession marked by loud and joyful singing, worshipers are called to "come into his presence with thanksgiving" and "make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise" (v. 2).

Why should one offer such ebullient praise? The psalmist tells us why: "For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods" (v. 3). God is large and in charge, the psalmist insists, the king of all other would-be gods.

It is Yahweh who's "got the whole world in his hands," in the words of a popular song from years ago. God not only holds the earth, from its deepest recesses to its loftiest heights, but also is responsible for having created it to begin with, from expansive seas to fertile lands (vv. 4-5).

The shepherd of all people (vv. 6-7c)

A God who can create and sustain the earth that nurtures its inhabitants is surely worthy of praise, but there is more to be said: God not only made the earth, but the people who dwell on it. More pointedly, God had called out the people of Israel for a special purpose.

Thus vv. 6-7c offer the third invitation to "come," calling participants to "worship and bow down" before God: "let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!" (v. 6).

The word translated as "bow down" (NRSV) actually means to prostrate oneself. The setting calls for worshipers to fall face down before God, then shift to a kneeling position

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from which they would attend to the next stage of worship.

Modern believers who are inclined to complain about uncomfortable church pews would do well to consider what worship might be like if the sanctuary held no pews, and they were expected to line up and lie prostrate on the floor before rising to their knees for the next element of the service – a practice common in mosques, but rare in churches.

With v. 7, the imagery shifts to a more personal metaphor. Thinking of God as creator of all things should incite praise and worship, but we can also think of God as a shepherd who cares for the flock.

"We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" brings God's care full circle: as "the depths of the earth" are in God's hand (v. 4), so are God's people, like sheep in the hands of a capable shepherd.

The trouble of all rebels (vv. 7d-11)

With the last line of v. 7, cozy thoughts of God as a loving shepherd disappear, and worshipers suddenly find themselves on the defensive, as if the shepherd has launched into a heated sermon.

If we imagine that this psalm was used as the liturgy for a worship service, we might visualize a prophet or priest stepping forward to shift the focus of the service. Abruptly, the threefold call to come and worship gives way to a sharp plea: "O that today you would listen to his voice!" (NRSV).

In Hebrew, to truly listen to God's voice is to obey. Thus, the NET translates it "Today, if only you would obey him!"

The preacher contrasts his plea for proper worship and obedience with Israel's history of rebellion, giving special attention to the wilderness stories of thirst and complaint (Exod. 17:1-7, Num. 20:1-13). In both cases, a place was given the nickname "Meribah," which means "contention" or "controversy." In Exod. 17:7 the name "Massah," meaning "testing," was also added.

The notion of "testing" does not suggest a formal challenge, like Gideon's fleece (Judg. 6:36-40), in which the people set conditions for God to prove something. Rather, when adversity arose, the people grumbled that Moses had misled them and God had not taken proper care of them. Their constant caviling tested even God's patience.

We know what it is like to have balky children or obstreperous co-workers stretch our tolerance to the limit. If we're honest, we'll confess that we also, like Israel, have relied too much on divine indulgence and tried God's patience through the years.

We can be grateful for the grace of God we've come to know in Christ. The psalmist, living within a covenant-based understanding of God's relationship with Israel, saw only harsh judgment in store for the hard-hearted.

Recalling Israel's persistent rebellion in the wilderness, the psalmist portrayed God as declaring that "For forty years I loathed that generation" because of their straying hearts and stubborn rejection of God's teaching (v. 10a).

"Loathed" is a hard word, one we don't like to associate with God's character. We'd rather speak of a loving God than a loathing one. The term does not suggest hatred of the people, however, but revulsion toward their actions. God did not hate the Israelites, but was repulsed by their headstrong hearts and ungrateful attitudes. Thus, the NET translates "I was continually disgusted with that generation."

"They do not regard my ways" (NRSV) could be translated more literally as, "they do not know my ways" (v. 10b). Presumably, one who knows God's ways should follow them: the word "know" carries the connotation of personal experience. The charge that "they do not know my ways" is equivalent to "they do not obey my commands" (NET).

God's response to the people's stubborn behavior in v. 11 echoes Moses' sermon in Deut. 1:22-37, where he recalled how the people had claimed that God hated them and refused to trust God for victory in the Promised Land. As a result, Moses declared that God "was wrathful and swore: 'Not one of these – not one of this evil generation – shall see the good land that I swore to give to your ancestors'" (Deut. 11:34-35).

By the time Psalm 95 was written, the promised entry into the Promised Land had grown into an expectation of security and "rest" in Israel (e.g. 2 Sam. 7:10b-11 and 1 Chron. 23:25). As a result, the psalmist's loose quotation declares "Therefore in my anger I swore, 'They shall not enter my rest'" (v. 11).

What does this psalm suggest to Christian readers? Few of us expect or hope to live in the territory once promised to the Israelites, but we do long for peace in the present and ease in eternity – as we say in obituary language, "to enter into rest."

An anonymous New Testament writer drew heavily on this text in Hebrews 3–4, urging believers not to harden their hearts as Israel did, but to hear God's voice and follow God's way so they might enter God's "Sabbath rest" – and to do it "today" (see especially Heb. 4:1-10).

If we are to see the world and our responsibilities as Jesus does, we also must listen for God's voice and respond with obedience. That message will preach: How will we respond? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

March 22, 2020

1 Samuel 16:1-13

A New King

Every four years, Americans go through a long process of choosing a president. Through a series of primaries, we narrow hopeful candidates down to one representative from each party on the ballot, all of whom claim to have the best abilities for leading the nation. Then, we vote.

Imagine that you alone were given the task of choosing the best president from a small field of contenders. What criteria would you use? Appearance? Experience?Ideology?Trustworthiness? Speaking ability?

In our text for today, the prophet/priest Samuel was sent by God to choose a king from among the sons of a rancher near Bethlehem whose name was Jesse. How did he do it?

An unwelcome mission (vv. 1-5)

It was not a job that Samuel asked for. He hadn't been happy when the elders of Israel had asked him to designate a king (1 Samuel 8). He had chosen Saul, a tall and promising Benjaminite (1 Samuel 9–11), but had never been pleased with Saul's performance. Twice Samuel told Saul that God had rejected him and would choose someone more suitable (1 Sam. 13:14, 15:26-28).

After Saul failed to wipe out a particular enemy as Samuel believed

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> *But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7)*

God had wanted him to do, the old prophet stalked away under a dark cloud of disappointment and retired to his home in Ramah. That's where God revealed his new mission: Samuel was to stop whining about Saul's failures and choose a new king from among the sons of Jesse (v. 1).

Samuel objected, fearing that Saul might hear of it and have him killed as a potential subversive. God offered an appropriate excuse, telling Samuel to take a heifer with him and make it known that God had sent him to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice.

Even the paranoid Saul could not argue with Samuel's sacred errand – so long as he didn't find out the true purpose beyond the sacrifice (v. 2).

Surely Samuel had more questions, but Yahweh assured him that "I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you" (v. 3).

When Samuel arrived, he was met by an "unwelcome committee" of town elders who questioned his motives. Bethlehem was in the southern part of the kingdom, where Saul was less popular. They were suspicious of Samuel's motives. He responded that he had come to offer a sacrifice and invited the elders to sanctify themselves and meet him later for the sacrifice. Jesse was among those invited (vv. 4-5).

A surprising audition (vv. 6-10)

Whether the others chose not to attend or whether the narrator simply dropped them into the background, only Jesse and his sons appeared to be present for the sacrifice.

Samuel wasted no time in asking Jesse to line up his sons. When Eliab, the oldest, stepped forward, he must have been an attractive man who made a strong impression on Samuel, who thought "Surely the LORD's anointed is before the LORD" (v. 6).

For once in his life, Samuel learned that he was wrong. We don't know how God spoke to Samuel, but the narrator says that Yahweh told him "Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (v. 7).

Neither looks nor age and experience were enough, Samuel learned: God had other standards. "The LORD looks on the heart."

Samuel turned to the next son, Abinadab, then to Shammah, then to the next, and the next. Each time – seven times in all – God told Samuel that this son was not the one (vv. 8-10). Seven was often considered a number of completeness – surely one of them should be chosen, but all were rejected.

An unexpected star (vv. 11-13)

Samuel was confused. Imagine him ticking off a mental list of God's instructions: "Go to Bethlehem … take a heifer for sacrifice … invite Jesse to attend … I will show you which of his

sons to anoint." Samuel knew he had followed the instructions, but God had not confirmed any of the candidates before him.

Finally, like the old TV detective Columbo in his wrinkled raincoat, Samuel had an idea. He asked, "Are all of your sons here?"

Jesse admitted that there was one more. He had not brought his youngest son because he assumed he would not to be chosen – and somebody had to watch the sheep while the rest of them attended the sacrifice.

Samuel was not happy. "Send for him!" he snapped. "We will not sit down until he comes here" (v. 11).

David could have been miles away with his wandering flocks, and it may have taken quite some time to fetch him. The reader suspects that David must be the chosen one, even though he was obviously young and probably ugly, since the narrator had gone to such lengths to say that appearances don't matter.

But when David arrived, the storyteller surprises us with unabashed adulation for the young man who would become king. He was ruddy, the author tells us, which probably means that he had fairer skin than most, so one could see color in his cheeks. He had beautiful eyes, we are told – though some argue for the translation "he was beautiful to the eyes."

More importantly, there was something special *inside* of David that only God could see, and so Yahweh poked Samuel in the heart: "This is the one: arise and anoint him!" (v. 12).

Samuel drew out his polished ram's horn filled with spiced olive oil and poured it over David's head, and as the anointing oil brought a shine to David's face, the Spirit of God was bringing a glow to his heart. "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David," the narrator says, "from that day forward" (v. 13).

Why was David the one? Back in chapter 13, Samuel told Saul that God planned to replace him with a man "after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). David must have fit the bill. In the New Testament book of Acts, Paul pointed to David as a man after God's heart who would carry out God's work (Acts 13:22).

What was it about David's heart?

Have you ever wondered what it was that made David a man after God's own heart? The narrator doesn't say. Was it because he had a loving or compassionate heart? A loyal heart? A joyful heart? David may have had those characteristics, but surely others did, too.

What was it about David, at least during the years of his ascendancy, that set him apart as a person after God's own heart?

We could point to a variety of things, but I believe two primary characteristics that set David apart were his spirit of openness and his attitude of trustfulness.

The narrator's account suggests that David's heart was wide open to adventure, to creativity, and to allowing God to work through him. He didn't have the closed heart of someone who thinks they have everything figured out.

David's heart was open to the future, open to new possibilities, open to mystery, and therefore open to the Spirit of God. A part of being open is a willingness to listen, and apparently David knew how to listen. The several stories in which David is said to "inquire of God" suggest that David remained constantly open to what God might be saying in a variety of ways. [See "The Hardest Question" online for more on this.]

And, as David remained receptive to God's leadership, he also trusted that God would empower him to do whatever he was called to do. He once claimed that God had enabled him to protect the sheep by slaying lions and bears with his bare hands. Later he stepped forward to confront Goliath, apparently the only one who really believed God was alive and well and willing to help the faithful.

In David's career, at least through 2 Samuel 10, he thought of things and did things no one else would do, because he listened to God, and trusted God

Have you ever known anyone like that?

I'll share one example: I can recall meeting Cheryl Allen almost 20 years ago. She served as pastor to a church in one of the most crime-ridden sections of Johannesburg, South Africa. Seeing babies abandoned and often dying with AIDS, she listened to God and dared to begin an orphanage known as the "Door of Hope," a ministry that continues to care for many children who might otherwise have died in a trash bin.

Perhaps you can think of similar examples of people who listened to God, trusted, and made a difference. Our text challenges us to look past our frailties and failures and be open to ways in which God can use us to bring light into this world, not because we are particularly strong or talented, but because we are willing. The Bible makes it clear that God delights in surprising the world by doing great things through small people who listen and who trust.

Isn't this what it means to have a "Jesus worldview"? To live with an open spirit, taking note of the needs around us, and listening for how Jesus would have us respond?

We may never be anointed as David was, and certainly won't be made king. But, we can be open and trusting and anointed by the Spirit of God. We can look to a future that is filled with unknown opportunities for life and service and joy. We can become the people God wants us to be. Are we listening? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14

A New Life

Have you ever been so lonely or down or tired that you felt almost dead to the world? You may have watched others busily going about their occupation or recreation or homelife with apparent purpose, but you felt left out or adrift.

Today's lesson is about a whole population of people who had been forced to leave their homes and march hundreds of miles before being assigned to resettlement camps in a new land.

The people in question were the most wealthy, educated, or skilled residents of Judah. When their king grew tired of paying the tribute he demanded, King Nebuchadnezzar brought his army and took both payment and people. An initial wave of royals and other elites were taken captive in 597 BCE, though Jerusalem was spared.

When the new king he appointed withheld payment a decade later, Nebuchadnezzar's armies returned and destroyed Jerusalem before putting thousands more on the long march to Babylon. Only the poorest of the people were left to work the land for their Babylonian taskmasters.

How would you feel if you'd been in their position, not only losing everything but also faced with an uncertain future?

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Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD." (Ezek. 37:4)

A moribund people (vv. 1-3)

A Hebrew named Ezekiel knew how it felt. Ezekiel had served among the temple priests in Jerusalem before being deported in the first wave of exiles. He had been spared the sight of the temple in flames, but still had to wonder what purpose he could serve in Babylon.

Any wonderment ceased a few years later when he experienced a mind-boggling vision of God that led him into a prophetic ministry lasting more than 20 years.

Ezekiel's fellow exiles may have considered him to be highly eccentric, and not just because he incorporated the roles of both priest and prophet – two groups that didn't usually get along. Ezekiel's inaugural vision of God was filled with fiery wheels, strange creatures, and a rainbow aura surrounding a flying sapphire throne – so strange that some modern writers have claimed he was visited by an alien spaceship. Would you have believed Ezekiel?

Ezekiel came to believe that God had not given up on Israel, and he sought to assure the exiles that God had something good in store for them: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you," he prophesied, ". . . and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (36:26-27).

That sounded hopeful, but the people remained morose. Despite being integrated into the Babylonian culture and economy, the Hebrews still longed for their homeland, especially during the first years, before the generation of adults who had been captured had begun to die out. If v. 11 is an accurate reflection, they were saying things such as "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (v. 11).

It's no surprise, then, that God would show Ezekiel a vision of hope that began with a valley of dry bones. While Ezekiel tells the story as an actual event, phrases such as "the hand of the LORD was upon me" suggest a visionary experience taking place in a trance-like state (see also 1:3, 3:22, 8:1, 40:1). The story describes a symbolic vision, not a mass resurrection.

Ezekiel speaks of being brought to a valley filled with disarticulated skeletons. There were "very many" bones, and they were "very dry" (v. 2), indicating that their owners were also very dead. Inhabitants of the ancient Near East sought to be buried or placed in secure tombs where their bones could remain together. The thought of having one's skeleton scattered across the land would have been innately disturbing.

The image suggests the aftermath of a battlefield where thousands had been slain (vv. 9-10), perhaps suggesting both Judah's defeat by the Babylonians and the Northern Kingdom's earlier destruction by the Assyrians.

In the midst of a lifeless and apparently hopeless scene, Ezekiel was

asked: "Mortal, can these bones live?" A modern scientist might envision a way to extract DNA from the bones and at least replicate the genome, but Ezekiel saw only bones that were deader than dead. He had no answer beyond the obvious response: "O Lord GOD, you know" (v. 3).

A lively sermon (vv. 4-10)

The succeeding verses tell the familiar story of how God told Ezekiel to preach to the congregation of dead bones, promising to reassemble the skeletons, then return to them muscle and sinew and skin before breathing once again the breath of life into their bodies (vv. 4-6).

When Ezekiel did as commanded, he felt the earth shaking with the rattling of bones as the skeletons reformed, then watched as flesh and skin reappeared like a time-lapse video of decomposition run in reverse (vv. 7-8).

At last, Ezekiel stood among a massive collection of perfectly formed bodies, but they were still dead. God then instructed him to "prophesy to the breath" that it might come from the four winds, re-enter the corpses, and return the "vast multitude" (or "vast army," NIV11, HCSB) to life (vv. 9-10).

The Hebrew term *ruach* can be used to mean "wind," "breath," or even "spirit." The image calls to mind the creation story of Gen. 2:7, but on a far grander scale. Instead of breathing life into one man, God whistled up the four winds to inspirit a host of bodies and return them to life.

But what was the meaning of this resurrected multitude? Was Ezekiel now standing before a zombie army of the living dead, or did the scene suggest something more? We can only imagine the questions running through the stunned prophet's mind before a word from God connected the dots for him.

A hopeful prophecy (vv. 11-14)

The dried bones represented the "whole house of Israel," God said – a phrase probably intended to include the Northern Kingdom of Israel (conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE) as well as the Southern Kingdom of Judah, who first fell to the Babylonians in 597 BCE and suffered several subsequent deportations.

The people had given up, thinking themselves as good as dead, "cut off completely" from home and from hope (v. 11). God, however, had not given up on Israel. In language reminiscent of the Exodus, God promised to raise the Hebrews from their metaphorical graves, restoring them to life and to the land of promise (vv. 13-14).

The new life God promised would come about through the active power of God's Spirit: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD (v. 14).

As the Holy Spirit would later bring new life to the dispirited disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the presence and power of God's Spirit promised new life to the exiles, and the hope that they might yet return to their homes in the land of promise.

Ezekiel's prophecy echoes a theological understanding of the exile as God's punishment for Israel's collective sin and rejection of the covenant. God had the power to "kill and make alive" (Deut. 32:39, 1 Sam. 2:6), to punish and forgive. The vision of 37:1-14 seems to elaborate on the promise of 36:26-27. Although Israel had proven incapable of keeping the covenant, God's grace would renew life and the promised Spirit would motivate obedience: "I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (36:27).

What the Hebrews could not do for themselves, God would do for them.

How might this strange vision of Ezekiel speak to us?

We do not live as captives in Babylon, but we can still feel separated from God and cut off from hope. We may know very well what it is like to feel dry of bone, numb of heart, and dead of spirit. We may be exiled by grief or despair or loneliness. We may have lost hope that our family will ever be whole or that our life will ever make sense.

Like Israel, we may sometimes feel as if our emotional ribs have been picked clean by vultures and left to dry in the sun.

One might argue, however, that the people in deepest exile are those who have no worries, who think everything is fine, whose indifference to God has left them too blind to see that they are dying inside, that their spiritual bones are turning to dust.

In Ezekiel's vision, things did not begin to change until there was a great shaking and a rattling. It could be that our pathway to renewed life must also begin with a shaking of priorities that rattles the framework of a fruitless faith.

God does not want us to be exiled forever. Our own efforts may leave us feeling dry as dust, but Jesus, even more than Ezekiel, made it clear that God desires to bring us new life through the presence of the Spirit (John 14:15-16).

As we are born anew through Christ, the Spirit enables us to see the world through the lens of Jesus' love, so that we may also become life-giving agents of change to others.

And there's nothing crazy about that. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

April 5, 2020

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

A New Foundation

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Ps. 118:24)

What is the best way to observe Palm Sunday? One option is to focus on celebrating Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" with the cheering crowds and waving of branches. Sometimes we worship by waving stems of jade or other greenery while singing joyful hymns.

In the back of our minds, though, we can't forget that it's the beginning of Holy Week and the dark shadow of Good Friday's cross looms behind the cheerful palms. How do we acknowledge Palm Sunday's split personality?

The psalmists were good at that sort of thing, often constructing poetic prayers that combined themes of suffering and salvation, prayer and praise. It's not surprising that quotations from Psalm 118 found their way into the New Testament story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and from there into the lectionary readings for Palm Sunday.

A God who is good (vv. 1-4)

The psalm is a favorite for other reasons also, though we're more likely to remember specific verses than the overall message of the text.

Perhaps you have memorized v. 14: "The Lord is my strength and my song, and has become my salvation." We find parts of v. 22 ("Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD") either quoted or referenced in all four of the gospels. And, many believers have a special fondness for v. 24: "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

The psalm tells us why we have cause to rejoice: it is the testimony of someone – probably to be thought of as a king of Israel – who was beset by enemies and in danger of death, but who believed he or she had been delivered by the grace of God.

Thus, the psalm begins with a reminder that God is always present and always loving. The poet emphasizes this by a careful use of both repetition and word order.

Look closely at the first verse, which begins with an imperative call for all who hear (or read) to praise Yahweh because of God's inherent goodness, revealed through steadfast love: "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!" (v. 1). The same refrain will be repeated as the last verse in the psalm, framing the entire poem with gratitude for God's dependable love.

In the next three verses, the psalmist calls on three specific groups to praise Yahweh – the personal name God revealed to Moses – and for the same reason: because "His steadfast love endures forever."

The psalmist was a Hebrew through and through, but he recognized that such love was offered not just to the priests or to Israel, but to all who "fear God," whatever their background (vv. 2-4).

We do not have to live in isolation, with the feeling that we are somehow detached from the universe: there is a God who not only loves us, but whose love is eternal.

The psalmist came to know the presence and the power of God through his own religious tradition. In ceremonies of worship and celebration, he had often relived the ways in which God had brought deliverance to Israel.

Yahweh called Abraham from Haran, brought him to the Promised Land, saved him from his enemies, and granted him a son.

God delivered the children of Abraham from the bondage of Egypt, cared for them in the wilderness, gave them guiding laws, and brought them again to the Promised Land.

Israel's spiritual path had been uneven, but God's love and grace had been constant. Those who followed the psalmist in putting their trust in God learned that they were never fully alone, never unloved, never separated from the lingering, comforting touch of the Spirit of God. That is the way God is. God's steadfast love endures forever.

The good news of scripture is that we can know this same God. As the psalmist knew the wonderful stories of Yahweh and Israel, so we recall the stories of Jesus and his followers.

We have learned how God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. We have learned how Jesus loved the poor, healed the sick, and comforted the afflicted.

We have learned how Jesus died on the cross but rose again, atoning for our

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persistent sins in a way that only God could do.

If we trust the word of the psalmist, the love of God is not an issue. The only issue is how we respond to God's redeeming presence in Christ, which Paul declared could never be taken away (Rom. 8:37-39) – and whether we will adopt Jesus' way of looking at and responding to the world.

A God who delivers (vv. 19-25)

While Psalm 118 appears to recount the experience of one of Israel's kings – and hence to have been written before the exile – it could have been used in later periods by anyone who wished to commemorate God's past deliverance as well as to express hope in God's future care.

The psalm was probably employed in worship as a processional liturgy, sung or acted out as worshipers entered the sanctuary on certain days. Perhaps we are to imagine a victorious king returning from battle with his entourage and coming first to the temple, where he called to the priests: "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD" (v. 19).

In later usage, a worship leader might have taken the role of the king in leading worshipers through the gates and into the temple.

Note the interplay between vv. 19 and 20, which probably represents an exchange between the returning king and the priest in charge of the temple. The king calls out to the gatekeeper, demanding that he open the "gates of righteousness" (v. 19), but is reminded that the gate belongs to Yahweh, and only the righteous should enter through it (v. 20).

Neither gates nor ground can be righteous or unrighteous. If the portal to the temple is a "gate of righteousness," it is because righteous people enter through it. The word translated as "righteousness" (*tsedek*) describes those whose behavior is just and correct, honoring God.

The psalmist's metaphor of a stone rejected by the builders being ultimately chosen as the cornerstone is so familiar from its New Testament usage in reference to Christ that many are unaware that it originally referred to the king for (or by) whom this psalm was written.

The psalmist thanks God for divine deliverance (v. 21). Though rejected or considered useless by others, God had made him the chief cornerstone, the most important foundation stone in a building (vv. 22-23). This terminology was adopted by New Testament writers and applied to Christ, who was also rejected by humankind, but exalted by God as the cornerstone (cf. Luke 20:17; Acts. 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:4, 7).

Careful readers may have a sense of surprise with v. 25, as the psalm turns from praise to plea. After celebrating "the LORD's doing" in bringing deliverance (v. 23) and rejoicing in the present day – which is also God's doing (v. 24) – the singer prays for God's saving work to continue in every trying circumstance (v. 25): "Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!"

A God who blesses (vv. 26-29)

"Save us!" is from the Hebrew expression "*hoshi'ah nah*," which comes into English as "Hosanna." Though technically a request for help, the expression came to be used as a word of praise, a shout of acclamation to the one who is able to save.

It is no surprise, then, that the crowds who followed Jesus during his triumphal entry shouted "Hosanna" in conjunction with their quotation of v. 26: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt. 19:9, Mark 11:9-10, Luke 19:38, John 12:13).

The spreading of branches during the Palm Sunday entry may also reflect v. 27, which speaks of leafy boughs being used in the festal procession, or to adorn the large outdoor altar that stood before the temple.

While we typically read these verses as if the people are blessing God, it is likely that v. 26 should be read as if spoken by the priests, who pronounced a blessing on the victorious king and his retinue who had entered the temple in God's name: "We bless you from the house of the LORD."

In later years, the psalm could have been used as a blessing for any worshipers who gathered in God's name to offer praise and seek God's favor.

They, like the king in the psalm's initial setting, would be moved to declare allegiance and praise to the author of their salvation: "You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, and I will extol you" (v. 28).

Today we may continue to express our devotion to God, who has worked out our ultimate redemption through Jesus Christ. As the psalmist confessed, "You are my God," so Paul reminds all people "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

The psalm begins and ends with praise to God, whose steadfast love endures forever. These words were written hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth, and thousands of years before our own pilgrimages began, but we may still echo its words and declare our praise to the one whose steadfast love has saved us all and who sticks with us for all time. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

April 12, 2020

Colossians 3:1-11

A New Wardrobe

Have you ever lost so much weight – or gained so much – that you had to buy new clothes? It's an indication that something is different: the old clothes no longer fit, and it's time for a change.

Easter Sunday reminds us of the biggest change ever – when Christ emerged from a tomb as living, not dead. We celebrate Easter especially because it is the promise that we can also find our way from death to life. Today's text concerns a change from the inside rather than in outer appearance. It's the change that comes when we realize how badly we have messed up, or how far we've gone astray, and we're ready to make things as right as we can make them.

In those situations, we discover that the only positive way forward is to admit our failures, ask for forgiveness, and hope for the opportunity to try again.

Having that experience helps us to appreciate today's text, because it is addressed to people who had goofed up, big time. They had sinned, every one of them. They had lived at odds with God.

And so have we.

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So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (Col. 3:1)

Heavenly thoughts (vv. 1-4)

Paul was writing to members of a young church in Colossae, a highland town on the scenic south bank of the Lycus River in southwest Turkey. Members of the church, like all new Christians, had become convicted of their sin. They had repented and sought God's mercy through Christ. They had been baptized in Jesus' name, dying to the old self and being "raised again" with Christ, experiencing their own kind of Easter.

Like us, however, none of the Colossian believers had been perfect since their baptism. They had stumbled along the way. They needed encouragement and instruction so they could learn to develop the full potential of their new lives. They had to learn that Christian growth is not automatic but comes as the result of a conscious process.

Again, we stand on common ground.

The Apostle Paul was not perfect, either. He knew what it was like to struggle with faith and to experience failure. From his own experience, he offered advice to the Colossians that speaks just as clearly and cogently to contemporary believers.

"So if you have been raised with Christ," he said, "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (v. 1). Because Paul was writing to people who were already Christians, we could also translate this verse as "Since you have been raised with Christ" (as NIV 11 does). His readers knew the experience of being forgiven, buried with Christ in baptism, and raised again to a new life.

That new life is the focus of Paul's encouragement. He challenged them to break out of the old molds that fashioned their former way of living, and to "seek the things that are above," that is, to look toward Christ for direction.

The best way to focus our *hearts* on Christ is to focus our *minds* on Christ. Thus, Paul added, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (vv. 2-3).

How we act, how we feel, and how we respond to others depends in large measure on how we think. Thus Paul called for believers to direct their thinking toward Christ because "you have died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God."

When we talk about the "new birth," we often fail to consider that a new birth must follow an old death. Baptism symbolizes that we have died to the old self and been raised again to new life, and that new life was Paul's concern.

Paul challenges us to focus on things above because that is where our true life – our new life – is found. "Your life has been hidden with Christ in God."

If we want to understand the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in Christ, we have to take the time and effort to focus our minds on Christ.

How can we do this? We can focus our minds on Christ through reading the scriptures, through seeking Jesus'

leading in prayer or meditation, or through group Bible study and corporate worship.

We may sometimes think it is hopeless – this idea that we could understand the mysteries of God or truly come to know the mind of Christ. But there is hope for us, and not just for this life, but for the life to come.

Paul wrote: "When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory" (v. 4).

Earthly temptations (vv. 5-11)

If we are truly to live as if Christ is our life, there are some things we must leave behind (vv. 5-11). We can't take everything with us.

Think of some negative behaviors that may have been characteristic of your life before Christ, or that still tempt you now. Are they consistent with a Jesus-centered lifestyle?

Paul used graphic terminology to emphasize our new way of walking, saying we must "put to death" certain characteristics of the old nature. In v. 5 he referred to a string of related vices: fornication, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed. All of those involve some form of exploitation in which one person objectifies another and uses him or her for personal satisfaction. This giving in to selfish desires is really idolatry, Paul said. It is giving earthly things a higher claim on our hearts than Jesus, and that leads one toward judgment rather than toward Christ.

That was the old way of life, Paul said (v. 7), a way also characterized by other vices that have no place on the journey into Christlikeness. Anger, rage, malice, slander, "filthy language," and lying to one another were all on Paul's not-to-do list (v. 8). We know these characteristics are not in keeping with Christ's call. Reality shows, TV dramas, and sometimes even the news bring a parade of angry, cheating, lying characters into our living rooms. The temptation is to assume that such behavior is normal or acceptable – but we know such things are not in keeping with a Christ-like life. If we would be more like Jesus, we must leave self-centered behavior behind and "put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (v. 10).

In that new life, the prejudices and injustices characteristic of this world will give way to a new understanding of others, Paul said, a renewed life in which "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all" (v. 10).

Helpful supplies (vv. 12-17)

The lectionary text stops at v. 11, but to round out Paul's thought, we should continue a bit further. The new life does not just derive from putting away negative behaviors: Paul went on to describe positive characteristics we should pack for the journey (vv. 12-17).

The vices Paul challenged the Colossians to eliminate had in common that they exploited or minimized the needs or feelings of other people. In contrast, the positive attributes Paul mentions major on caring or consideration for others. Paul would have us express compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love (vv. 12-14). Can anyone argue with how those chracteristics support our efforts to live with a Jesus worldview?

As we move forward on life's journey, Paul calls us to live in peace and gratitude, so centered on Christ and his teachings that we do all things, whether in word or deed, "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (vv. 15-17). Is there any question that these characteristics will make for a happier life than the negative behaviors enumerated in vv. 5 and 8?

Paul's reminder that we have died to the old self demonstrates just how new and radically different our life in Christ is to be. To find and truly understand what it means to live in Christ, we must keep seeking it, keep thinking about the things above, keep thinking about Christ and his way. We must learn, in short, to discover what Paul means by "Christ, who is your life."

When we buy a new computer, smartphone, or other electronic gizmo, we may be able to "plug and play" with its basic functions, but it takes effort to learn all the new features. There can be quite a learning curve if one seeks to become a power user – and becoming a "power Christian" is not automatic, either.

Every Christian is in a life-long search to discover all the riches of the new life we have in Christ, trusting that our path will lead us ever closer to experience the Christ-life in all its abundance.

When we pack for a trip, we leave behind things that will weigh us down or impede our ability to travel. Instead, we take clothing, equipment, or documents that will be needed for the journey.

To live with a true "Jesus worldview," we must leave behind those behaviors that harm relationships and alienate people, while taking with us those that build community. In doing this, we also find we are not alone: our adventure joins us with a community of others who seek to follow Jesus' pattern of living.

We would all do well to consider the physical, emotional, or spiritual luggage we carry around from day to day. Are there things we need to unpack? Things to add? What are we waiting for? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

April 19, 2020

1 Peter 1:3-9

A New Future

Did you make it to a sunrise service or church worship for Easter? Chances are, you experienced an inspirational celebration of the high point of the church year. But what do we do *after* Easter, when the hallelujahs have faded and routine returns? The book of 1 Peter offers encouragement for Christ-followers who may flounder in the wake of the resurrection, and it will be the source of our studies for the next several weeks.

Being Christian is not always easy: Jesus promised his followers a comforter, but also a cross. Peter's letter to Christians of the late first century addresses the difficulties faced by those who try to live the Christian life in a pluralistic culture that in some ways was not so different than our own.

No one can say with certainty whether the Apostle Peter wrote this letter, as it bears several marks of having been written long after his death. Still, it is likely that his teaching inspired it. In our studies, we may refer to the author as "Peter" with the understanding that someone else may have written it in his name.

When Christians changed their lifestyle and no longer participated in their pagan cultures, opposition was inevitable: we recall how idol-makers in Ephesus started a riot when their business suffered because of the Christian movement (Acts 18:23-41).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Pet. 1:3)

The writer of 1 Peter sought to encourage and comfort those Christians whose changed lifestyle had made them unacceptable within their cultural world. We may experience some of the same pushback in our own society, whether from non-Christians or from fellow believers who hold to different doctrine or values.

A living hope (vv. 3-5)

The letter begins with a salutation (1:1-2) in the style made popular by Paul, replacing the typical word "greetings" with "grace and peace." The letter is addressed to the "exiles of the Dispersion" (NRSV), which usually refers to the "diaspora," or scattering of Jewish exiles throughout the known world. The writer, however, apparently considered both Jewish and Gentile Christians to be part of the diaspora. This terminology is a reminder that all Christians have connections with God's covenant people.

The address mentions the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, all in the northern half of what was then called Asia and is now the country of Turkey.

It is likely that the letter was designed to circulate among churches in the region so that all might learn and be encouraged (5:12). Its message did prove to be helpful, so much so that the letter traveled to other areas and eventually came to be accepted as scripture, inspired by God and instructive for churches and Christians in all places and all times.

Christian letters often included a prayer of thanksgiving after the greeting, so we are not surprised that vv. 3-12 offer a prayer of praise for what God has done in the lives of believers. The writer begins, appropriately, by offering thanks for God's great mercy. It is because God is merciful that we are freely offered a new birth (literally "re-begotten"), made possible through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This gives to believers *a living hope*.

We can't overemphasize the importance of hope, and for Christians, that hope is firmly grounded in Christ's resurrection. If there had been no resurrection, there would have been no church. It was Christ's resurrection that convinced his disciples that Jesus truly was the Son of God, victorious over death and evil. The resurrection led them to trust in his promise of eternal life to those who are "born again" (John 3:3).

Some Old Testament prophets hoped for a resurrection sometime in the future, at the end of the age. In contrast, the resurrection of Christ gave to Christians a *living* hope, a confident assurance of life beyond the grave.

While the new birth can lead to an abundant life here on earth, the writer

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also speaks of "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (v. 4). We normally think of an inheritance as something we receive when someone else dies, but this inheritance comes when *we* die.

Three adjectives describe this eternal inheritance: it is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. The writer adds a nice alliterative touch, for the three words all begin with the negative particle *a*: *aphtharton, amianton, amaranton*.

The word for "imperishable" means "not subject to spoiling." The term translated "undefiled" is related to a word that can mean "to stain or dye." With the negative particle, it means "unstained." The word for "unfading" derives from the name of a flower, the *maranth*, with a negative prefix attached. It is used only here in the New Testament, but appeared in Greek literature to describe a flower whose beauty never fades (Daniel Arichea and Eugene Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the First Letter from Peter* [United Bible Societies, 1980], p. 18).

The author also thanked God for the protective promise of salvation that ensures our future (v. 5). We usually think of salvation in the context of one's initial experience of trusting Jesus and being assured of eternity (cf. Luke 19:9). Paul sometimes speaks of it as a present possession being worked into a finished product (Phil. 2:12). At other times, "salvation" refers to the consummation of God's redeeming work at the second coming of Christ (Rom. 13:11, Heb. 9:28), and that is probably its meaning here. Christians experience this sense of security through the living hope of committing their lives and their eternity to the power of God.

Trial by fire (vv. 6-7)

Salvation calls for rejoicing, even if current troubles limit our rejoicing to future hope. "In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials" (v. 6). This theme recurs throughout the letter.

The writer did not spell out the "various trials" his readers had suffered. Persecution is not limited to violent or physically harmful acts. The word here translated as "suffer" was most commonly used for "grieve." It speaks of the emotional effects of suffering more than physical pain. The distress of grief may seem overwhelming, but in comparison to eternity, it is but "a little while."

Pain, whether it arises from persecution or misunderstanding or heartache, is not just to be endured: it can be tapped for self-growth and increased maturity. Like a smelting fire that burns away impurities and renders gold more valuable, the heat of public derision or opposition could serve to purify the believers' faith and prove it genuine. That kind of faith, according to the author, will result "in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (v. 7).

The metaphor of gold is helpful, but it falls short of describing true faith. Gold is fireproof, but not destruction-proof. In contrast, genuine faith that has been through the fire is imperishable. Counterfeit faith is inherently worthless and brings shame upon both Christ and the church. Faith that has been tested and proven to be genuine brings greater glory to the author of our faith.

The outcome of our faith (vv. 8-9)

Faith involves believing in something for which one has no visible proof. In trying times, faith may falter, or it may grow stronger. The writer of 1 Peter recognized the tested and true faith of the Christians in Asia Minor by affirming "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy" (v. 8).

If the apostle Peter wrote these words, the author would have been an eyewitness to Christ's life, work, and resurrection. In contrast, the people to whom he wrote had not heard Jesus teach, seen his miraculous works, or witnessed his resurrection – yet they believed. They walked by faith and not by sight (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7, John 20:29).

The believers not only believed in Christ – they *loved* him. Through the experience of faith and love, they experienced the joy of knowing the presence of Christ's spirit and the assurance of their final salvation, the ultimate outcome of faith (v. 9). Suffering is not required for faith, but pain can strengthen us along the pathway to our ultimate salvation.

Scholars have often noted that 1 Peter has many similarities to the writings of Paul. This is particularly evident in this moving introduction to 1 Peter. The author begins with an affirmation of the Christian's living *hope* (v. 3), then speaks of genuine *faith* (vv. 5, 7), and finally moves to joyous *love* (v. 8). These are the three things that remain when all else fails, aspects of Christian maturity that Paul often emphasized (1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thess. 1:3, 5:8). For Christians who face the intense pressures of an unbelieving culture, these three virtues are central.

Does living in your world ever leave you with a level of tension between the life you live and the one to which you are called? Don't give up: in Christ we have a hope that *lives*. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

April 26, 2020

1 Peter 1:17-23

A New Birth

Have you ever messed something up and wished for a do-over? You can do that with an essay or a painting or even a casserole if you have adequate time and supplies. Relationships are another story: it's hard to start over and pretend past offenses haven't occurred.

In the most important arena, however, we do have a chance to begin anew. When our spiritual life has gone awry, Jesus offers the hope of salvation. What's more, the experience of living a redeemed life leads us to share and receive mutual love.

Do you like the thought of living with confidence, of loving and being loved? Then read on.

Of hope and holiness (vv. 13-16)

The letter of 1 Peter begins with a prayer that praises God for the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, and for the readers' acceptance of it (vv. 3-12). The writer was not satisfied to celebrate salvation as if that's all that matters, however. The prayer is a call to action for believers, a mandate for a new and different kind of life.

"Therefore," the author writes, "prepare your minds for action" (v. 13a). Right behavior begins with right thinking. "Prepare your minds" translates the ancient idiom "gird up your loins," a reference to someone gathering up the skirt of his or her robe and tucking it into the belt in preparation for running or some other physical action.

> *You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. (1 Pet. 1:23)*

Peter applies the idiom to mental rather than physical activity, adding a second modifier to suggest the need for a sober or disciplined mind.

To "gird up the loins of your mind" is to get mentally prepared for the challenge ahead. It means to tuck in the loose ends of things that would distract us and to focus on what is really important. Christians of every generation must wrestle with their faith, interpret the scriptures, and apply the gospel message to the culture in which they live.

With disciplined minds ready for action, believers learn to think for themselves. They don't blindly accept everything they hear or read, whether it comes from a televised prosperity preacher, a popular book, or their own pastor. They think it through and reach their own understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

In doing so, believers recognize that their ultimate hope lies in Christ alone. "Set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed," Peter said (v. 13b).

Christ-centered hope and disciplined thinking lead us to become more like Jesus and less like those who are shaped by selfish interests and cultural pressures (vv. 14-15). As we become more like Christ, we fulfill the covenant command that "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (v. 16, quoting from Lev. 19:2).

Can we honestly say that we are shaped more by Christ than by our culture? What is the evidence for either?

Reverence and redemption (vv. 17-21)

Having called on believers to get their thinking right and their living straight, Peter moves to the subject of healthy associations: a right relationship with God (vv. 17-21) that relates to others in helpful and healthy ways (vv. 22-25).

Relating rightly to God begins with the understanding that God judges all people impartially "according to their deeds" – a statement that would leave all of us falling short, for none live without fault. But the judgment we all deserve – the fear of which should keep us living in humble reverence before God (v. 17) – is tempered and held in tension by the grace God has offered through Christ.

The author speaks of this atoning grace through the metaphor of paying a ransom, one of several images used in scripture and developed by the church to try and explain the mystery of how Christ's earthly life, death, and resurrection reconciled us to God. (See "The Hardest Question" online for more on theories of the atonement.)

No attempt at explaining the atonement fully captures a truth that only God can truly comprehend. The metaphor of Christ's death serving as a ransom payment (v. 18) or sacrifice (v. 19) for our sins is an incomplete image, but a powerful one. It is a

Additional information at nurturingfaith.net

reminder that Christ died *for us*, and that in some way beyond our understanding, Christ's death and resurrection opened the door for us to be reconciled and brought into a positive relationship with the Lord of all.

Peter's purpose is not to elucidate the atonement, but to remind his readers that Christ is the means by which we have come trustfully to God, "who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God" (v. 21).

Love and loving (vv. 22-25)

The author of 1 Peter believed that loving God would naturally lead to loving others: "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply, from the heart" (v. 22).

God created us to live in community. From the creation stories of Genesis 1–2 to the Ten Commandments to the preaching of the prophets, the scriptures challenge God's people to love and care for others, especially widows, orphans, and strangers. Jesus reflected this same ethic of caring for all, even "the least of these."

Christ-followers, especially, are called to "have genuine mutual love," to "love one another deeply from the heart" (v. 22).

Love is to be not only reciprocal and real, but also fervent and heartfelt. "Love deeply" translates a verb that describes unconditional love with an adverb that means "earnestly," "eagerly," "intently," or "constantly."

Talking about love and demonstrating it are quite different things. A spiritual relationship grounded in God's love inspires a community characterized by love in action, something more than high ideals or empty talk. It is a love that walks.

If we are to get our thinking straight, get our living straight, and get our relationships straight, we need each other. We need mutual support and unconditional love. We need someone to care, even when we are not acting very lovable.

This is why God gave us the church as a family of faith to encourage us, to inspire us, to hold us accountable, to love us in good times and bad times. We all need others who believe in us and love us deeply, from the heart.

Such love should come naturally to those who truly "have been born anew" through their response to the gospel message, Peter suggests (v. 23).

The author's mention of "the living and enduring word of God" that brings us into relationship with God led him to a tangential quotation from Isaiah 40:6-8. Humankind and human glory are no more permanent than grass or flowers that grow and then fade, but "the word of the Lord endures forever" (vv. 24-25a).

This verse is often taken out of context and used as a reference to the Bible or in defense of an interpretation of scripture that someone claims to be unchanging. The verse is not about the Bible, however, or even the Old Testament.

When used in scripture, "word of God" commonly refers to a special revelation from God, a clear word that comes through a prophetic oracle or other means.

Lest we misunderstand – as many have done – Peter explained his meaning in the conclusion of the verse, a part that is rarely quoted: "*That word* is the good news that was announced to you" (v. 25b).

"Good news" translates a form of the Greek word *euangelizo*, "to proclaim good news." It is the word from which we derive "evangelize." It refers to the gospel message of Jesus, the good news of salvation for those who put their faith and hope in God through Christ.

That good news – that word from God – endures forever.

The love of those who live in relationship with God should likewise be as sure as it is sincere, both ardent and lasting. It is this kind of life that both experiences and lives out what it means to participate in the kingdom of God.

From the perspective of the last verse in ch. 1, we should look back to the first, where Peter addressed his readers as "exiles of the dispersion." The terminology would suggest an audience of immigrant Jews living in the northern reaches of Asia Minor. Some, no doubt, would have been members of the churches addressed in this letter.

The author's use of the term "exiles" (vv. 1, 17) is not limited to Jews no longer living in Palestine, however. The churches would also have included Gentile believers, who may well have been in the majority.

The "exile" that Peter has in mind is a lifestyle so devoted to Christ that it puts believers at odds with the materialistic and pagan culture in which they live. As they love God and love each other with the kind of fervency that Peter described, they become, not "strangers in a strange land," but strangers in their own land, people who live apart from the norms of polytheistic worship and self-focused living.

The language of exile should set all of us to thinking. Do we feel a bit like outsiders in the overtly materialistic and morally misguided society that surrounds us, or do we feel perfectly at home in our culture?

As far as Peter is concerned, feeling too comfortable could be to our peril. NFJ

OUT of EXILE

A spiritual view of stroke recovery

BY ROBERT M. RANDOLPH

Long ago I wrote columns titled "After the Sermon" for this publication, describing my early struggles as a stroke survivor at age 34. Now, at age 67, I look back in celebration of a miraculous recovery and unimagined blessings.

I now add an update on these past 33 years of following Jesus down some very curvy mountain roads, as are common here in the North Carolina mountains. My hope is these reflections will aid those who may encounter the critical injuries of strokes.

PATIENCE

First of all, stroke recovery requires great patience. The marvelous brain — which is the origin of every physical movement, thought, anticipated action, emotional response, and word we utter — is something we often take for granted, until a part of it is injured by a traumatic brain injury (TBI) or stroke (CVA).

Most of us only notice the inhibition of motor function of arms or legs or perhaps speech difficulty (aphasia). Less apparent are difficulties in controlling emotional responses, concentration, and proper social behavior.

It takes a long time to heal and recover these diminished or lost functions. Most of us observe physical rehabilitation with very little appreciation of how difficult it is to recover lost function and strength — and how humiliating it is to admit needing physical assistance with our most personal tasks and the aching desire to recover wounded dignity when at last we can go to the bathroom by ourselves.

Healing higher-level functions, such as remaining calm in a crisis, may take years, in comparison to physical rehabilitation, which may last many months. Members of my monthly stroke survivors' support group loudly applauded my telling them that I will begin this article by stressing patience.

A MODEL

A spiritual model for such patience is Joseph in the Book of Genesis. He was sidetracked from his life as a rising star in his family to becoming a slave in Egypt, then falsely accused and imprisoned for many years.

The years dragged by as his life appeared to be wasting in desolation (Genesis 37ff). We do not know how he kept himself alive or from becoming despondent during those long years in filthy surroundings and with criminals for companions, but it required great patience.

We are given hints in the story that Joseph sensed God's presence that allowed him to become a leader, even in prison. "But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer . . . because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper" (Gen. 39:21-23).

I preached two sermons during the 2019 Lenten season on learning to be silent and nurturing a sense of mysticism in order to respond to the needs of our broken world, as Jesus did so often — by finding a lonely place to pray and be silent.

It takes a lot of spiritual preparation to confront major "ob-stacles," as they were called in the movie *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* Joseph was able to endure and even prosper in his horrible prison environment because he knew of the Lord's presence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer exemplified similar spiritual strength in the final year of his life, while imprisoned by the Nazis, waiting for his execution, yet writing words still widely quoted today.

Recovery from stroke requires patience, tenacity, vigilance, and a powerful source of spiritual strength.

EXILE

A second spiritual phase is to endure living in exile. The Israelites were taken into exile to Babylon in the sixth century BCE, after witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem and their temple. We Christians cannot imagine their profound grief in losing the very symbols of their identity and faith.

The Israelites' grief is vividly described in Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon —

there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. . . How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

Strokes send us into a foreign land where our hands, arms, legs and voices may not work properly. Formerly familiar places may seem strange and fearful. Tasks we once enjoyed become impossible or undesirable.

We feel like strangers in our own home, job or circle of friends. We feel exiled from the life we once knew. We feel far from anything familiar, comfortable or enjoyable. We are in exile!

The grief beyond description may take months or years to process. Many people close to us will not understand how long that grief may last and how the songs have departed our hearts, like the Jews.

PROMISES

But there are powerful words for those in exile from the prophet Jeremiah (31:10-17). "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd a flock" (v.10).

Exile scatters our personal world and our sense of personal wholeness, and this promise is to be gathered up into a new flock, which may not be exactly like the former flock.

Renewal and healing may bring great promise, but unlikely identical to our former selves — perhaps better, perhaps not, but certainly a new promise. "For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him" (v.11).

Great joy often accompanies the return from exile as a new life chapter begins: "They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord. . . their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again" (v. 12).

According to Jeremiah, these exiles will also sing on Mount Zion, even though the temple is destroyed. They will also build a new temple, as the book of Ezra describes. We who survive strokes must also rebuild our spiritual connections to God amid the ruins of what used to be our faith's foundations.

For me, it was moving beyond my intellectual focus of Christianity and discovering the practices of the medieval mystics such as St. John of the Cross, Brother Lawrence, Hildegard of Bengen, and Julian of Norwich.

Old temples can be destroyed or fall in due to neglect, as Carlyle Marney reminded us 50 years ago in a Lenten sermon, but we can be led by God to new places of spiritual joy, like a watered garden where young people dance and "mourning is turned to joy" (v. 13). Exile can be very painful and overwhelming, but God can lead us through exile to new joy and purpose.

HOPE

A third level of spiritual stroke recovery is renewed hope and mission. It is a medical fact that a biological-based depression often accompanies stroke, caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. This internal condition is often increased by external events from the crushing changes that strokes cause in our ordinary lifestyles.

It is bad enough to feel blue/down/sad quite often, but to be unable to hold your children, do your job, or even eat without assistance can send the stroke survivor into a state of utter hopelessness/despair/suicidal thoughts.

A couple years after my strokes, I was encouraged to participate in a spiritual retreat, which my friends thought would bless and encourage me. The rigorous schedule of the weekend retreat exhausted my physical and emotional reserve and sent me into a deep state of depression, which necessitated my staying in bed for the second half of the weekend.

Some participants, both lay and clergy, were concerned that I seemed "bitter," which I admitted I was. They could not understand the depth of my pain. Hope can be lost when we have a stroke, but it can be found.

In 2 Cor. 1:3-11, the Apostle Paul speaks to Christians in Corinth who are questioning his authority. Paul had led in the founding of that church, with the able leadership of Aquila and Priscilla. Previously he had written letters to help the Corinthians sort out their problems.

Now they are getting personal, calling Paul "a fool" (11:16) and having inadequate credentials to be an apostle, which he passionately refutes (11:12-29).

His response to those who claim his vulnerabilities and shortcomings prove his inadequacy to be an apostle is to claim that such failures and afflictions are part of the *blessings* of "the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolations by which we ourselves are comforted by God" (1:3-4).

Paul is blatantly honest about his experiences in Asia Minor: "for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again. . ." (1:8-10).

Paul's crowning image for a broken life is that of our being like "treasure in clay jars" (4:7ff), which are fragile and easily broken, yet are full of great possibilities.

We can be perplexed, afflicted, persecuted, but we find our strength and hope in the resurrected Christ. This claim of a resurrected Christ is far more than a doctrine or required faith statement for Paul. It is the life-giving power to hope!

When hope is recovered from a spiritual source, it gives power from beyond ourselves. We tap the essential Source of the universe from which all creation has unfolded.

When a stroke survivor finds this power there is new strength for new tasks, as with my friend, Karyn, who makes beautiful calendars and notecards and brings joyfulness to our support group.

Prior to my strokes, I almost despised the preparation and delivery of sermons. Since the strokes, I eagerly anticipate the in-depth biblical study, reflection, and delivery of sermons. After struggling for more than 20 years, I found my voice and connected with my passion to share the wonderful news of hope for all us fragile, broken pots who feel overwhelmed by the "vicissitudes of life" — as pastoral care pioneer Wayne Oates described our human frailty. NFJ

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Richard M. Nixon (1969–1974): Part 1

By Bruce Gourley

It was a dark and stormy night in American politics. During a time of upheaval, "millions of Americans believed their time-honored values were being swept away by an insurgent left," wrote historian David Greenberg.

To conservatives, liberal opposition to a beloved Republican president represented an "attack on their mores and way of life."

While evidence of presidential abuse of power loomed over the White House, the Republican president dismissed opposition as "a political witch hunt." A White House source called Democratic investigations an attempt "to destroy the President." Congressional Republicans agreed.

EVANGELICAL SUPPORT

Some 30 percent of the electorate — and almost nine in 10 white evangelicals — stood firm in their support of President Richard M. Nixon, undaunted by his criminal actions. They would not abandon their hero, a defender of white privilege and advocate of "law and order" against their common enemies.

A renowned evangelical leader and Christian nationalist with a household surname — Graham — defended the president at all costs. God had anointed the man in the White House to champion conservative white Christendom.

Pushing aside constitutional religion-state separation, the Rev. Billy Graham urged the president to allow white evangelicals to legally discriminate against those deemed unworthy. Against all evidence, America's most prominent evangelical leader called the president a great moral and ethical leader.

Richard Nixon's birthplace in Yorba Linda, California

When finally forced to face a cascade of damning facts about God's anointed, Graham admitted that "mistakes and blunders have been made," including "moral and ethical questions." But, he insisted, there was "no proof that the president did anything illegal."

"He wielded power like a Shakespearean king," biographer Tim Weiner wrote of Nixon's presidency. "In his eyes, he stood above the law."

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Ironically, the president whose king-like ambition led to his downfall entered the world in poverty while bearing the name of a king.

Born in 1913 to a poor family living in the rural town of Yorba Linda, Calif., Richard Milhous Nixon's namesake was 12th-century British King Richard I. Renowned as the Lionheart and the champion of Christendom, Richard I led the Third Crusade and successfully wrested control of the Holy Land, Jerusalem, from the mighty Muslim leader Saladin.

Of his family's low circumstances and his exalted name, Nixon fittingly noted: "We were poor, but the glory of it was we didn't know it."

The son of a struggling small businessman and a devout Quaker mother who soon moved the family to nearby Whittier, Calif., young Richard was raised in a religiously conservative atmosphere prohibitive of alcohol, dancing and swearing.

Richard's father, formerly an evangelical Methodist, often took Richard to hear the preaching of two of America's most famous evangelists. Both based in nearby Los Angeles, both conservative, and both boasting national radio audiences in the

This is the 37th 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.*

millions, Robert P. Shuler and Aimee Semple McPherson popularized Christian fundamentalism among poor and blue-collar America.

Nixon listened as "Fighting Bob" Shuler, pastor of Trinity Methodist Church, railed against Prohibition era gamblers, bootleggers and corrupt politicians. He witnessed McPherson, pastor of the Pentecostal Church of the Foursquare Gospel, speak in tongues, lead healing services, and traffic in patriotic religion.

FAITH EMBRACE

In a 1962 article in Billy Graham's *Decision* magazine, Nixon first claimed a conversion experience during his youth. Whether honest recollection or a politically astute story, Shuler's warnings against political corruption had long since been discarded by Nixon, even as he embraced McPherson's patriotic religion.

In addition to attending Quaker and conservative evangelical church services, young Richard while in high school worked to help support his family. Nonetheless, he found time to participate in extracurricular activities, excelling in public speaking and debate competitions.

Declining a tuition grant to attend Harvard University, he remained home in support of his family. Enrolling at a local college, he graduated with a history degree. Leaving home upon accepting a scholarship to Duke University School of Law in North Carolina, he graduated third in his class.

RISING AMBITION

Returning to his hometown of Whittier, Nixon practiced law and met Thelma "Pat" Ryan, a high school teacher. They married in 1940. Two years later they moved to Washington, D.C., where Richard briefly worked for the government in a clerical position.

Soon arose an opportunity for a commission in the Navy. His Quaker heritage long since silenced, a publicly irreligious Nixon set aside pacifism and served in the South Pacific Theater during World War II, rising to the rank of lieutenant commander.

Now a prominent figure in the eyes of his hometown, and encouraged to return home and enter politics, Nixon ran as a conservative Republican in California's 12th congressional district. Winning the election in 1946, Nixon served in the House of Representatives from 1947 to 1950 during the "Red Scare," a period marked by national concerns over perceived attempts by Russia, previously a key ally in World War II, to exert communistic influence globally.

Nixon's most notable accomplishments took place in the context of his leadership on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Devoting himself to the "complicated problem of internal communist subversion," he set about exposing suspected American communists.

Of the many Americans the committee targeted, few were proven to be communists. One notable exception, Alger Hiss, a high-profile State Department employee, catapulted Nixon to national prominence. Investigative work by the HUAC and two trials exposed Hiss as a Soviet spy during the 1930s. Hiss unsuccessfully pleaded innocence. With the espionage charges then beyond the statute of limitations, he served prison time for perjury.

ACCLAIM

To national acclaim, Nixon in 1950 ran for the U.S. Senate. Showcasing his willingness to engage in dirty politics, without any factual basis, he castigated his opponent as communistic, earning the nickname "Tricky Dick." The nickname stuck, but Nixon won the election.

Fellow Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed the distinction of being the most anti-communist Republican in America, followed by the newly-elected California senator.

An enthusiastic anti-communist crusader himself, and steadfast ally of McCarthy, Billy Graham was deemed "Communism's Public Enemy Number One" by the *Chicago Daily News* in 1953. The evangelist found a soul mate in Nixon, forming a lasting friendship with the conservative senator.

In the years following, Graham shaped an irreligious Nixon into a conservative Christian hero, a transformation that began with invitations for Nixon to speak — with

Lieutenant Commander Richard Nixon, United States Navy (circa 1945)

Graham's coaching — at the evangelist's rallies.

Abroad, communist aggression hovered over the growing Korean War in East Asia. Communist China and Russia backed North Korea. Western democratic forces supported South Korea. Offering no prospects of a clear victory, the escalating conflict raised the specter of a wider war with communistic Russia and China.

In the Senate in 1951, Nixom criticized Democratic President Harry Truman's refusal to release classified documents regarding the Korean War, documents that revealed a much bleaker assessment of the war than public government statements indicated.

Truman's two-term presidency, troubled by the Korean War, drew to a close in 1953. The same year an armistice brought the Korean conflict to a stalemated close. Richard Nixon's aspirations grew.

MOVING UP

World War II hero Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, a moderate Republican running for president in 1952, chose the popular and ambitious California senator as his vice-presidential running mate. The combination of war hero and communist hunter proved a good salve for the anxieties of the Cold War era. They won easily in 1952 and again in 1956.

The well-liked general and partisan ideologue each embodied extensive foreign affairs experience. Together they led U.S. efforts to maintain military and diplomatic superiority over the Soviet Union.

When the U.S. Senate in 1954 censured Joseph McCarthy for his unconsti-

tutional tactics against suspected American communists, Nixon deftly sidestepped, his focus now on besting Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev on the world's diplomatic stage.

Simultaneously, a growing conflict in Vietnam — with the North backed by communist forces and the South by democratic forces — led Eisenhower to send military advisors, but not troops, to assist South Vietnam. Vice President Nixon remained distant from the war that would one day consume him.

Republicans and Democrats alike, in opposition to "godless" communism in the 1950s, often took the form of public proclamations of faith in God. Politicians frequently ignored constitutional separation of religion and state.

Tutored by Graham, President Eisenhower led the way in inserting the words "under God" into the national Pledge of Allegiance and the phrase "In God We Trust" onto American currency.

MODERN VP

Vice President Richard Nixon expressed little personal interest in the ascendant civil religion of the 1950s. Graham sensed opportunity.

Realizing that Nixon could one day be president, and ever mindful of his Christian nationalist agenda for America, the evangelist prodded the reluctant Californian to deliver contrived speeches at major Protestant conferences. For his own political ambitions, Nixon complied.

Also on the home front and in the face of opposition from many white racist Protestants, Eisenhower tasked Nixon with helping guide the Civil Rights Act of 1957 through Congress. From political ambition Nixon agreed.

Designed to enforce the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling prohibiting racial segregation in public schools, a decision widely defied in much of the South, the 1957 legislation was the first civil rights bill since 1875. Conflict between white southern Christians and black civil rights activists intensified in the wake of the legislation.

Eisenhower and Nixon worked so closely in tandem — as contrasted with the more typical aloof relationships between presidents and vice presidents of the past — biographer Irwin Gellman would later refer to Nixon as "the first modern vice president."

Front cover of literature for the Eisenhower–Nixon campaign, 1952

No closer were the fates of the two men intertwined than in 1955 when Eisenhower suffered a major heart attack and Nixon effectively served as "acting president" for several weeks.

POLITICAL LOSSES

As Eisenhower's second term drew to an end, Nixon, widely popular among Republicans, campaigned for and easily won his party's presidential nomination. In the general election contest he faced off against a young liberal Democrat, Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy.

Favored by many observers to win on the basis of his extensive experience, Nixon, a white Protestant in a largely white Protestant nation, also enjoyed a religious advantage against the Roman Catholic Kennedy. For good measure, Graham counseled Nixon to begin attending church and warned Protestants not to vote for Kennedy, lest the Democrat do the biding of the pope if elected.

Even so, Nixon's advantages over Kennedy faded as the Democratic candidate, affirming religion and state separation, successfully neutralized the religious issue. Kennedy also bested his more experienced but less prepared opponent in the nation's first presidential debate carried on live television. An economic recession further shifted the advantage to Kennedy.

Losing to Kennedy in a close 1960 presidential election, Nixon suddenly found himself politically adrift.

The following year, and with Kennedy's encouragement, Nixon, aided by a ghostwriter, wrote a book examining challenges during his vice presidency, including Eisenhower's heart attack and Nixon's loss in the 1960 election. A best seller, the *Six Crises* sold 300,000 copies.

Returning to California, Nixon discouragingly lost a 1962 campaign for governor of his home state. Despondent, he left politics. "You won't have Dick Nixon to kick around any more," he retorted to reporters on his way out the political door.

BOUNCING BACK

Richard Nixon's political exile was brief. Joining a prestigious law firm, he quickly became wealthy. Soon, he sought new political opportunities.

In 1964 he campaigned for conservative Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Openly seeking the votes of southern whites — angered over civil rights advances — Goldwater alienated most of the Republican establishment other than Nixon. Despite Nixon's help, Goldwater lost in a landslide to Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Elected in his own right after ascending to the presidency from the vice presidency upon Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Johnson in the years following cemented his political legacy.

President Johnson's progressive accomplishments were numerous: civil rights legislation, the Immigration and Naturalization Act, the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, job training initiatives, anti-poverty government programs for low-income Americans, anti-pollution environmental policies, and the formation of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Collectively popular and steering the nation leftward toward a "Great Society," Johnson's policies nonetheless garnered the ire of ideological conservatives.

On the other hand, Johnson's decision to escalate the Vietnam War with direct military involvement of U.S. troops, initially popular, soon gave way to widespread anger as American deaths mounted and prospects for victory dimmed.

RACE

Meanwhile, domestic racial problems intensified as race riots rocked major American cities, reflecting rising tensions between restless blacks and fearful whites.

Seizing the opportunity, Nixon further shored up his conservative credentials by campaigning for far right, racist Republican candidates in the 1966 congressional elections.

Having positioned himself with party leaders and the white racist public for the presidential campaign of 1968, second-time candidate Nixon set out to transform the Republican Party through an emerging political playbook that became known as the "Southern Strategy."

The plan called for steering the Republican Party further rightward by appealing to a primary base of white racists with coded wording. Nixon's advisor H.R. Haldeman explained the core of the strategy: "[Y]ou have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognized this while not appearing to."

Reflecting on the Southern Strategy in a 1981 interview, Republican strategist Lee Atwater spoke more bluntly: "You start out in 1954 by saying, 'Nigger, nigger, nigger.' By 1968 you can't say 'nigger' — that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites … Obviously sitting around saying, 'We want to cut this,' is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than 'Nigger, nigger.'"

NEW COALITION

In short, Nixon determined to use the coded language and imagery of "states' rights," "law and order" and smaller government to build a new Republican coalition of white racists from the Southern states and southern California, the latter his home and that of the greatest concentration of white southerners who had migrated westward in search of good-paying defense industry jobs.

Strom Thurmond and Barry Goldwater, fellow racist politicians now publicly couching their hatred in coded language, campaigned on Nixon's behalf. Billy Graham, whom some called the "Protestant Pope," publicly endorsed Nixon's campaign despite being known for his own desegregated evangelistic rallies.

White evangelicals listened. They liked what they heard.

Running for president in 1968 under the guise of moderation, Nixon ventured forth to transform the party of abolitionist Abraham Lincoln into a political home for those with racial fears. It was a bold foray into uncharted waters.

And the political waters would part again and again.

RIOTIOUS TIMES

Johnson, eyeing plunging approval ratings, noting bitter racial divisions, and citing above all the nation's weariness of an escalating Vietnam War, opted not to run for a second presidential term.

An assassin's bullet felled civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Racial turmoil ensued as angry black Americans rioted in cities across America.

Another assassin's bullet took the life of Democratic darling and presidential candidate New York U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy, brother of former President John F. Kennedy, five years earlier felled by an assassin's bullet.

A horrified nation mourned. Robert Kennedy's assassination scrambled the Democratic Party's primary season. One month later, violence erupted between police and antiwar protesters at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Meanwhile, segregationist, populist and former Alabama governor George Wallace ran for president on a third party platform of racial hatred. Under the banner of "Stand Up for America," Wallace targeted voters who, in the words of historian Michael Kazin, "felt their good jobs, their modest homes, and their personal safety were under siege both from liberal authorities above and angry minorities below."

Lesser-educated whites, Wallace's core supporters, resented government welfare for black people, public school racial integration and school busing. They viewed liberal anti-Vietnam "hippies" as lazy and unpatriotic, despised anything resembling communism, and blamed liberal elites in Washington for leading America into a failed Vietnam War.

Wallace was "an extraordinarily intuitive politician," his biographer Dan T. Carter wrote. "He understood … there were tens of millions of Americans who really were not supportive of the kind of social changes that were taking place in the United States."

Wallace, he added, recognized that many white Americans despised anti-war protestors and violent black activists as symbols of "a fundamental decline in the traditional cultural compass of God, family, and country."

The former Alabama governor shared with his supporters a sense of white victimhood and a hatred of minorities. Liberals have been looking "down their nose at you and me a long time," he said at rallies. Carter recalled how Wallace campaign director Tom Turnipseed told him that a supporter once asked, "When George Wallace is elected president, he's going to round up all the niggers and shoot them, right?"

Disappointed when told that Wallace had no plans to execute black Americans, his supporters nonetheless embodied the white supremacist anger that Wallace intentionally tapped into.

RACIAL RHETORIC

"What are the real issues that exist today in these United States?" Wallace rhetorically asked his nodding supporters. "It is the trend of the pseudo-intellectual government, where a select, elite group have written guidelines in bureaus and court decisions, have spoken from some pulpits, some college campuses, some newspaper

offices, looking down their noses at the average man on the street."

Although Wallace primarily targeted the states of the former Confederacy, he also hoped to capitalize on overt racism and growing discontent he encountered at campaign rallies in the Midwest.

Reveling in the crude and ugly rhetoric that Nixon had resolved to avoid, Wallace's campaign made Nixon look less racist than he was. So angry was Wallace's language and demeanor that at his rallies fights often broke out as supporters attacked protesters.

"A lot of folks just worshiped him, the poor white people in the country," Turnipseed recounted of Wallace's campaign.

But when Wallace's hate-filled demagoguery failed to gain traction beyond his most loyal supporters, Nixon was ready with coded, veiled appeals to racism. Using the language of freedom of choice in school busing, Nixon peeled off some Wallace supporters who viewed the former Alabama senator as unelectable.

Minus the blunt rhetoric, Nixon's campaign rallies often became orderly white Christian love fests. In the South, Billy Graham strategically trotted Nixon out at evangelical meetings and rallies, where the presidential hopeful voiced canned lines about God and country. On the stump, civil religion rhetoric from the 1950s Eisenhower administration returned.

Even so, the Johnson administration's peace talks with Vietnam bolstered the campaign of eventual Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey. Seeking a last-minute boost and living up to the nickname "Tricky Dick," weeks before the election Nixon's campaign quietly helped persuade South Vietnam to call off the talks.

In November 1968 and with America divided, chaotic and manipulated by Nixon's secretive anti-Johnson foreign policy, Nixon walked into the breach. Breaking Democrats' hold upon the South, he won several southern states — helped by the votes of white evangelicals influenced by Graham.

With the exception of Texas, Wallace took the remaining states of the old Confederacy, his only states. For the first time since the Civil War era, Democrats had been shut out of the South, Texas excluded.

Nixon won the presidency with about 15 percent of the black vote, less than half of his failed 1960 presidential total.

Southern Strategy architect Kevin Phillips envisioned the 1968 election's significance for Republican politics of the future: "From now on, the Republicans are never going to get more than 10 to 20 percent of the Negro vote and they don't need any more than that."

However, he cautioned: "Republicans would be shortsighted if they weakened enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. The more Negroes who register as Democrats in the South, the sooner the Negrophobe whites will quit the Democrats and become Republicans. That's where the votes are. Without that prodding from the blacks, the whites will backslide into their old comfortable arrangement with the local Democrats."

OATH TAKEN

Nixon in 1968, in fact, became the last Republican presidential candidate to date to capture more than approximately 10 percent of the black vote. Yet Phillips failed to foresee a future America composed also of many non-black minority citizens.

His personal dream achieved in 1968 through the dawning of an evangelical-empowered, "New Right" Republican Party, Nixon in his first inaugural address of Jan. 20, 1969 captured his triumphant feelings: "I ask you to share with me today the majesty of this moment."

In Nixon's estimation, the sky was the limit for conservative white America.

Billy Graham believed the same. Leading the inaugural prayer, he bestowed God's favor upon Nixon. "We recognize, O Lord, that in Thy sovereignty Thou has permitted Richard Nixon to lead us at this momentous hour of our history."

Heady stuff, but Nixon was up to the task. Humanity's hope of its "deepest aspirations can at last be realized," he declared. Sending a man to the moon …World peace … "This is our summons to greatness."

Then came the big picture coded language. Against the backdrop of a Democrat-controlled Congress, Nixon invoked the legacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, yet insisted: "We are approaching the limits of what government alone can do." Americans, he declared, should take care of themselves, rather than depending upon Washington, D.C.

He spoke disarmingly. Nixon's history of bare-knuckled politics seemingly faded away

Election flyer/poster distributed on behalf of Richard Nixon's campaign for Congress, 1946.

as he summoned the greatness of Lincoln: "When we listen to 'the better angels of our nature,' we find that they celebrate the simple things, the basic things — such as goodness, decency, love, kindness."

He promised to be loyal to his country: "I have taken an oath today in the presence of God and my countrymen to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States." It was a promise he would be unwilling and unable to keep.

SEEKING FAVOR

Six days later, a Sunday, the new president hosted a worship service in the White House. "[W]e feel God's presence here, and ... we seek his guidance," Nixon (or perhaps Graham; accounts vary) assured the hand-picked congregation of key politicians, donors and religious leaders.

Thirty-five additional White House worship services would take place during Nixon's administration, each carefully orchestrated to communicate the president's conservative religious faith and translate it into political loyalty.

Graham often led the services. Nixon also strategically reached out to influential conservative Catholic, Jewish and black Christian leaders.

Presidential historian Gary Scott Smith's extensive research offers insight into Nixon's White House worship services. One participant placed Nixon in the lineage of "Old Testament kings" who summoned prophets to their courts to preach to the nation.

Another group of supporters called Nixon's worship services "the most vital religious services on this planet" and prayed that "the contaminating influences of pro-communist, Un-American ideologies and modernistic apostate ideologies" would never get wind of the important meetings.

From there the adulation only grew. Christian minister Norman Vincent Peale called Nixon "the first father of the nation." Jewish Rabbi Louis Finkelstein upped Peale in declaring Nixon "judge of us all," pontificating that God gave Nixon "the vision and wisdom to save the world."

Vulgar and vain, Nixon welcomed the adoration of religious leaders. Personally, the president showed little to no interest in God, the Bible or prayer. Rarely did he actually refer to God. He spoke of moral values not in any personal sense, but as a way to stroke evangelicals for his own glory.

Graham prayed and played alongside Nixon, their friendship a mutual alliance against the common enemy of liberalism.

Even as he publicly projected godliness and ecumenism, Nixon — as taped private conversations would later reveal — was in reality a bigot who disdained Jews and African Americans. Catholic scholar Michael Sean Winters summed up the conniving president in simple yet stark terms: Nixon "was consumed by his hatred of others, a walking bundle of resentments."

TRUE NATURE

Some religious leaders sensed Nixon's true nature, as Garry Scott Smith's research chronicles. Conservative evangelical Carl F. Henry, editor of *Christianity Today* and ally of Graham, had his doubts. Henry interviewed candidate Nixon during the 1968 campaign season, finding him "remarkably imprecise about spiritual realities and enduring ethical concerns." Nonetheless, Henry supported Nixon.

Some liberal Christian leaders called upon the president to withdraw all troops from Vietnam, reestablish diplomatic relations with communist Cuba, and grant amnesty to draft resisters citing Christian convictions. Nixon ignored them.

The president's favoritism of conservative evangelicals drew a rebuke from famed liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who warned that Nixon threatened the "wall of separation between church and state." The unbiblical "Nixon-Graham doctrine," Niebuhr charged, consisted of "morally inferior or outrageously unjust" public policies.

Outraged, the president directed the FBI to probe Niebuhr's "patriotism."

Undaunted, Graham's loyalty to Nixon grew ever deeper. From securing special privileges for evangelical Christian organizations to crafting Vietnam policies and voicing opposition to collegiate protests, Nixon and Graham worked in tandem.

Intoxicated with power, the evangelist failed to see that he was Nixon's pawn. Or perhaps he did, and it mattered not.

Six months after his election and with his evangelical coalition growing, Nixon announced a domestic framework for reducing the federal government. He deployed coded language for policies designed to hurt minorities. "New Federalism" would transfer "more power" from Washington to states and localities "with less interference."

Southern states understood the invitation to use the pretext of states' rights to impose more restrictions on African Americans.

Still using coded language in his memoirs, Nixon recalled the driving force behind New Federalism's downsizing of the national government: "I wanted to get rid of the costly failures of the Great Society … The worst offender was the welfare system, and welfare reform was my highest domestic priority."

Blacks benefited most from the "welfare system." Nixon's welfare reforms favored aid to working white poor families over fatherless, non-working black families. Addressing law and order in a racially divided nation, the president focused on crime in America's urban black neighborhoods, doubling down on a century of racist penal policies aimed primarily at African Americans.

Yet the more Nixon did to please racists, the greater white demands grew. Black families didn't deserve any federal aid, many whites grumbled. Government is liberal, and we don't like it at all, others said. Wait a minute, though: we do want more Medicare and Medicaid benefits.

To the latter, Nixon wisely responded affirmatively. He also increased federal aid for blind, disabled and elderly Americans through the creation of Supplemental Security Income managed by the Social Security Administration.

Liberal with government spending when advantageous, Nixon also seized opportunities to shrink government under the guise of opposing liberalism.

FRAGILE EARTH

An epic contrast of the triumphs and failures of American government unfolded in the summer of 1969. It surfaced on a river in Cleveland, soared to the dry surface of the

moon, and splashed down into the Pacific Ocean. Afterward, earth and heaven would never be the same.

Transformed into a manufacturing city during the Civil War, Cleveland, Ohio, absent federal oversight, prospered financially for the next 100 years. A literal trial of fires, however, came with the economic good times. Over the course of a century a dozen or more times the Cuyahoga River, an open sewage dump for toxic industrial chemicals and sludge that also served as the city's drinking water, went up in flames.

Sometimes people died from the flames and explosions. Hundreds if not thousands became seriously ill from swimming or falling into the water, or from drinking the city's tap water. This was the price of industrial profits.

But in 1950s and 1960s Cleveland, something unexpected happened: Industry collapsed, putting some 60,000 people out of work. Against the backdrop of an economically depressed city in an era of civil rights and Vietnam War unrest, on June 22, 1969 yet another ordinary river fire illuminated the problems of the city and those of many other industrial cities with polluted, fire-prone rivers.

For some 30 minutes flames five stories tall poured thick black smoke skyward, consuming a railroad bridge. Although the fire was not among the worst Cuyahoga River fires, Cleveland mayor Carl Stokes, the first African-American mayor of a large U.S. city, through the national press and a visit to Washington D.C., brought the fire to the nation's attention.

Stokes' timing was excellent. Pioneer ecologist Rachel Carson's 1962 hallmark book, *Silent Spring*, had warned the nation of the deadly misuse of chemicals and ignited an environmental movement. And in December 1968 Apollo 8 astronaut Bill Anders, while orbiting the moon, had captured a spectacular photograph of a fragile-looking, small and distant earth rising over the moon's surface.

Earthlings, in short, were becoming sensitized to environmental problems on their shrinking blue planet. Within months the Cuyahoga River fire symbolized the urgency of cleaning up the environment.

Soon the Sierra Club pressed President Nixon for federal environmental legislation. Sensing an opportunity, in December 1970, Nixon by executive order consolidated environmental-related functions within 44 government offices into the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

With the stroke of his pen he responded to the "fad" of liberal environmentalism by shrinking the federal government. Thereafter during his administration he blocked the EPA from achieving significant environmental reform.

SPACE

Meanwhile, less than a month after the Cuyahoga River fire, the Apollo 11 spacecraft lifted off for the moon's surface. Enormously expensive, the National Space and Aeronautics Administration (NASA) budget was already in the president's fiscal crosshairs. But first, Nixon determined to receive full credit for Apollo 11's path-breaking mission.

As captivated earthlings watched via live television on July 21, 1969, humans set foot on the moon's surface for the first time. It was a spectacular moment, considered by many as the greatest achievement in human history.

Prior to leaving the moon, the astronauts — Neil A. Armstrong, Michael Collins and Edwin E. Aldrin Jr. — deposited a plaque on the moon's surface bearing their signatures, along with that of President Richard Nixon. Never once did Nixon mention former President Kennedy's connection with the Apollo mission.

The three famous astronauts returned to earth, their capsule safely splashing down in the Pacific Ocean, a vast body of water whose currents were already beginning to form a floating train of plastics that within two decades would be an environmental disaster.

Less than a year after the Apollo 11 mission and in the name of downsizing government, Nixon, his name enshrined on the moon, set in motion a reduction of NASA's budget.

Although achieving with minimal resistance a restructuring of federal government to the benefit of white conservative Americans, one singular issue vexed President Richard Nixon: Vietnam.

VIETNAM

Early in Nixon's presidency, Billy Graham, not confined to offering domestic advice to the president, in a 13-page memo, unclassified in 1989, suggested a quick way to bring about victory in Vietnam. He claimed that American missionaries in South Vietnam backed the plan.

Turn the war over to the South Vietnamese, Graham wrote. Then "rapidly" withdraw American forces, arm southern guerrillas, wage a propaganda campaign in the North, and finally, equip North Vietnamese defectors to bomb the flood-control dikes throughout the North followed by a massive troop invasion.

One critic contended that Graham's plan would result in a million deaths. Nixon wisely declined the evangelist's counsel.

Yet, political reality demanded that Nixon do something as the increasingly unpopular war drove his approval rating below 50 percent.

He responded by initiating a withdrawal of U.S. troops alongside a simultaneous buildup of democratic South Vietnamese military capacity, promising victory by the end of the troop withdrawal. His plan was unrealistic for victory in a complex war. The fighting instead intensified and spilled over into neighboring Cambodia, a neutral nation. Student protests against the war increased.

On March 4, 1970, at Kent State University of Ohio, the National Guard killed four and wounded nine unarmed student protestors, evoking national fury. White conservative Republicans and evangelicals, mostly one and the same, recoiled in horror at young liberals challenging authority.

Much of the rest of America expressed outrage at American armed forces killing young Americans. Five day later 100,000 people demonstrated in Washington, D.C., in protest of the war and the killing of unarmed student protesters. Nixon fled to Camp David in the face of what his administration termed a "mob" bent on "civil war."

DESEGREGATION

Many Nixon supporters, along with 1968 Wallace voters, viewed university campuses and desegregated public schools with great disdain. From elementary schools to colleges, many of America's young people were being taught liberal values of racial diversity, human equality and empathy.

Resistance to school integration remained widespread in much of the old Confederate South. Renewed federal efforts to enforce court-ordered desegregation elicited white anger. Wallace, in 1970 running again for Alabama governor on a campaign of resisting integration, challenged Nixon's acquiescence to mandated desegregation.

A Wallace campaign ad portrayed a white girl surrounded by a group of menacing black boys. "Wake Up Alabama! Blacks vow to take over Alabama," the ad screamed, a modern version of antebellum, Civil War and Jim Crow era unfounded propaganda playing to white fears of black males preying upon white girls and women.

The Nixon administration, caught in a political vise, tried to allay white fears by reaffirming support for freedom of choice in school busing, coded language communicating segregationist sentiments.

To a racially divided nation, Nixon "pledged elimination of segregation that is imposed by law but indicated that he would await further guidance from the courts before moving against de facto segregation, the problem for which busing has most frequently been prescribed," the *New York Times* reported.

Nixon's half-hearted stance brought about predictable results. A December 1970 report by two liberal Christian organizations — the Quaker American Friends Service Committee and the interdenominational National Council of Churches of Christ — charged the administration with negligence.

"The Status of School Desegregation in the South" report faulted Nixon's efforts on multiple fronts. Citing "misleading" government statistics regarding desegregation compliance, the report noted that "individual schools often remain segregated."

Too frequently, "the burden of segregation has been placed on black schools and parents," while "within 'desegregated' schools, widespread segregation in classrooms and buses and relating to many of the extra-curricular activities still persists." In many schools "black teachers and staff have been dismissed or demoted." Perversely, "some desegregation plans" instead resulted in "resegregation." Nixon's anti-federal government crusade was working.

ON EDGE

In military and ideological warfare alike, America teetered on a precipitous edge. The seemingly never-ending Vietnam war claimed upwards of a million lives total, evoking growing liberal protests.

Hoping to bring the disastrous war to an end, Nixon secretly ordered a new offensive against North Vietnamese communists in 1971. It ended in failure.

Seeking a diplomatic solution, early in the presidential election year of 1972 Nixon and national security advisor Henry Kissinger traveled to Beijing to meet with Chinese leader Mao Zedong, ally of the North Vietnamese. In the background Kissinger also quietly led peace talks with North Vietnamese leaders. From these overtures nothing of substance immediately took place, but the talks led to an uptick in Nixon's popularity.

At the same time the seemingly never-ending white war against civil rights, abetted by a presidential administration unwilling to fully enforce civil rights laws, effectively prevented millions of black Americans from enjoying equal liberties enshrined in law.

ELECTION YEAR

As the 1972 presidential election year dawned, black Americans and progressive whites protested never-ending racial inequalities. Democratic and Republican moderates wavered. Conservatives, evangelicals foremost, praised Nixon but lusted for the total marginalization of liberals. Graham and Nixon secretly complained about Jews having a "stranglehold" on the American media.

Ever insecure and always grasping for more, Nixon feared losing reelection in November. Seeking a way to politically tip the scales, he sought insider information about the Democratic Party.

On June 17, 1972 police arrested five burglars, four with ties to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), at the office of the Democratic National Convention in the Watergate complex in Washington.

The next morning's *Washington Post* covered the story. Young reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein soon identified two co-conspirators, a former CIA officer on Nixon's staff and a former FBI agent.

The White House dismissed the incident as a meaningless "third-rate burglary attempt" and distanced Nixon from the crime. The burglars destroyed evidence. Presidential aid Charles Colson planted alibis on their behalf. A co-conspirator disappeared.

Whispers vaguely placed blame on alleged and unidentified perpetrators far removed from the White House. The FBI was ordered to back down on its investigation. A cover-up was in place.

Public attention shifted elsewhere. Nixon's approval ratings edged upward. Graham remained loyal. The president's coalition of white conservative evangelicals held strong.

Life in the White House retained a veneer of normalcy. Sunday worship services continued. Routine meetings took place. An ever-present tape recorder silently whirred.

Outside the White House, Woodward and Bernstein determined to uncover the truth. On the trail of a smoldering scandal, they refused to give up.

Overhead, political clouds gathered as the November presidential election drew near. NFJ

What if? *Finding answers in relationships*

BY CAROL BOSEMAN TAYLOR

For years I have contemplated the shrinking churches of which I have been a participating member. What are we missing? Why don't people come to these places I love and enjoy? What can we do?

Quite frankly, such questions have consumed a lot of my thinking and prayers. Recently, however, I have felt an answer circling my thoughts although I couldn't put words to them.

Personal encounters with several people had a part in my "eureka" moment: three involved people I did not know before — and another a long-lost friend.

First, while attending a Nurturing Faith board meeting in the Atlanta area last fall, I met, talked with and listened to civil rights leader and retired Baptist minister Albert Paul Brinson who was a close friend of Martin Luther King Jr. and Sr.

Sometimes you just "connect" with someone on a deeply spiritual level and know that person is your brother or your sister. As I listened to the struggles he had endured as a child and young man, tears ran down my face.

What struck me most was this: There was no anger in him. There was no hatred in him. There was gratitude and kindness. There was only love. My life has been changed forever by meeting this man of God.

Second, I was part of a lecture series sponsored by Barton College where Amy Butler, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, spoke and led a workshop. During the workshop, attendees were encouraged into conversations about how they reach out to the community through their churches and with their families.

There was much talk around the mission work churches do locally and afar: serving at a homeless shelter, providing Thanksgiving dinner to those in need, making Christmas gifts available for children, improving living conditions for those in poverty.

All of these things are very worthy accomplishments. But I began to wonder, "What if…?"

What if instead of just repairing someone's home, we went back on a weekly basis to check on them? What if we took them to doctors' appointments if they needed transportation? What if we didn't stop with Thanksgiving dinner but made sure they had groceries each week or a prepared meal to slip into their oven?

What if we asked them to go out for coffee and conversation? What if we became a part of their lives? What if we didn't do missions, but instead made friends?

The third time my life was touched was while having lunch at a local restaurant owned by a young man, his dad and his uncle. Moe Deloache sat down at our table as we chatted about the great food we were enjoying.

Then for more than 30 minutes we talked about our town and the things that hurt us both. He plays professional basketball in Europe, but his heart is in helping the young people who live in a poor section of our town where he grew up — where privileges are few and the struggles are real.

His desire is to come back permanently to make a difference in those young lives. His current struggle is prejudice and hatred from those who should be encouraging and empowering him.

Later I mentioned his name and passions to someone who works with a mission project in that area. Two days later I saw pictures of this wonderful young man spending time with kids through a ministry in that part of our town.

Fourth, and finally, is Caleb Oladipo, professor of evangelism and missions at Campbell University. He entered our lives more than three decades ago when he was newly enrolled at Southeastern Seminary and began an internship working with college students at our church in Raleigh.

My husband Chuck and I worked in that department, and befriended Caleb and his wife. We shared meals and discussions, and later loved on their baby twins. Caleb then attended Yale Divinity School, and we did not keep up over the years.

However, we heard him speak last year at our former Raleigh church. He talked about how the church must change in order to reach people today.

He spoke of how the questions we used to ask ("If you died tonight, do you know where you would go?") aren't relevant. Instead we must raise new questions such as: "How can I help you with the struggles you face as we face struggles together?"

Another part of my "eureka" moment occurred. We cannot entice people as we've done in the past. What they need most are relationships!

We must get to know people where they are. Invite them into our lives, not just to our church. Listen to them. Love them. And they will know we are Christians by our love. NFJ

—Carol Boseman Taylor lives in Rocky Mount, N.C., and is the author of I Promise. Rejoice! *(2015, Nurturing Faith).*

Have we erred on Ur?

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

For years, most Bible readers have assumed that Abraham's hometown should be identified with the great city of Ur, located in southern Mesopotamia, an area known in ancient times as Sumer. The area is now in southern Iraq; the site of Ur is near the modern city of Basra.

From the time of Leonard Wooley's spectacular excavations in Ur (1922–1934), his claims that the Sumerian Ur was a city "worthy of Abraham" led to that location becoming near orthodoxy in scholarly circles. I for one have repeated it many times to my Old Testament students.

That may have been an "urrer." I knew the geography was problematic, but didn't know of a better option until reading a recent post by Gary Rentdorf at Torah.com. An excellent scholar who teaches Jewish studies at Rutgers University, Rentdorf makes a good case that Abraham's Ur was actually in southern Turkey.

Why? The Bible makes several references to God bringing Abraham from *'Ur-Kasdim*, translated as "Ur of the Chaldees" (Gen. 11:27, 31; Gen. 15:7; Neh. 9:7).

No one in southern Mesopotamia was called a "Chaldean" in Abraham's day, but since the story was written much later, we assumed the author retrojected a contemporary label to an ancient situation.

Some texts imply that Abraham went straight from "Ur of the Chaldees" to Canaan, but the story in Gen. 11:27-32 says he moved with his father Terah from Ur-Kasdim to Haran (now in southeastern Turkey), stopping there until Terah died.

Genesis 12 picks up the story in Haran, with God's call for Abraham to proceed to "the land that I will show you" (12:1).

We know there were Chaldeans in southern Mesopotamia during the Neo-Babylonian period, a thousand years after Abraham's time, and that Babylonians

Urfa skyline

of that time were also popularly known as Chaldeans.

Some ancient sources, however, suggest the Chaldeans' original home was in Anatolia, now a part of Turkey, before some of them migrated south.

A cuneiform tablet found at Ugarit contains a significant clue: it is a letter from a Hittite king named Hattusili III, also located in Turkey. The king of Ugarit, on the Mediterranean coast, had complained about the activities of certain Hittite merchants from a city named Ura — which would come into Hebrew as 'Ur. The Hittite king pledged to crack down on the merchants and make them behave.

This is likely the same city in southern Turkey that is now called Urfa. It turns out that local Jewish, Islamic and Christian traditions have considered Urfa to be the birthplace of Abraham for more than a thousand years.

The biblical names of Abraham's grandfather Nahor and great-grandfather Serug are also the names of towns located near Urfa. The official Turkish name of the city is Saliurfa. In the Byzantine period it was known as Edessa, a popular focus of Syriac Christianity.

Is the Turkish Urfa a better candidate for Abraham's 'Ur-Kasdim? We have good reason to think so.

Gen. 24:4, 7, 10 and 29 describe Abraham's birthplace as being in Aram-Naharayim ("Beyond the River"), a region defined as being east of the Euphrates River. The northern Ur was in that area, but the southern city of Ur was built on the west side of the river.

Another geographical problem I have long recognized is this: If Abraham's father Terah had set out for Canaan from the Sumerian Ur, he would have gone north along the Euphrates, bearing west around the top of the Fertile Crescent, then turning south and traveling through Syria until reaching Canaan.

But Terah wound up in Haran — which means Terah would have had to make a sharp right turn at the Balik River and travel many miles upstream to reach Haran. That makes little sense.

If the family had departed from the northern Ur, however, Haran would have been a natural stop on the way to Canaan.

Cyrus Gordon, who dug at the Sumerian Ur with Leonard Wooley, never accepted Wooley's identification of the southern Ur as Abraham's "Ur of the Chaldees." He consistently argued for a northern location, but few followed his lead, although the northern Ur was generally accepted before Wooley's argument for the southern Ur became popular.

A preponderance of evidence appears to support Gordon's contention.

The next time I lecture on Abraham, I will mention the great Sumerian city of Ur, but will point to the more likely possibility that Abraham grew up in Anatolia, not Sumer.

This is the way biblical studies work: We are always discovering new things and challenging or refining past ideas. That's not a bad approach to life in general. Being too set in our ways can stymie progress, but accepting the challenge of new understandings broadens the potential for a better future. NFJ

PRIVILEGE & POWER

Historical survey shows Christianity's current conflicts go beyond familiar labels

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

"White evangelicals are terrified that liberals want to extinguish their rights," reads a modern headline. "'Christian' is no longer a religious faith — it's white identity politics," blares another. There is much substance — and history — behind both.

CONSERVATIVE CRITICISM

As a recent *Christianity Today* editorial observed, many fearful evangelicals have placed their hope for salvation from liberalism in a profane and "profoundly immoral" man who is the mirror opposite of Jesus of the Gospels. This, coming from the flagship publication of conservative American evangelicals.

"Consider how your justification of Mr. Trump influences your witness to your Lord and Savior," the *CT* missive asks of evangelical Trump supporters.

"Consider what an unbelieving world will say if you continue to brush off Mr. Trump's immoral words and behavior in the cause of political expediency," it continues. "If we don't reverse course now, will anyone take anything we say about justice and righteousness with any seriousness for decades to come?"

After justifying itself for not earlier criticizing evangelical support for Trump, *CT* concedes it is time "to say that no matter how many hands we win in this political poker game, we are playing with a stacked deck of gross immorality and ethical incompetence."

Forsaking an inclusive Jesus for the racist wiles of Trump is further accelerating the decades-long decline of white American Christianity. Non-Christians — Jews, Muslims, secularists, agnostics, atheists — readily recognize that Christianity without Jesus is self-serving politics.

The historical record also bears out this reality.

LABELS

Today's labels of "conservative" and "liberal" do not fully capture the centuries-old struggle between disparate ideologies currently embodied in America's Age of Trump.

"Conservative" is properly understood as preserving a status quo that serves the interest of those in power. "Liberal" is shorthand for some form of equitable change.

Conservatives fear the loss of power and privilege. Liberals, sometimes but often not benefiting from the status quo, desire the remodeling or dismantling of exclusive structures in order that more people may enjoy rights and privileges.

Not the words best descriptive of the dynamics of these competing ideologies, what passes today for "conservative" and "liberal" could more fairly be summarized as "exclusive" and "inclusive."

In the American Revolution, conservative Tories (or Loyalists) supported the British monarchy, an exclusive form of government from which only a few fully benefited. Liberal patriots fought to expand "liberty and justice" to include far more, albeit not all, citizens.

Past and present alike, conservatives often deploy religious arguments, centered on authority and order in the name of God, in defense of exclusive-oriented systems from which they benefit. Liberals sometimes respond with religious arguments, focusing on the equality of all humans in God's image or the love of God for all humans, in striving to overturn the status quo in favor of inclusiveness.

Mosaics in the Hagia Sophia, section: Detail, Emperor Constantine I with a model of the city

The rightness of conservatism or liberalism, of exclusivism and inclusiveness, has always been a matter of perspective.

During the American Revolution were the Tories or the Patriots "right"? Is the preservation or abolishment of today's unjust systems "right"? Upon what foundation should Christians stand in sorting out answers to such questions?

Opinions vary. Emotions run high. Clashes ensue. It has always been that way.

EXCLUSIVITY

The story of exclusive Christianity began long ago in a place far away from America. A fourth-century CE pagan Roman emperor, so the story goes, one day had a vision. Or perhaps he glanced at the sun and saw a solar

halo phenomenon, otherwise known as a sun dog. Accounts vary, but in support of the latter some coins of the day depicted the emperor alongside Sol Invictus, a solar deity sometimes shown with a solar halo.

Regardless, Emperor Constantine by some later accounts saw something that resembled a Christian sign, a cross. He may or may not have realized the symbolism that day, but after he saw whatever he saw hours before a pivotal battle, Constantine emerged victorious.

Within a few years the pagan Constantine pronounced his favor upon the minority but ascendant Christian religion that he believed could further his political ambitions. But soon he faced a problem: Christians, it turned out, were a diverse group of people whose clerics argued greatly among themselves.

Whether Constantine knew the backstory or not, many Christian leaders of the fourth century had departed significantly from the way of Christ. Setting aside Jesus' life and inclusive teachings recorded in the first-century Christian Gospels, they spent much time debating obscure theological fine points of the nature and substance of Jesus. Of no end were the theological disputations.

Constantine, on the other hand, needed a clearly defined religious system to replace the fading paganism of the Roman Empire, unite his subjects, and expand his power. In 325, 12 years after his mysterious vision or common solar halo, the emperor summoned Christian leaders to Nicea in present-day Turkey and issued an ultimatum.

Get to the bottom of your arguments, he demanded. Sort it all out. Tell me what is the proper Christian faith, and what is not. Then by official edict and the point of the sword we can get on with unifying the empire around the one and only true faith.

And so it was. With the Nicene Creed in one hand and a sword in the other, the Roman Empire became Christian — not including those who refused to embrace the creed and fled into exile or were executed.

Those who were literate — and not many were — may have noticed something peculiar about the creed that separated the worthy from the unworthy. Not a word did it say about the life and teachings of Jesus.

EMPIRE

For more than a thousand years this Christian empire — political and religious leaders sometimes in tandem, oftentimes jockeying among themselves for the upper hand — conquered unlettered peoples by sword-enforced creeds, absent the life and teachings of Jesus.

A religious reformation of the 16th century wrested some control from the long-dominant Roman Catholic Church. Protesting against perceived abuses and injustices of the Church, Protestant Christians emerged, carving out space for themselves in Europe. They issued their own creeds, within which the life and teachings of Jesus remained absent. And like the Roman Catholic Church, they often persecuted and sometimes executed dissenters.

In a now-crowded Europe with few places to hide from either Catholic or Protestant overlords, some zealous dissenters set sail for newly-discovered land across the Atlantic, the New World.

"The story of exclusive Christianity began long ago in a place far away from America."

Thousands of miles away in safety, the dissenters started afresh — or did they?

Repeating the age-old historical pattern, Virginians and Pilgrims and Puritans and Quakers of the New World united religion and state by creed and sword. All but two of the sundry 17th-century colonies enjoined church and state to one degree or another. Some were theocracies.

Virginia, in 1607 the first colony and chartered for business purposes, was nonetheless devoted to the "propagating of Christian Religion to such People, as yet live in Darkness and miserable Ignorance of the true Knowledge and Worship of God, and may in time bring the Infidels and Savages, living in those parts, to human Civility."

For God, the sword subdued many native peoples. Life for invasive Christians, too, was a bit harsh. For missing church services, criticizing clergy or committing blasphemy, various punishments were meted.

Decades later, in 1682, Quaker William Penn established Pennsylvania for religious freedom — at least for some people. "[T]o reduce the Savage Natives by gentle and just manners to the love of civil society and Christian Religion," the English crown charged Penn.

Love? Not so fast. Since "savages themselves, as of other, enemies, pirates and Robbers, may probably be feared," Pennsylvania's charter noted, Penn and his followers were granted permission "to make war and pursue … enemies ... by Sea as by Land, yea, even without the Limits of the said province, and by God's assistance, to vanquish and take them, and being taken, to put them to death by the law of War, or to save them at their pleasure."

Southward, North Carolina's charter read almost verbatim. In the decades between Virginia and Pennsylvania, other conservative, non-inclusive colonies sprang up, theocratic to various degrees. Massachusetts and Connecticut were established as "Bible Commonwealths," their charters and other legal documents drawing freely and deeply from harsh Old Testament laws, violators subject to beatings, jailing and execution.

Maryland existed in part for the purpose of "extending the Christian religion," charged with protecting "God's holy and true Christian Religion" from defilement "by Change, Prejudice, or Diminution." Maine's bore similar wording.

New York's charter listed offenses for capital laws. "If any person within this Government shall by direct express, impious or presumptuous ways, deny the true God and his Attributes, he shall be put to death," read the first.

New Hampshire's first settlers vowed "solemnly by the Grace and Help of Christ and in His Name and fear to submit ourselves to such Godly and Christian Laws as are established in the realm of England to our best Knowledge." That England's "Christian Laws" neglected the life and teachings of Jesus was left unsaid.

INCLUSIVITY

Two independent-minded, inclusive colonies opted to forgo the long history of church and state entanglement. Rhode Island first and then New Jersey acknowledged Christianity as the common faith but explicitly granted freedom of religion to all.

Within Rhode Island "no person … at any time hereafter shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinion in matters of religion" undisruptive of "the civil peace of our said colony," the colonial charter decreed, "[A]ll and every person and persons may, from time to time, and at all times hereafter, freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments."

Nearby New Jersey later deployed similar but briefer language.

Here matters largely stood, with a few colonial additions, more than 150 years later. Even during the American Revolution, America's first colony, among others, still punished and jailed citizens defiant of proscribed Christian laws. In the 1760s, an estimated one-half of all Virginia's Baptist ministers were incarcerated by Anglican state authorities.

Yet in an ironic twist of fate upon America's successful break from England, Virginia of the 1780s, pushed hard by minority Baptists and steered by Thomas Jefferson, did an about-face. Rejecting exclusivism in favor of granting freedom of religion to all its citizens and separating church from state, Virginia then led the fledgling American nation to do the same in 1791.

Conservative Christians, long dominant and privileged at the exclusion of others, were horrified of America's founding as a secular nation. Many white evangelicals angrily criticized the U.S. Constitution of 1789, the religion clauses of the First Amendment of 1791, and early U.S. presidents, including George Washington, as liberal and godless.

Jefferson in particular they hated. In the 1800 presidential election, his detractors warned the atheist would confiscate all Bibles in America.

Constitutional church-state separation violated their rights to a Christian government, early conservative American Christians insisted. For decades Christian groups once privileged in colonial theocracies petitioned Congress to make America Christian by formally recognizing Sunday as a federal holy day.

Minority groups — Baptists, Quakers, Jews, atheists and others who for centuries were persecuted by dominant Christians in colonial theocracies — resisted efforts to Christianize America.

Exclusive-minded Christians lost that battle. Inclusive ideology won the day, equally protecting practitioners of any and all religious faiths, and of no faith, through the separation of religion and state.

NEW GROUND

Shifting to a different battlefield, the war between exclusive and inclusive ideologies in America continued. Since African peoples first arrived in the American colonies in 1619 against their will and as slaves, white Christians had struggled over the issue of "African slavery."

Native Americans they routinely killed in the name of God. Imported Africans they found more useful. Wealthy, privileged white Christians in colonies North and South often embraced the enslavement of black persons as necessary to maintain their own status quo.

Frequently quoting pro-slavery Old Testament verses, white Christian proponents of slavery pointed out that the Bible did not prohibit slavery. Dissenting white religious groups, and those socially and economically disadvantaged, tended to advance a more inclusive view, often welcoming black persons — free and slave — into their congregations and preaching against human slavery.

The "whole scene of slavery is pregnant with enormous evils," wrote the Virginia Baptist evangelist John Leland in 1790. "On the master's side, pride, haughtiness, domination, cruelty, deceit and indolence; and on the side of the slave, ignorance, servility, fraud, perfidy and despair."

To remedy the evils of slavery, Leland insisted the institution be quickly abolished. Politically astute, Leland also realized that African slavery had already become too entrenched in America.

A close political ally of Jefferson — both men fiery proponents of church and state separation — Leland, a country preacher of common means, understood that socially and economically-privileged white Christians were unwilling to free their slaves, the source of their wealth and power.

Yet he persisted in his criticism: "It is a question, whether men had not better lose all their property, than deprive an individual of his birth-right blessing — freedom. If a political system is such, that common justice cannot be administered without innovation, the sooner such a system is destroyed, the better for the people."

Leland continued: "Something must be done! May Heaven point out that something, and may the people be obedient."

Placing his finger on the self-profiting exclusivity of privileged Christianity in violation of true Christianity based on the inclusive teachings of Christ, Leland declared he could "never be reconciled to the keeping of them [slaves]; nor can I endure to see one man strip and whip another, as free by nature as himself."

The Baptist evangelist also criticized defenders of slavery as violators of the liberal, enlightenment ideals of freedom enshrined within the founding documents of the newly-formed United States of America.

"[S]lavery, in its best appearance, is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature, inconsistent with republican government, destructive of every humane and benevolent passion of the soul, and subversive to that liberty absolutely necessary to ennoble the human mind."

He longed for the day of freedom for slaves and employed powerful biblical imagery of liberation: "How would every benevolent heart rejoice to see the ... day appear ... when the poor slaves, with a Moses at their head, should hoist up the standard, and march out of bondage!"

SUPERIORITY

However, Leland's inclusive politics and theology faded from the South as white Baptists began climbing the ladder of social and economic status enabled by black slavery. Increasingly, slave labor and profits

from slavery built church buildings and paid ministers' salaries throughout much of the South.

The higher they climbed in privilege, the more conservative and exclusive-minded Baptists became. Elaborate slaveholding theologies followed, upholding white supremacist-driven politics.

Racially exclusive, slaveholding theology nonetheless made room for non-slaveholding poor whites. By virtue of the color of their skin, poor whites were of the superior race and hence blessed by God regardless of their economic circumstances.

Even as southern white Christians on the pretext of an authoritarian white God created a world of white supremacy, northern white Christians increasingly traveled in a different ideological direction.

Few white northerners truly considered black persons as their equals, yet more and more became convinced that all Americans, blacks included, deserved bodily freedom. Slavery became illegal in the North by 1804, although often through a process of gradual emancipation that forced some to remain in slavery for decades more.

On the road to eradicating slavery, many white Christians in the North in the 1820s and following focused their attention on the millions of black people yet enslaved on southern cotton, rice and indigo plantations — or more properly, forced labor camps. They also trained their ire on northern banks and businesses that profited from the southern cotton economy.

Evangelical white Christians of the North, working with free blacks, established abolitionist organizations, conferences, newspapers and publishing houses. Through the Underground Railroad they helped slaves escape from southern bondage. Increasingly they called not merely for emancipation of slaves, but legal equality for blacks.

Inevitably their advocacy bled over into denominational affairs. In time, northern evangelicals came to openly castigate their slaveholding southern counterparts as enemies of an inclusive God.

White evangelicals of the South witnessed the growing liberalism of racial inclusivity infect their northern counterparts. And lo, they were indignant.

"Fanatics!" southern evangelicals called abolitionists. God willed and the Bible sanctified "African slavery," they reminded their Christian counterparts who cited Jesus' love for all persons as the basis of their inclusive faith.

Blacks were cursed by God and not truly human, some southern evangelicals insisted. But if they were human, the only thing about black persons that counted was their souls. Enslaving black bodies both benefited God's favored white race and saved black souls from an afterlife of eternity in hell, making African slavery a "positive good."

Rev. Richard Furman, leader of South Carolina's white Baptists, clearly articulated the rights of southern white evangelicals endangered by liberalism.

"Even during the American Revolution, America's first colony, among others, still punished and jailed citizens defiant of proscribed Christian laws."

Speaking of liberals in the North, he lamented that "certain writers on politics, morals and religion, and some of them highly respectable, have advanced positions, and inculcated sentiments, very unfriendly to the principle and practice of holding slaves."

But worse were the southern traitors in their midst, for "by some these sentiments have been advanced among us, tending in their nature, directly to disturb the domestic peace of the State, to produce insubordination and rebellion among the slaves, and to infringe the rights of our [white] citizens."

Furman scoffed that "the sentiments in opposition to the holding of slaves have been attributed, by their advocates, to the Holy Scriptures, and to the genius of Christianity." Not so, he said of such godless liberalism. "The right of holding slaves is clearly established by the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example."

And off he went, liberally and literally appropriating Old and New Testament scriptures in support of slavery, and pointing out, quite correctly, that the Bible did not prohibit slavery.

With the Bible literally on their side as abolitionists assailed them with Jesus' teachings of love and inclusion, southern evangelicals decided it was time to defend pure Christianity from liberal nonsense.

In 1844 white Methodists of the South split from their liberal northern counterparts in defense of their rights to remain faithful to their conservative God and their conservative Bible's command to keep black people in perpetual slavery. Baptists followed suit the next year.

The faith of Southern Methodists, Baptists and other white Christians depended upon the preservation of white supremacy. Slave labor provided the money to build their church buildings and pay their pastors. The federal government must faithfully protect the institution of African slavery, they demanded. Anything less would be religious discrimination.

White evangelical slave owners relished their rights as sanctioned by government, God and the Bible. Under a self-serving mandate of heaven they stole the wages and violated the bodies of the black people they owned. They had the right and freedom to terrorize, rape and even kill their African slaves. Many did so with gusto, few with any outward signs of remorse. Mulatto slaves became increasingly common on southern plantations.

On Sunday mornings in the South white evangelical ministers in many Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal and Catholic churches stood in the pulpit and preached to a congregation of well-dressed elite slave owners who in practice were the worst of sinners: white supremacists, white terrorists, thieves, rapists and murderers. Never challenged from the pulpit, some walked out the church door and in the evening raped female slaves they deemed desirable.

BOLDEST FRAUD

Northward, former slave and lay preacher Frederick Douglass, champion of a liberal dream of freedom for all black people in America, spoke truth that infuriated southern white evangelicals.

The "slaveholding religion" of the South, he observed, had "no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land [the South], and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference — so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I hate corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity ... I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels."

But Douglass wasn't finished — not even close.

"I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and ... horrible inconsistencies, which everywhere surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the [whip] during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus ...

"The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together.

"The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealers in the bodies of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other."

Douglass spoke truth to conservative power. Slave owners were terrified of Douglass and other truth-tellers, terrified that one day the truth would escape from southern bondage and bring liberty to enslaved blacks, terrified lest inclusive ideology mortally wound white supremacy.

In fear they worked all the harder to force the U.S. government to defend their conservative rights against liberal voices. For decades in Washington, D.C., through political muscle and deftness they fended off rising anti-slavery sentiment.

Then, in a moment, their fears came true — and so did the opportunity some had long sought. Republican presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln, running on a platform of halting the westward expansion of slavery, won the presidency in November 1860.

Never had southern white evangelicals felt so terrified. Never had their rights been so violated. But South Carolina slaveholders were also jubilant, believing the election would lead to the national division they desired. The "Black President," they called him, a proponent of racial equality, an unholy threat to true Christianity.

"Conservative Christians, long dominant and privileged at the exclusion of others, were horrified of America's founding as a secular nation."

It was true in part. Yes, he did count many black persons, including Douglass, as friends. But his black friends well knew of Lincoln's lingering racism and his stubborn unwillingness to advocate for abolition.

Yes, Lincoln believed slavery was unjust. But for the sake of holding together a divided nation he reluctantly concluded slavery should remain, albeit confined to the southern states.

For their part, the economic fortunes of large-scale southern slaveholders, their lands increasingly depleted by nutrient-draining cotton, depended on access to unbroken land in the West. In vowing to stop slavery's westward march, Lincoln had thrown down a gauntlet. It would be but a matter of time before the Black President would come for their slaves, their lucrative slave profits, and their slaveholding ideology and religion.

He must be stopped, the South Carolinians proclaimed. We must create a new nation, a white Christian nation that will stand up to the evils of liberalism and for the God of the white man, they said.

DIVINE BLESSING

In the First Baptist Church of Columbia, S.C., a new revolution for liberty from liberalism began. Divinely blessed, the champions of liberty relocated to Charleston, the slavery capital of the nation.

"There were a people assembled through their highest representatives," the *Charleston Mercury* said of the South Carolina secession convention of December 1860. "[M]en most of them upon whose heads the snows of sixty winters had been shed — patriarchs in age — the dignitaries of the land — the High Priests of the Church of Christ — reverend statesmen — and the wise judges of the law."

The "20th day of December, in the year of our Lord 1860, has become an epoch in the history of the human race," the newspaper enthused. "A great Confederated Republic, overwrought with arrogant and tyrannous oppressions, has fallen from its high estate amongst the nations of the earth. Conservative liberty has been vindicated. Mobocratic license has been stricken down. Order has conquered, yet liberty has survived."

Leading the way, "South Carolina has recorded herself before the universe. In reverence before God, fearless of man, unawed by power [she] stands ready to uphold alike her independence and her dignity before the world." Now, "she is ready for war. Deprecating blood, she is willing to shed it. Valuing her liberties, she will maintain them."

One by one, 10 more Southern states followed the lead of South Carolina. Together they formed the Confederate States of America and created a constitution.

To the applause of Southern white evangelicals, the Confederate Constitution

rebuked the liberal, godless U.S. Constitution long despised. Invoking "the favor and guidance of Almighty God," the Confederate Constitution declared the Southern government a nation of "justice," "domestic tranquility" and "liberty."

Alexander Stephens, elected vice president of the Southern Confederacy, explained how white supremacy triumphed over the liberal U.S. Constitution.

The American Constitution, he insisted, was "fundamentally wrong." It "rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the 'storm came and the wind blew,'" a reference to the breakup of the Union.

The Confederate Constitution "has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution, African slavery as it exists amongst us — the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution."

"Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea," Stephens continued. "Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery — subordination to the superior race — is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth."

The fear that white Southerners' slaves, riches and religion might be stolen by liberals had been lifted. As the Confederate States of America — a union of "slaveholding states" only — took shape, pulpits by the hundreds preached the good news in packed church sanctuaries. God's blessed chosen — white supremacists, terrorists, thieves, rapists and murderers — listened, smiled and applauded.

Poor, lesser-blessed whites, nonetheless privileged by the tone of their skin, had mixed feelings. Many hoped to own their own slaves one day, with all the attendant privileges thereof. Others despised the eliteness and crassness of their social and economic superiors.

Enslaved blacks, forced to attend their masters' churches, from balconies above gazed down. Routinely the preacher reminded them of their biblical duty to obey their tormentors. The lies they endured because they had no choice.

Few could read or write — state law forbade it — but most understood that the true God was a God of freedom and liberty for all persons. For their own exodus from bondage they longed, day after day, week after week, month after month, long year after long year. All these thoughts, feelings and undercurrents permeated Sunday mornings in the South.

One pulpit well represented the common sentiment of Southern conservative Christianity — in a church that vividly reflected the God-ordained racial structures of the South now liberated from the misplaced criticisms of Northern liberal Christians and politicians. Secession from the Northern states had proven "The Scriptural Vindication of Slavery," Pastor Ebenezer Warren of the First Baptist Church of Macon, Ga., pronounced.

"White evangelical slave owners relished their rights as sanctioned by government, God and the Bible. Under a self-serving mandate of heaven they stole the wages and violated the bodies of the black people they owned."

"Slavery forms a vital element of the Divine Revelation to man. Its institution, regulation, and perpetuity, constitute a part of many of the books of the Bible." "It is necessary," he continued, "for ministers of the Gospel … to teach slavery from the pulpit, as it was taught by the holy men of old, who spake as moved by the Holy Spirit."

Let us rejoice, Warren enthused in the presence of slave owners and slaves alike: "Both Christianity and Slavery are from Heaven; both are blessings to humanity; both are to be perpetuated to the end of time; and therefore both have been protected and defended by God's omnipotent arm from the assaults, oppositions and persecutions through which they have passed."

Resist liberalism, he continued: "Slavery is right; and because the condition of the slaves affords them all those privileges which would prove substantial blessings to them; and, too, because their Maker has decreed their bondage, and has given them, as a race, capacities and aspirations suited alone to this condition of life."

African slavery "is neither unjust, oppressive, nor wrong. A higher law than the Bible must be found before slavery can be condemned."

A new day and a new nation dawned for self-pitied Southern evangelical slaveholders: "Christianity has had her trials, and is now in some measure, enjoying her triumph. Slavery is her trial now, but a triumph, which shall honor God, and bless humanity awaits her in the future."

A grand and glorious future it would be, gushed Samuel Boykin, Baptist owner of the *Christian Index* newspaper: "We [the Confederacy] will absorb Central America and the contiguous states of Mexico, not by bloody war but by the generous attractions of purer civilization and purer religion … When these golden visions become realities … then will the proudest nations of the earth come to woo and worship at the shrine of our imperial Confederacy."

Modesty was neither Boykin's nor the Southern Confederacy's strong point.

AT WAR

Four long years of battlefield warfare later, the imaginary white supremacist nation lay in ruins. Visions of grandeur smoldered, Southern evangelical fears fully realized. The four million "African slaves" of the Southern states were free, the Southern economy devastated, liberalism triumphant.

But mere days later something unexpected happened. Lincoln, the "Black President," was assassinated by a Confederate sympathizer. Andrew Johnson, a white racist Southerner, ascended to the White House.

Rather than continue Lincoln's post-war plan of establishing racial equality in the South, Johnson advocated on behalf of defeated white supremacists, while denying rights to former slaves.

The war between liberal and conservative ideologies resumed. In Washington, a liberal Congress defied Johnson and passed civil rights legislation granting freedoms and voting rights to black Americans. In the South, federal soldiers enforced the laws.

The federal government provided 40 acres of land for newly-freed slaves, on which they could sustain themselves. Northern missionaries and philanthropists, protected by the military might of the North, established public schools in the South to educate blacks and poor whites alike.

The federal government also enforced voting rights for blacks. Soon, hundreds of black men in the South were elected to local, state and federal offices.

But Southern evangelicals quickly struck back against the liberals whom they feared and detested. They formed the Ku Klux Klan, an explicitly white supremacist Christian terrorist organization that beat, raped and killed blacks who exerted too many rights.

The White League, a white supremacist paramilitary organization, complemented the KKK. In the name of law and order they kept black men from the voting booth and forced elected black officials out of political office.

Faced with white supremacist terrorism in the South and an economic downturn nationally, Northern liberals grew weary and gave up on reconstructing the South, leaving black Southerners to the fate of the terrorists. By 1910, white supremacists had effectively suppressed the votes of most black Southerners, stolen lands from many blacks, turned the South into a region of apartheid, created penal laws that allowed the imprisonment of black persons for almost any reason, and turned imprisoned black men into virtual chain-gang slaves.

So complete was the victory of Southern white Christians that liberal evangelicals of the North largely gave up the fight for equal rights for blacks.

Walter Rauschenbusch, a New York liberal Christian and arguably the greatest advocate of the "Social Gospel," essentially ignored the plight of blacks as he sought to bring economic justice to poor whites. Liberal white women suffragists, fearful of racial controversy, largely excluded black women from their midst.

Once again, conservative white evangelicals had triumphed over liberals by abandoning Jesus and re-enshrining their right to dominate, persecute and terrorize at will against people of color and their sympathizers.

TUG-OF-WAR

With theocratic colonies and war-torn domestic battlefields all in the past, conservatives and liberals settled into a long tug of war that remains to the present day. By virtue of their victories over liberalism, Southern white Christians effectively claimed control of the title "evangelical," the term becoming synonymous with religious conservatism.

"Despite efforts to portray Christianity Today *as something else, it is consistently conservative in its worldview, opposed to liberalism."*

Meanwhile, Black Christians, especially in the South, were left virtually alone to defend themselves. White terrorism blanketed the South, no black person immune from its reach.

Thousands of blacks were lynched on Sunday afternoons after church services, crowds of white Christians in attendance, picnicking on the lawn, cheering the murders, celebrating as black bodies hung from trees, Jesus nowhere to be found.

From the depths of despair and with epic perseverance and enormous courage, often under the banner of Jesus' love and his inclusive gospel teachings, black leaders emerged to lead the way for civil rights, their liberal advocacy met with jeers, taunts, flaming crosses, ropes and bombs from conservative white evangelicals.

Yet they persisted.

Judicial and legislative victories in the 1950s and 1960s were met with horrified indignation by conservative white evangelicals. Communists, they called black Americans demanding equal rights once briefly achieved but long since snuffed out. Liberals, scum and worse.

But through herculean bravery and determination, liberal activists secured a string of civil rights victories. Now on the defensive again, white evangelicals draped themselves in the mantle of persecution.

Their religious rights were being violated by liberals. Their conservative faith demanded they be allowed to discriminate. They called it freedom and liberty, just as their ideological forebears did during the antebellum and Civil War years.

Now sensing an opportunity, the Republican Party, once the party of Lincoln, embraced racism and white supremacy. Southern evangelicals noticed, increasingly voting Republican.

In rather short time, however, liberalism, now embodied by the Democratic Party, triumphed to a significant if not complete degree in securing equal rights for black persons and other minorities. Conservative white evangelicals felt coerced to be more discrete in voicing their racist and white supremacist sentiments.

In 1976, Jimmy Carter — peanut farmer, exemplary Christian, civil rights advocate — with the help of white evangelical voters won the White House following the corrupt presidency of Republican Richard Nixon. The soft-spoken Sunday school teacher from rural Georgia, however, proved unsatisfactory for evangelicals.

In 1980, evangelicals abandoned Carter for Hollywood's Ronald Reagan, a Republican who rarely graced the doors of a church but who courted receptive white evangelicals by promising to fight liberalism.

Meanwhile, emboldened by equal rights victories for black Americans, other minorities began demanding equal rights. Again white conservative evangelicals cried out in a terrifying wilderness, claiming persecution of

their religious rights to discriminate against women and homosexuals and immigrants and other minority groups.

On the defensive in an increasingly inclusive nation, white evangelicals, absent Jesus' teachings of love and inclusion, waged war against liberalism on multiple fronts but with less overt hatred. In the coded language of "welfare reform," "law and order," "pro-life" and "smaller government" they enacted policies designed to explicitly harm minorities.

The strategy worked, with conservatives retaking the offensive. Even Democrat Bill Clinton, a moderate pragmatist, gave ground to conservative racists in policing and welfare policies. In Washington of the last two decades of the 20th century, liberal policy victories were relatively few and far between. Compromises tended to favor conservatives more than liberals.

BATTLING ON

Conservatives in the early 21st century, once again powerful and determined to defeat liberalism for once and all, in close alliance with white evangelicals and Fox News set to the task of suppressing the votes of a rapidly rising tide of minority Americans.

They gerrymandered voting districts to favor white voters, devised shady methods of keeping minorities from the voting booth, reduced government assistance for black Americans, recruited far right conservative and often racist lawyers for judicial vacancies, and gamed the nation's electoral system in order to win the presidency with a minority of the popular vote.

But, unexpectedly, a second "Black President" took office in 2009. Barack Obama, son of a black father and white mother, a Christian and exemplary family man, enraged conservative white evangelicals — many who retained generations-long racism.

Donald Trump — television celebrity, pathological liar, sexual predator and billionaire from New York — belittled Obama, falsely claiming he was a Muslim born in Kenya. White supremacists reveled in incorrectly calling Obama the most racist president ever. Fox News daily trafficked in lies and conspiracy theories about the president.

Angered by the orderly, inclusive and centrist presidency of the twice-elected Obama, white evangelicals in 2016 gravitated to Trump's innate racist rhetoric and open hatred. Neither liberal, conservative, nor centrist, Trump lived solely to glorify himself.

A "strong man," some white evangelical supporters called Trump, our SOB.

A white-collar crook with a long history of punishing those who got in his way, Trump was exactly who many white evangelicals sought to kick liberals to the political curb.

Jesus was too meek and weak. Trump was white evangelicals' long-sought political savior.

Winning the White House as a Republican, Trump jettisoned from the Republican Party any remaining pretense of compassion, civility, honor and fiscal responsibility. Remaking the party into his own glorified and openly lawless image, Trump delighted white evangelicals with his hatred of liberals and dismantling of many of Obama's policies.

His anti-Obama presidency echoed President Andrew Johnson's repudiation of Lincoln, the first "Black President."

And like Andrew Johnson some 150 years earlier, for his criminal acts and violation of the U.S. Constitution, the House of Representatives in December 2019 impeached Trump. However, impeachment further endeared him to many white evangelicals who rated Trump as a greater president than Lincoln.

Trump's impeachment, on the other hand, proved the final straw for the editorial board of the conservative publication *Christianity Today*. Although many white evangelicals remain loath to admit Trump's criminality and defiance of the Constitution, "the facts in this instance are unambiguous," *CT* acknowledged following impeachment.

"The president of the United States attempted to use his political power to coerce a foreign leader to harass and discredit one of the president's political opponents. That is not only a violation of the Constitution; more importantly, it is profoundly immoral."

Many Christians and non-Christians alike wonder why so many white evangelicals are unperturbed by an amoral and lawless president. So did the *CT* editorial:

"This president has dumbed down the idea of morality in his administration. He has hired and fired a number of people who are now convicted criminals. He himself has admitted to immoral actions in business and his relationship with women, about which he remains proud.

"His Twitter feed alone — with its habitual string of mischaracterizations, lies, and slanders — is a near perfect example of a human being who is morally lost and confused."

And so, the nation's flagship conservative Christian magazine concluded: "We believe the impeachment hearings have made ... absolutely clear … the president's moral deficiencies for all to see. This damages the institution of the presidency, damages the reputation of our country, and damages both the spirit and the future of our people. None of the president's positives can balance the moral and political danger we face under a leader of such grossly immoral character."

Despite efforts to portray *Christianity Today* as something else, it is consistently conservative in its worldview, opposed to liberalism. The six-decade-old magazine has historically represented the evangelical perspectives held by many who now glory in Trump. But in calling for impeachment, *CT* now speaks for those evangelicals who have come to understand that supporting Trump destroys any semblance of their Christian witness.

However, many white evangelicals remain unconvinced by either *Christianity Today* or the inclusivity of Jesus. Liberalism and inclusivism, they contend, are enemies that must be defeated at all costs.

And history attests to their claim. From some 2,000 years of Christianity we have learned certain truths.

- In pulpits of empire, evils are sanctified.
- Under the banner of demagogic saviors, theocracy stirs.
- In the darkness of exclusivism, Christianity loses sight of Jesus.
- From power absent Jesus, Christianity must be rescued again and again. NFJ

M.D., M.DIV.

Physician-turned-chaplain offers insights from his unique professional, personal perspective

When Bill Holmes, M.D., retired as a pediatric neurologist, he completed a seminary degree and became a hospital chaplain.

In *Thoughts from the Bedside: From Medicine to Chaplaincy and Beyond*, author Bill Holmes shares from his unique experiences as a physician, chaplain and cancer patient. His compassion and insights are reflected in personal stories, moving poetry and honest wrestling with issues such as prayer, miracles and social justice.

STORY AND PHOTO BY JOHN D. PIERCE

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — It is an unusual vocational path that "evolved over time" — going from being a medical doctor to a hospital chaplain. When asked to explain it, Bill Holmes simply responds that ministry is "doing the other thing I was called to do."

In his book, *Thoughts from the Bedside: From Medicine to Chaplaincy and Beyond* (2018, Nurturing Faith), Holmes delves more into his unique dual-career perspectives, along with the challenges of being a cancer patient himself.

In the book's foreword, Bible scholar and author Walter Brueggeman calls Holmes "a witty, generous human person among us who makes a difference under the cover of his several degrees."

A Muslim physician said to Holmes recently: "I like the God that is in your book."

UNUSUAL ROUTE

After excelling at Louisville Male High School, Bill accepted a scholarship to Vanderbilt University where he majored in philosophy — not a degree program considered "pre-med." Then he headed to seminary.

After a year of theological studies, however, he switched course and entered medical school followed by its laborious training and postgraduate studies.

His sterling career in adult and pediatric neurology was fulfilling but incomplete. Upon retirement, he re-entered seminary to complete his theological training and became a chaplain at Louisville's Norton Brownsboro Hospital.

He asked that the "M.D." be removed from his name tag so it would read only: "Bill Holmes, Pastoral Care."

Patients who learned their chaplain was also a medical doctor, however, were surprised.

"Very few started asking me for medical advice," he said. Rather they would try to triangle him into getting their house doctors to make changes with their medicines.

Holmes said he learned to "keep my medical mouth shut" — noting that the biggest personal challenge was "trying to keep myself grounded in being the chaplain and not the doctor."

The pastoral role, however, was one that he filled as well as the medical one.

LESSONS LEARNED

Those dual roles in health care provided unique perspectives worth sharing in his book, at conferences and in other settings where he speaks in retirement. And Holmes is serious about his own continuing learning — especially from his unplanned role as a multiple myeloma patient.

"I learned the most in the waiting room from patients," he said in a recent interview with *Nurturing Faith Journal*. He would ask other patients how they felt about the experiences they were going through.

"When told I had cancer, I went to my default: Go do the research," said Holmes, "… but I ended up in the Psalms."

The ancient scriptures spoke to him over the ages, he said. "We don't have spears coming at us; we have cancer coming at us."

Through his own treatments and reflections, Holmes said he is very aware of his privileged state.

"I'm very fortunate because I'm well insured and have enough money to pay for what insurance doesn't cover," he said.

He thinks others should have such access, he said, though "I don't know what that should look like."

ADVISING DOCTORS

Physicians are often poor communicators, said Holmes. And we "tend to be a 'Yes, I know that' lot — so I give advice cautiously and, most often, only when sought."

When asked what from his experiences as a physician-turned-chaplain might be helpful to medical doctors today, he reflected before responding.

"Most patients, if not all, have a worldview that includes something about God, even if it is just to say they don't believe. For some, their religion or faith is a primary driver of how they see the world."

He continued: "While we as physicians are at the bedside thinking in scientific and clinical terms, patients' family and friends are in the waiting room praying for a miracle from God."

In pointing out this reality, said Holmes, he is not arguing for or against any religious belief. Rather "my purpose is to say, 'Be aware that God is in the waiting room — and at the bedside.'"

That awareness does not mean the physician should necessarily act in a religious manner.

"While I as a physician offering to pray with a patient sounds good on the surface, it is for me a 'stepping out of bounds' to expect their belief to line up with mine," said Holmes. "More often than not, the patient came seeking [my] medical help without regard to [my] faith or their faith."

ADVISING MINISTERS

When asked what ministers might learn as well, Holmes quoted pastoral care pioneer Wayne Oates: "Your pastoral presence itself spiritually fortifies as you come alongside people in time of stress. You sit there as a reminder of the presence of God."

That pastoral presence, said Holmes, should not be equated with finding the right words.

"What is needed is your visible concern and concern of the faith community. Hear the story of the one in the bed without verbal feedback," he advised. "Job 13:5 says, 'If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom.'"

While rightly timed, comforting words can be reassuring, Holmes warns of inserting oneself into someone else's story by saying something such as: "I've had the exact same thing" — or trivializing the situation by telling someone "everything will be OK; you'll be fine."

And this strong word: "Most of all, remember that it is not a time for debating theological issues."

And this practical advice: "Knock; silence your phone; acknowledge the presence of all; have a seat but not on the bed."

Sharing a scripture reading "that speaks to the moment" can bring hope to the bedside, he noted. Psalms of lament, for example — such as Psalm 13, 22, 130, 139 — can be comforting.

"Also I like to share John 14:1-7, 1 Corinthians 13 — especially verses 12-13 — and 2 Cor. 4:13-18."

PRAYER

Pastoral ministers should protect the privacy of patients by letting them decide how much of their medical story should be shared.

Often ministers don't fully understand the person's medical problems and shouldn't try to explain them to the congregation in detail.

"Church prayer meetings have the potential to be a major HIPAA violation," he noted.

When at the bedside, however, Holmes suggests asking the patient to share their prayer concerns. "You might be surprised."

Ministers and friends should be careful when sharing their compassion that they don't "make claims that can't be justified." But recognize that "who a person is spiritually makes a difference in a person's health."

NEXT CHAPTER

In retirement Holmes has served as interim president of Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, where he currently serves on its board, and writes frequent columns on current issues for Louisville's daily newspaper, *The Courier-Journal*.

Additionally, he writes for other publications, including poetry, and speaks to organizations where his unique experience as both a medical doctor and a hospital chaplain can shed light. He has done radio and newspaper interviews related to his book, especially concerning his perspective on miracles.

A member of Louisville's Highland Baptist Church, Holmes is "very purposeful in becoming friends with people who don't believe as I do."

And, of course, there's always time for family — especially the grandchildren.

His book, *Thoughts from the Bedside*, is available at nurturingfaith.net. NFJ

"What is needed is a different way of looking at human suffering, so that which we have beheld as a clinical observer becomes a divine encounter." Bill Holmes, M.D., M.Div., in Thoughts from the Bedside

Questions Christians ask scientists

There seems to be some tension between Christianity and science. Are there other religions more in line with the modern-day science community?

Perform an Internet search for books about faith and science and you will see that the majority of them have been written about Christianity and science, not other faith traditions and science. However, representatives of non-Christian faiths have engaged with science, to be sure.

I have read books about Islam and science; heard talks by Hasidic Jews on the overlap between quantum mechanics and Kabbalah, a mystical tradition within Judaism; and had many discussions with Tibetan Buddhist monks about the significance of science to Buddhist philosophy and practice.

For the most part, however, it seems Christians are the ones most engaged with this issue. This may be due to the historical fact that science, as we know it, arose finally out of a Christian cultural context.

Related to this, the incarnational nature of Christianity makes it an especially rich field of play for the faith-science discussion. Additionally, many contemporary Christians reject large swaths of science as a matter of religious faith.

And, finally, we live in a culture that has been influenced profoundly by Christianity, and this may be sufficient to explain the perception that religious dialogue with science is dominated by Christianity.

Much of this dialogue, at least on a popular level, is concerned with real or perceived conflicts between faith and science. A minority of it is devoted to the compatibility of these two ways of knowing.

Whether or not Christianity and science are compatible — and I believe that they are — this overriding point remains: *There is a felt need for reconciliation.* This moves us to ask if such a felt need exists for other religious traditions.

Certainly the three Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — offer at least two entry points to dialogue and possible disagreement with science. First, these religions claim that a personal and loving God created the cosmos, has acted in human history, and still acts today.

Second, each points to some sacred book that reveals these things to us. These claims, and certain interpretations of these scriptures, expose points of vulnerability that science may contradict.

For example, science might ask Jews, Christians and Muslims why a loving God would weave so much suffering into natural history, suggest that miracles be ruled out, draw into question the validity of creation as an idea, and throw a skeptical light on the historical claims of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles and the Quran.

And Christianity makes unique claims that science might challenge, such as those involving the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Resurrection. In any case, all three faiths are centered on ideas that, in principle, might be falsified by science.

At least one world faith tradition, however, is easily reconciled with science: Buddhism. Two reasons for this come to mind.

The first has to do with the content of Buddhist belief, which is minimal when compared to that of the Abrahamic religions. Buddhists just don't have to believe very much, and none of the things they have to believe are really threatened by scientific questioning.

A list of statements, called the "Four Seals," is central to all Buddhist teaching and practice. The seals are nothing like a creed or a universal statement of faith but rather the closest thing to these found within Buddhism. The Four Seals are:

1. *All compounded things are impermanent.* Here the word compounded means "made of distinct parts." Put another way, anything made of parts that can be isolated will not last. This stands in agreement with scientific visions of the remote cosmic future, in which stars burn out and all complex life forms disappear.

2. *Everything influenced by delusion is suffering.* In his book, *Mind in Comfort and Ease*, the Dalai Lama translates this seal as "all contaminated phenomena are of the nature of suffering" (p. 119). The word contaminated refers to actions, emotions and thoughts conditioned by selfish attachment, or by hate, greed and ignorance. It is not clear how science could possibly contradict this even in principle.

3. *All phenomena are empty and without inherent existence.* This seal carries the most significance and presents the greatest philosophical challenge of the Four Seals. In some sense the others can be derived from it (so I understand). This seal is difficult, especially for us Westerners, to wrap

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our heads around, and I will not attempt to unpack it here; just know that science, which deals only with measurable properties and not things-in-themselves, stands in accord with it.

4. *Nirvana is beyond description.* This means that what we truly seek are not things or relationships that we think are better or last longer or are more expensive. What we long for is Nirvana, which transcends all categories and is freely available, right now, to each of us. Science runs on distinctions and categories and therefore has nothing to say about Nirvana.

Notice that the Four Seals make no mention of any god, personal or otherwise, and they have nothing to say about history or the need to believe in any particular set of holy texts or theological statements. (The Buddhist canon of sacred writing consists of a vast number of ancient texts, and is much more varied and far less agreed-upon than the Christian canon or the Hebrew Bible or Quran.)

None of the Four Seals could be falsified by science, even in principle. Buddhism makes no claims about God or prayer or worship or any of the things we normally associate with religion.

Some Buddhists are atheists, and some are not. Buddhism makes no historical claims (such as our Resurrection) that science might contradict and offers no stories (as in our Gospels) you must believe, even figuratively.

Put another way, Buddhism is primarily about practice and discipline and not belief. It is much more concerned with what its adherents *do* than with what they *believe*. Therefore it imposes no constraints on scientific inquiry and presupposes no answers to scientific questions, as some forms of Christianity do.

This brings us to the second point that explains why Buddhism and science get along so nicely: the spirit of Buddhism resonates deeply with that of science. Buddhism offers us a very stripped-down, non-authoritarian, pragmatic, specialized approach to the world.

It is individualistic and has a distinct do-it-yourself quality about it. Like science, it insists that no one make claims for which there is no clear and compelling evidence. Also, like science, it solves particular problems by rejecting questions and issues — such as the existence and nature of God that it regards as peripheral, distracting and even harmful.

The single problem Buddhism focuses on is suffering and its alleviation. Anything that doesn't assist in this program is disregarded. In this way it is again much like science, which progresses precisely because of the narrowness of its goal.

Christianity addresses suffering, too, by putting it at the exact center of a narrative that places us in a relationship with a creator God who is identified with the very one who suffers. This narrative makes claims that some people hold as opposed to modern science.

But Buddhism is free of such difficulties. It is, of all major world faiths, the one most easily amenable to not only the results of science but also to its very spirit and process. NFJ

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