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OUR MISSION

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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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Ken and Nancy Hastings Sehested have blazed creative pastoral paths that may well be models for future ministers.

Good Faith Media

Nurturing Faith, EthicsDaily forming new, expanded media organization

Two independent, national, faith-based entities are coming together to create a new non-profit organization known as Good Faith Media. The boards of directors of Baptists Today, Inc. (branded as Nurturing Faith) and Baptist Center for Ethics (branded as EthicsDaily) voted unanimously to approve the formation of the new organization aimed at a June 2020 launch.

“I am excited that two trusted voices are coming together to create a new company, Good Faith Media,” said Jack Glasgow, longtime pastor of Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C., who will serve as the first chair of the organization’s governing board. “It will be a relevant voice, a voice that speaks with integrity and, I know, a voice that reflects the teachings of Jesus.”



Jack Glasgow

TEAMWORK

Mitch Randall, executive director of EthicsDaily, will be CEO of Good Faith Media, with John Pierce of Nurturing Faith serving as executive editor/publisher. Joining the executive team is Development and Marketing Director Autumn Lockett, coming from the staff of the University of Oklahoma College of Law.

“Good Faith Media will be a trusted and reliable resource for people of faith finding themselves at the intersection of culture and faith,” said Randall.

He noted that the new organization will be dedicated to “providing the very best reflections and resources” for individuals, churches, organizations and institutions — often in collaboration with trusted partners.

John Pierce, who has led Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith for 20 years, said the new entity is greater than the sum of its parts.

“This combined and expanded team is well equipped to provide more high-quality resources and experiences than ever before,” he said.

Team members include Cliff Vaughn, Zach Dawes and Missy Randall from EthicsDaily, Jackie Riley, Jannie Lister, Tony Cartledge, Vickie Frayne and Bruce Gourley — who will assume a full-time position in June — from Nurturing Faith.

SUPPORT

In addition to ongoing support of the existing organizations by individuals, churches, foundations and partner groups, a generous gift from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation is helping launch the new initiative.

“The Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation is proud to offer our enthusiastic support for this new venture that will be a significant tool to help people of faith as they respond to their individual and collective calls to make a positive impact in their own communities and connect them with others,” said Jackie Baugh Moore, vice president of the foundation and a member of Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas.

“We believe this is a wise and timely decision by two organizations that believe more can be done to recognize and follow God’s movement in our world by joining efforts, being responsible and efficient with resources, and creatively engaging multiple generations where they are,” she added.



Jackie Baugh Moore

VISION

Physician Kevin Heifner, a member of Providence Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., and current chair of the EthicsDaily Board, expressed appreciation for the enthusiasm and vision that emerged from conversations by representatives of the organizations during much of last year.

“Through an extensive period of negotiations and due diligence, representatives of the two groups discovered an energy and sense of trust that led to a shared vision of the new venture,” said Heifner.

Current Nurturing Faith Board Chair David Turner, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., agreed.

“This new media enterprise harnesses the strength of Nurturing Faith and Ethics Daily, strengths enhanced by strategic partnerships with George Mason’s *Good God* podcasts, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Center for Healthy Churches and others to form something altogether new that has the potential to be a significant voice in the progressive Christian movement,” said Turner.

Heifner, Turner and Baugh Moore will be among the new 12-member governing board of Good Faith Media, serving along with a new strategic advisory board composed of up to 35 additional volunteer members.

MISSION

Combining and enlarging this talented team with vast experience in writing, publishing, communications technology, marketing and other gifts will enable Good Faith Media to provide a variety of quality resources with an unwavering commitment to reliable and relevant news coverage, thoughtful analysis and inspiring storytelling in various formats.



TEAMWORK—Newly forming Good Faith Media combines and expands its experienced team that includes (left to right) Missy Randall, Bruce Gourley, Tony Cartledge, Autumn Lockett, John Pierce, Mitch Randall, Jackie Riley, Zach Dawes and Cliff Vaughn. Not pictured: Vickie Frayne and Jannie Lister.

These offerings will include news and opinion, publications (including this journal, Bible studies and books), videos and podcasts, and transformative experiences.

Writing in an EthicsDaily.com editorial, Randall noted that news articles will “address substantive events, surveys and reports,” while a wide range of opinion columnists “will offer their expertise and wisdom at the intersection of faith and culture.”

Continuing the traditions of the two merging organizations, Good Faith Media will also provide short story-telling documentaries and narrative podcasts, along with all the familiar publishing resources and engaging, in-person experiences.

The guiding mission of Good Faith Media is to provide reflections and resources at the intersection of culture and faith through an inclusive Christian lens.

COLLABORATION

Announcing the emergence of this new venture through his Nurturing Faith blog, Pierce wrote: “At a time when bad faith

reveals a departure from truth as fact, and Christianity gets redefined apart from following Jesus, enter Good Faith Media!”

Lockett, the newest addition to the team, said she grew up in religious fundamentalism and “felt isolated and distraught by a faith culture that didn’t see the injustices in our world.”

Discovering organizations such as Nurturing Faith and EthicsDaily, she said, provided the network of believers she needed in order to ask tough questions and to seek social justice as a Christian disciple.

Now, she is excited to be a part of this enlarged venture.

New initiatives will emerge from within Good Faith Media. One of the first is a strategic partnership with the interview-style podcast, *Good God*, hosted by George Mason, longtime pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.

“Good Faith Media will be interpreting culture for us in light of faith, and it is a venture we are all looking forward to,” said Mason, who helped facilitate the envisioning process during 2019.

FOUNDATION

While forming a new entity, Good Faith Media is being built on the foundation of two organizations with long histories of creativity and independence in providing news, analysis and resources to individuals and churches.

Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith was founded in 1983 by veteran journalist Walker Knight (1924–2019) to produce an autonomous national newspaper, first known as *SBC Today*. The publication evolved into *Nurturing Faith Journal* and, in recent years, the mission expanded to publish books, Bible studies and other resources, and to provide Nurturing Faith Experiences.

Baptist Center for Ethics was founded in 1991 by Robert Parham (1953–2017) to provide timely resources, including opinion columns, news articles, documentary films, Bible studies and video interviews. Following Parham’s death in 2017, Randall became executive director of the organization now known as EthicsDaily.

For more information now, and as Good Faith Media fully emerges, visit goodfaithmedia.org. **NFJ**





The wonderful discovery of good faith



BY AUTUMN LOCKETT

The little white church where I was baptized had blood red carpet. At five years old, I was scared of water splashing in my face, so our pastor let me take a practice swim on the Saturday night before my baptism.

On Sunday morning we sang, “I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God.” And I really was!

I lisped “Away in a Manger” with the children’s choir, and learned about a Jesus who loved and expected the same of me. At our Wednesday night Girls in Action meetings, I learned how Jesus used special people called missionaries to take care of people all around in the world.

Then, at 7 years old, I faced my first crisis of faith. A single mom in our community was supporting her two young daughters by cleaning our church building. Some leaders in the church accused her of taking rolls of toilet paper home with her at the end of her cleaning shifts.

The rumors spread, and she was fired. The same people who taught me Bible verses about the “least of these” left a struggling family with no hope (and no toilet paper). The injustice I observed sparked questions I still haven’t answered.

I began singing a version of my baptismal hymn that lamented, “I’m *apart* from the family of God.”

Eventually my family moved to a nearby green-carpeted Baptist church, where I learned how Jesus called all of us to be missionaries, loving the neighbors in our hometown, bordering states and at a sister church in Ciudad Acuña, Mexico.

My youth group spent spring, summer and winter breaks traveling to learn from and serve vulnerable populations. When

our youth minister challenged us to look for places to serve in our own tiny town, we built a relationship with the community living in our local public housing.

Focusing on people who didn’t look or live like me shaped my teenage faith and made me feel less apart from God’s family.

Through college and early married life, my husband and I served in churches while he attended seminary. We experienced all the beauty and horror of church leadership.

While we met shining examples of God’s love and grew up and together through the trials of ministry, the constant criticism, expectations of perfection, lack of support, and absence of empathy from congregants and fellow leadership rattled my faith to its core.

We stayed up late at night asking questions about injustice and how to empower the voices of vulnerable people. I continued to wonder if I would ever truly feel part of the family of God again.

Eventually we moved away from vocational ministry. My husband attended law school and is now an attorney — which he finds to be much kinder and gentler than church work. We joined a wonderful church affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

We felt safe growing our little, but quickly expanding, family there. And I found a career in higher education.

For the past eight years, I worked with the best and brightest prospective law students. As director of admissions, I empowered applicants from every spectrum of our beautiful nation to successfully navigate the law school admission process.

One by one, they sat in my office and shared giant dreams of how they planned to use their law degrees to change the world.

I watched them do it. Their passion was contagious.

When I learned Nurturing Faith and EthicsDaily were combining their important work and forming a new organization called Good Faith Media, I knew I had to be part of it. Their respective missions and new vision synthesized the questions I have been asking for the past 30 years.

How can we love Jesus and exclude The Other? How can we politely stand by as vulnerable populations are ignored, violated and exploited?

Where in the world is the family of God in the boastful, superlative-laden jargon we hear these days from prevalent faith voices?

Good Faith Media holds space for The Other. Good Faith Media speaks truth to injustice. Good Faith Media stands for the faithful who feel lost because of their convictions.

Through our four offerings: News and Opinion, Videos and Podcasts, Print/Digital Publications and Transformative Experiences, Good Faith Media is committed to providing a much-needed voice in the wilderness.

As Good Faith Media’s first official joint-hire, I’m thrilled to work alongside the Nurturing Faith and Ethics Daily teams as we continue the good work and invite more of the faithful to join us.

I look forward to serving alongside you, too. Together, we can further the mission of Good Faith Media to provide reflection and resources at the intersection of faith and culture through an inclusive Christian lens.

Truly, I’m so glad we’re a part of the family of God. **NFJ**

—Autumn Lockett is executive director for development and marketing for Good Faith Media.





Get to know

GOOD FAITH MEDIA

AT THE
**Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
General Assembly**

June 24–26 | Hyatt Regency | Atlanta, Ga.

**GOOD FAITH
AFTER HOURS**

9pm-11pm Wed., June 24
The Barrel Bar @ White Oak
across Peachtree St. from
the Hyatt Regency
Details/reservations at
goodfaithmedia.org

Look for us in The Gather-
ing Place and other locations
throughout the Assembly.

Meet the Good Faith Media team,
directors, supporters and friends.
Discover the latest resources from
this emerging, expanding new
media company.

Visit cbf.net/general-assembly-2020 for registration/scheduling
information and goodfaithmedia.org for further developments.

Attend the workshop
we will host with **Imam
Imad Enchassi**, author
of *Cloud Miles: A Remark-
able Journey of Mercy,
Peace, and Purpose*.





Worth Repeating

“The evangelical world needs leaders who embody holiness, not hubris; who grow disciples, not groom sycophants; who see themselves as naked before Christ, not robed in the prestige of their platforms; who know that when success becomes an idol that bullying becomes a sacrament.”

Michael F. Bird, academic dean at Ridley College in Ontario, Canada (Twitter)

“Christianity has been an instrument of repression, but in the living memory of Americans it has also been deployed as a means of liberation and progress — which feeds the hope that it can become a force for good once more.”

Historian Jon Meacham, author of *The Hope of Glory: Reflections on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross*, writing in the *New York Times*

“You worry that this is as much about preening as praying.”

Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne Jr., on the National Prayer Breakfast

“I’m tired of trying to convince professed followers of Jesus that they’re supposed to care about other people...I’m tired of being reminded daily of the white supremacy that my former church friends are so terribly afflicted with.”

Minister/writer John Pavlovitz (Stuff That Needs To Be Said)

“I do not believe God sends suffering as a test or an undercover exercise leading to spiritual maturity. But I do believe God uses our suffering. Entering the darkness of this world shapes and forms the church in profound ways we’re not able to fully articulate.”

Frank G. Honeycutt, an ELCA minister in Walhalla, S.C., writing in *Christian Century*

“I make a simple vow — by God’s grace, I will love my enemies, and I will not hire anyone to hate them on my behalf.”

David French, senior editor of *The Dispatch*

“A few things about Christ-like manhood: It is fierce enough to fight for women. Bold enough to want a woman in Bible class. Safe enough to be alone with a woman. Muscular enough to scatter a crowd of men ready to stone a sinful woman. Brazen enough to send a woman with good news.”

Popular Southern Baptist Bible teacher Beth Moore on Twitter

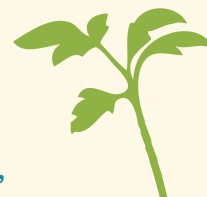
“True human connection is fueled by empathy — the God-given ability to step into another’s shoes and open ourselves up to another’s story, not to compare and contrast, but to be overwhelmed by compassion...”

Jay Y. Kim in *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (2020, InterVarsity Press)

The place to go between issues of the *Nurturing Faith Journal* is

nurturingfaith.net

- > **Blogs, breaking news, and the latest books, resources and experiences from Nurturing Faith**
- > **Daily religion news from around world, handpicked by online editor Bruce Gourley**
- > **Teaching resources, including video overviews and lesson plans, for the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge**



Our timidity enables the enablers

By John D. Pierce

Echoes resound from our childhood: “Be nice!”
Above all else, be nice.

Reinforced by every teacher, both the Sunday and weekday versions, along with relatives aplenty, we have been shaped into believing that upsetting the applecart — or causing a scene — is the worst of human behavior.

Don't be a troublemaker! Keep the peace.

A more grownup version is understood as: Protect the institution — or, more importantly, the funding that protects the institution.

So en masse we stand with our hands in our pockets and lips zipped while those with no timidity — yet claim to be the most Christian of us all and even speak for all others — engage in a loud, public campaign to redefine Christianity to serve a political agenda at odds with what Jesus called his followers to be and do.

As a result, those who pervert Christianity without timidity are winning the day.

Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress is not timid about using the Sunday morning worship slot at First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, and its TV audience along with Fox News appearances, to advance a dangerous civil religion.

Jeffress is bold in admitting that Jesus' foundational teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount are simply too weak for him; he prefers an aggressive if even abusive political leader to follow.

Franklin Graham, who makes money off of and brings shame to his family name, spews ignorance and hatred through a social media fire hose to gullible Christian followers. Graham the Younger isn't timid. Nor is he concerned about keeping peace.

Paula White's pulpit would be more fitting on QVC than in a church. Yet her fleeing of the flock gets buoyed by limelight-seeking Southern Baptist preachers such as Jeffress and Jack Graham, eager to share some political porridge.

Never mind that these same pastors and denominational leaders were equally eager to separate themselves from fellow Baptists who simply affirmed that God calls some women to preach (real sermons, not prosperity scams).

In addition to self-promotion via hateful politics, these and other high-profile ministers have something else in common: They are not timid!

Yet we who know better often are.

Perhaps we need to remember another lesson taught in the nurturing churches of our childhood and youth: to be bold witnesses for Christ.

Perhaps we need passionate, alternative voices in the public sphere — speaking not arrogantly but clearly.



Perhaps for the sake of Christ and the Christian witness we need to be less concerned about keeping peace and more concerned about speaking truth.

Perhaps we should worry less about institutional protection and focus more on ensuring that the public message of the church aligns with the message of Jesus.

Perhaps we should avoid the temptation to make false equivalencies that excuse or soften the reality of specific evils by noting universal human imperfection.

Perhaps ignoring or downplaying injustice should be feared more than “causing a fuss.”

There is nothing noble or faithful about being quiet amid such costly carnage that puts the Christian witness on the side of nationalistic power and the denigration of those with little or no power.

Just maybe the most needed confession of sin for many of us is to admit we have used timidity when boldness is the more faithful response. We can do so and still be nice.

Otherwise, our timidity enables those who enable a fearful, self-serving version of Christianity at odds with the one known as the Christ. **NFJ**

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Just email socialmedia@nurturingfaith.net and say, “Put me on the list.”

FRANCIS OF ASSISI

My unlikely friend

BY WYMAN LEWIS RICHARDSON

What is a Baptist pastor in Arkansas doing cultivating a deep interest in a 12th/13th century Catholic saint? What could Assisi possibly have to do with North Little Rock?

These are fair questions. I ask them myself. Even so, I not only defend my admiration for Francis of Assisi, but also would suggest Francis is worthy of the study and, at many points, imitation of all Christians.

More than that, I would suggest that Francis of Assisi is the saint Protestant Christians most need to understand and the saint whose example we most need to heed in these days.

I am under no illusions concerning what Francis would have thought of certain aspects of my life as a Protestant Christian. Many of his writings are quite uncomfortable for me, and I strongly disagree with some of what he said.

Why, then, do I find the *Poverello*, the “Little Poor Man” of Assisi, so endearing, so convicting, so worthy of study and emulation?

It is because, even with our differences, there are, in the life of Francis, such powerful examples of the imitation of Jesus, such a bold and courageous living out of the gospel, and such disarmingly simple and charming examples of countercultural and prophetic challenge to the church that I feel I would be missing something fundamental if I allowed our differences to cause me to turn away.

I am not blind to what I think Francis gets wrong, but what he gets right truly helps me to see. I am deeply touched and challenged by his life.



The Pope approving the statutes of the order of the Franciscans. By Giotto, 1295-1300.

So much of what I find very important and relevant about Francis is bound to certain places and events in his life. I offer three examples, three snapshots of what happened with Francis in three different places in an effort to demonstrate his abiding significance.

San Damiano: Humility and Simplicity

We begin in the dilapidated church of San Damiano, a couple of miles outside of the walls of Assisi. There, Francis of Assisi, a young man caught in the throes of a spiritual crisis after his release from time spent as a prisoner of war in one of the military conflicts of the region, heard the voice of God.

As he stood in the little church, he heard the voice of God say to him from the crucifix: “Francis, can you not see that my church is in ruins? Rebuild my church.”

Here, perhaps more than in any other episode of Francis’ life, the disarmingly simple humility of the man confronts us and catches us off guard. In our day of social

media posturing and religious celebrity, many would interpret this call — “Rebuild my church” — in grandiose and self-advancing terms.

Many people would take it to mean that God is calling them to be the next Martin Luther or the next William Tyndale. Many would take “Rebuild my church!” to mean “Become a famous reformer! Become a great Christian celebrity!”

But not Francis: He took it to mean, quite literally, that God wanted him to pick up stones and rebuild the ruins of that little church and others. And that is what he did. He started rebuilding San Damiano and other churches.

That Francis so interpreted these words from the cross — with such a lack of ego, with such an absence of the kind of showiness that dominates our own age — is a testimony to the genuineness of his relationship with Jesus. Francis had the ears of a child, which is to say, the ears of the Kingdom.

He set down his ego and picked up little stones instead. For him, that was enough.

Francis at San Damiano confronts me with these questions: Would I be content picking up little stones for the Lord if that was what he called me to? How have ego and the need to “succeed” (whatever that is!) kept me from hearing the simple call of God to simple service?

The Bishop’s Palace: Sacrifice and Self-Denial

Back inside the city of Assisi, at the piazza of Mary Maggiore just outside the palace of Guido I, the bishop of Assisi, we find one of the most astonishing scenes from the life of Francis.



To fund his rebuilding of churches, Francis had sold some of his cloth-merchant father's goods, including a horse. The priest at San Damiano had refused to touch the proceeds when Francis presented them because he feared Francis' fairly well-off and well-connected father, Pietro di Bernardone.

His fears proved legitimate as Pietro, once his haggard and erratic son returned to the city from his self-imposed exile in the church, drug him before the bishop so that Guido could render judgment for the theft and selling of his property.

What happened next has shocked and inspired Christians for 800 years. Francis, standing before his incensed father and the conflicted bishop, disrobed.

He took his clothes off in front of his father, the bishop, and all of the townspeople who had gathered to observe the proceedings. He then said to the crowd, "From now on I will no longer say, 'My Father Pietro Bernardone, but Our Father who art in heaven.'"

In so doing, Francis made his great step of "leaving the world" that he knew and embracing instead a new life of love, service and identification with the poor and the needy.

This moment — the disrobing, the renunciation of his name, and the pronouncement of his new life — is utterly stupefying. For the son of a cloth-merchant, whose earlier life of relative ease and frivolity was funded by fabrics and clothing, to strip naked was an amazing act of breaking with the past.

It was Francis' dramatic statement that he would no longer depend on the safety net of his own family for the living of his life. Now he would follow God into the world and depend solely on God.

For the modern observer all of this raises uncomfortable questions: Is our own walk with Jesus characterized by this kind of reckless abandon, this kind of radical self-denial and faith? Have we cast off the garments of our own pride, our own enslavement to comfort, our own bondage to the past?

The Church of Saint Nicholas: Simple Immediate Enactment of Jesus' Commands

While Francis did not go out into the world to start a movement, soon some of the young men from the surrounding area took up with him. Women such as St. Claire and others would do so as well.

However, Francis struggled with the question of what he was supposed to do with these first brothers. To find the answer, Francis and two men named Bernard and Peter entered the church of Saint Nicholas in Assisi.

There Francis found a missal, a small book containing, among other things, passages of scriptures. Turning to the section of the missal containing passages from the Gospels, Francis practiced what is known as *sortes biblicae*, the random opening of scripture with the assumption God is leading the reader to the first passage he or she happens to see.

I would wager that somewhere along the line many of us have practiced *sortes biblicae*! While such a random and haphazard approach to scripture is not to be commended as a generally good practice, we cannot help but conclude that God truly did bless this odd approach in Francis' case.

Either Francis or the priest opened the missal at random three times and came across these three statements from Jesus:

- "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Mark 10:21)
- "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics." (Luke 9:3)
- "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matt. 16:24)

Francis' response to these three verses was one of simple immediate enactment. While at times Francis went to unhealthy extremes in his embrace of Lady Poverty (as he termed it), his abiding witness and

example are attributable in no small part to these three verses and the way he fearlessly determined to live these out with a literalness that could be jarring.

The great challenge from this episode in the Church of Saint Nicholas is simply this: Have we determined to live out the commands of Jesus with simplicity and immediacy, or do we pass the passages of scripture we read through our own internal filters in an effort to take the sharp edges off, to make the hard words of Jesus more palatable?

What would it look like for us to determine truly to obey what Jesus commanded of us?

These are three of the reasons why I so deeply appreciate Francis. His was a life of astounding faith and determination to follow Jesus.

At times, yes, Francis could misstep in his journey. At times, yes, he could go too far. But is our age not marked by the very opposite extreme, by Christians who often-times do not go far enough?

I will go one step further: Who can deny that in our day of self-promotion, self-advancement, and comfortable Christianity even the excesses of Francis might serve as useful correctives and challenges? His was a fascinating life, and his witness remains much needed in our day. **NFJ**

—Wyman Lewis Richardson is pastor of Central Baptist Church in North Little Rock, Ark. His writings and sermons may be found at walkingtogetherministries.com.



Wyman Richardson



Facing the pandemic of racism

By Mitch Randall

The World Health Organization (WHO) categorizes a pandemic as “when a new influenza virus emerges and spreads around the world, and most people do not have immunity. Viruses that have caused past pandemics typically originated from animal influenza viruses.”

Of course, news of the latest threatening virus brought pressing questions about its origins. Often, for some reason, we Westerners tend to conclude that some other people group is responsible for our misfortunes. It never occurs to us that, as we suffer, others have suffered before us from no fault of their own.

Reports surfaced around the U.S. about people of Asian descent being targeted for harassment, much like people of African descent were targeted during the Ebola scare. Such behavior is detestable and reveals the depths of racism persisting in society.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, while the number of hate crimes is slightly down, the number of violent hate crimes is on the rise. In other words, hate crimes such as intimidation, assault and homicide continue to climb.

This troubling trend is not an American problem exclusively. The British government reported rising hate crimes, nearing 70,000 in the fiscal year of 2017–2018, after Brexit.

Racism has become an epidemic across the globe. As people of faith, there should be no room for bigotry and racism.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once wrote: “No human race is superior... All collective judgments are wrong. Only racists make them.”

The Apostle Paul put it this way: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28-29).

How can people of faith and goodwill combat racism and xenophobia when it raises its ugly head?

First, we need to make sure when we react to circumstances such as the coronavirus outbreak, we are not doing so from a place of privilege. We should never target people based upon their race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. When a crisis emerges from other parts of the world and cultures, we need to stand in solidarity with the victims of such terrible tragedies.

Many times, Americans react from a lofty place of privilege the rest of the world will never ascend. As people of faith living in America, we need to demonstrate compassion and kindness, especially to those in underdeveloped countries where poverty and disease are too common. We need an

attitude and reaction more like Jesus.

Second, after checking our privilege, we need to denounce all forms of racism and xenophobia through clearly communicating its evil. During the life and ministry of Jesus, he demonstrated through his actions and deeds that all humans were God’s children worthy of decency, respect and love.

Jesus embraced Samaritans, Gentiles, sick, poor, women and others who were categorized as unworthy of God’s favor. Jesus welcomed the strangers and marginalized them into his embrace — a sentiment and a deed that should not be lost in the modern world.

Finally, the most significant way to combat racism and xenophobia will be through the nurturing of relationships. While Jesus boldly set an example of inclusivity, his words were only as good as his actions.

Jesus ate and conversed with people outside his ethnic and social status. He connected with them on a human level.

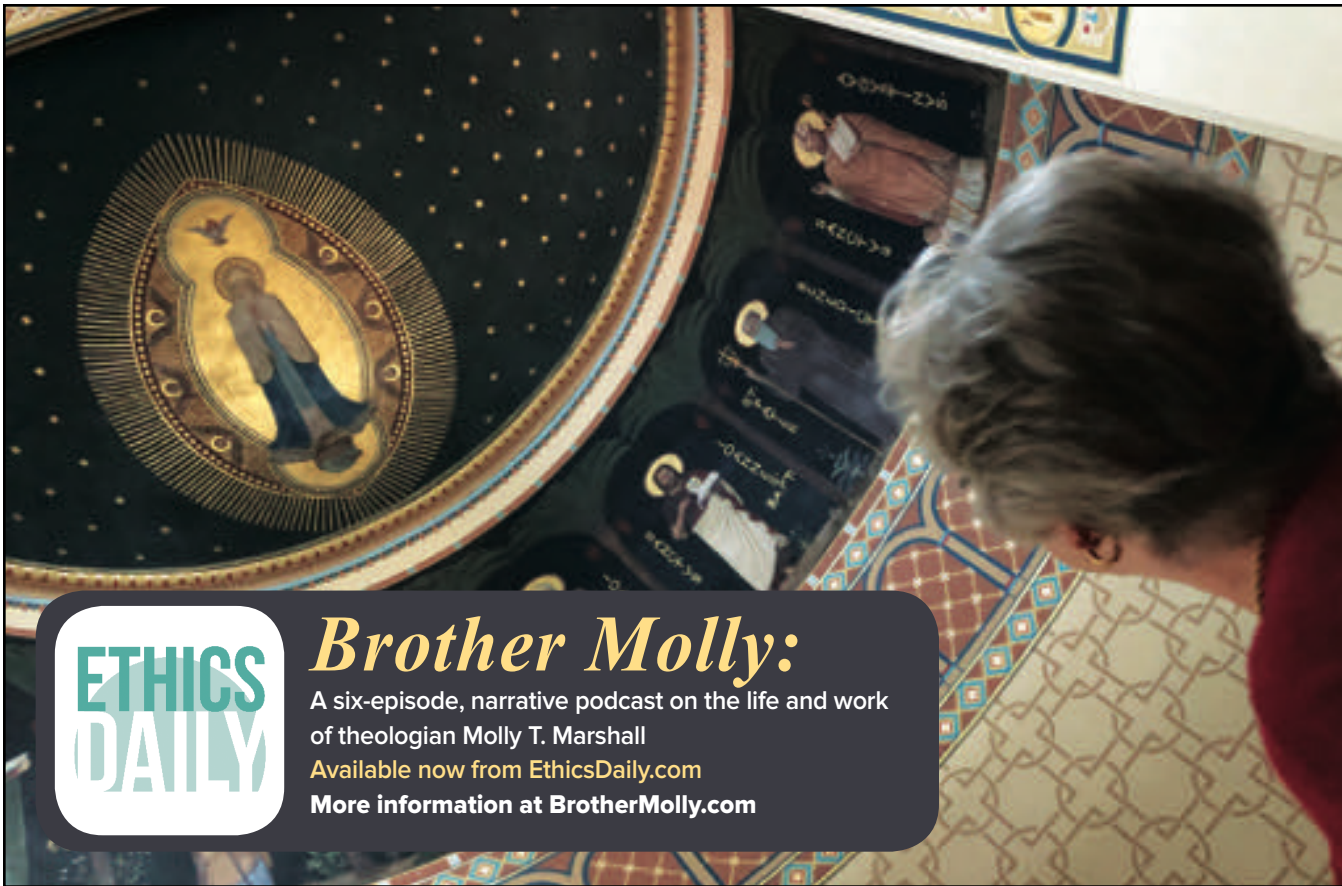
If people of faith have any chance to root out racism and xenophobia, then it will be through personal relationships. This will be difficult work.

It is never easy to sit down and converse with someone with whom we disagree or even see as an enemy. However, if we have any desire to thwart the pandemic of bigotry spreading across the globe, then we must try. **NFJ**

—*Mitch Randall is executive director of EthicsDaily, and soon to become CEO of Good Faith Media.*



*Many times, Americans react from a lofty place of privilege
the rest of the world will never ascend.*



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Forgive us our debts

Congregations find transformative way to bear another's burdens

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

One in four American families has “problems paying or an inability to pay medical bills in the past 12 months” according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, an independent and non-profit public charity providing analysis and information about how health care policies affect people.

Another study from healthcare-focused The Commonwealth Fund foundation estimates 40 percent of working Americans, or some 80 million people, “have medical bill problems or are paying off medical debt.”

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau statistics show more than 43 million Americans in 2014 had medical debt in collections. Many eventually reach a point of insolvency and declare bankruptcy. Studies indicate 40 to 60 percent of all bankruptcies in the U.S. result from medical debts.

While specific struggles with medical debt vary, the underlying dimensions are well known: Health care in America is more expensive than other developed nations, while wealth inequality is at record levels.

Recent studies revealed a staggering 40 percent or more of Americans do not have access to \$500 in case of an emergency. And, in general, medical procedures in the U.S. are far more expensive than in most other countries, with many Americans reporting they sometimes forgo needed medical care or prescription drugs due to costs.

A recent analysis by the *L.A. Times* revealed that catastrophic medical debt, likely to lead to bankruptcy, is a far greater problem in the U.S. than in other developed nations. According to one analysis by two former medical debt collectors, Americans in total owe some \$1 trillion in medical debts.



Beneath this staggering debt are a constant barrage of collection agency notices, downward spiraling individual credit scores and, in many instances, families forced into financial insolvency and bankruptcy.

In the past, for those deep in medical debt, without necessary financial resources, the only backstop was to seek a settlement or payment plan with their health care provider(s). Even then, many faced the prospect of medical debt for decades, if not the rest of their lives, that led to a further spiral of cutting back on basic expenditures such as food, clothing, gas, doctor visits and medicines.

Enter Craig Antico and Jerry Ashton, the two former medical debt collectors previously mentioned. They were never happy taking money from people desperately trying to stay above water financially.

“It doesn’t make sense for America to be burdened with people who have \$1 trillion in medical debt,” says Antico, sharing his story in an online video.

“You and I are one accident or one illness away from being destroyed financially,” Ashton added. Now “reformed” Ashton describes his new gig as a “predatory giver.”

In 2014, Antico and Ashton created RIP Medical Debt charity and began buying medical debt portfolios for pennies on the dollar in order to forgive “every last penny” of the debt. It was easy, and it unshackled many debtors from a prison of otherwise crushing debt.

But to make a real difference, they

needed to raise more awareness of the medical debt problem. Enter John Oliver, host of HBO’s *Last Week Tonight*.

In 2016 the comedian hosted an investigative report on the medical debt industry before a live audience. In comedic fashion he demonstrated the “grimy business” of the little-regulated, debt-buying industry and showed how to fight back.

Earlier, Oliver and his staff easily registered a debt-buying company in Mississippi for \$50. They named it Central Asset Recovery Professionals, or CARP. Then they purchased a medical debt portfolio worth \$14.9 million for about \$60,000. Next, they donated the debt portfolio to RIP.

At the close of Oliver’s June 5, 2016 show, in hilarious fashion with great fanfare and millions of viewers watching on live television, Oliver pushed a large button symbolically smashing the \$14.9 million in medical debts owed by some 9,000 people.

He provided the much-needed public awareness for Antico and Ashton’s charity. Today, RIP Medical Debt has forgiven almost \$1.4 billion in medical debts and counting, freeing from financial hardship some 650,000 people.

Recently the nondenominational Crossroads Church in Cincinnati raised \$465,000 and forgave \$46.5 million of medical debt owed by 41,233 lower-income Ohio households — the “largest medical debt relief to date,” according to RIP. Letters informed unsuspecting but joyous families their debts and been forgiven.

Pastor Victor Martinez said: “Jesus, before we knew who he was, he died for us to forgive our debt. And, here, we don’t know who these people are, and we are putting this money for their debt to be forgiven.”

Churches of various size and affiliation are partnering with RIP (ripmedicaldebt.org) to raise money for buying medical debt at a steep discount and forgiving every penny of the debt. Even small congregations are fulfilling Jesus’ command to love others through the gift of forgiveness. **NFJ**

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A pastoral story of retirement transition

BY MICHAEL SMITH

A group of pastors asked me to share how church leadership and I handled the transition sparked by my retirement as pastor. Here's how I told it:

We started long before the retirement was on anyone's agenda by implementing a new church governance system. Key lay and ministerial leaders (the administrative council) now gathered around one table. This enhanced the potential for meaningful conversation, working through complex issues, fashioning recommendations and clear communication with the congregation.

The new council practiced its craft for approximately three years before I began to move toward retirement. By then, I knew we had a governance structure adequate to meet the challenges of a transition in pastoral leadership.

One morning I woke up with the realization I should start down the road to retirement. Call it the prompting of the Holy Spirit. I felt as if I had been told I had nearly completed my assignment with the church and that a different person would be needed to lead the congregation into its future. After consultation and reflection, I chose a time frame.

I would share the news with my ministerial colleagues and the administrative council nine months ahead of my projected retirement date. Together we would take three months to consider a set of questions in need of answers and frame the message to be shared with the congregation.

Over the three months, the ministers and council worked through questions such as the following:

- How could core ministries be sustained?
- How might the council and congregation best support the ministry staff?
- What should the congregation be challenged to do during the transition period?
- How might the council and the eventual search committee keep communication channels open with the congregation?

- What criteria might be used in the selection of a search committee?
- What specifics might be included in the search committee's assignment?
- How would the search committee and council interact?
- What resources would be available to support the search committee's work?
- What, if any, outside resources should be considered to assist the congregation and search committee?
- How might we best use the run up to retirement to provide healthy closure and launch the work of transition?

The council members, in collaboration with the ministerial staff, met often during the three months to fashion answers.

Six months before my retirement, we sent a text message to congregation members alerting them to check their email for letters from the pastor and the administrative council. The two letters went out at the same time. At the risk of oversimplification, both letters stressed these points:

(1) The pastor is retiring for all the right reasons. (2) The administrative council, as provided for in the bylaws, is prepared to collaborate with the ministerial staff to provide for ministries during the coming transition time and to guide the congregation into and through a healthy search process.

What happened over the next six months? I withdrew from involvement in long-term decision-making. At the same time, though, I chose to help the council and congregation in three ways:

1. I engaged in one-on-one conversations with church members to reinforce the message of the two letters.
2. The other ministers and I preached a sermon series dealing with the philosophy of ministry the congregation had come to embrace.

3. I briefed the deacons on matters such as appreciative inquiry, the promise and dangers of a search process in the context of modern Baptist life in America, their role in strengthening the congregation's unity throughout the transition period, and the positive potential of partnering with proven outside resources to facilitate a healthy search process.

The council provided frequent updates on its work. Two months before my retirement date, the council finished drafting a set of recommendations for the congregation's consideration. The council shared the recommendations with the deacons, small groups, and the congregation for their reflection and input.

As a result, the congregation strongly approved the council's proposals, which included contracting with the Center for Healthy Churches to provide coaching to the congregation and search committee during the transition period.

Based on our experience, I believe most congregations would do well to embrace these principles when faced with pastoral transition:

- Ask if the church's governance system is adequate to address the challenges and opportunities of pastoral transition. If not, make appropriate changes.
- Provide adequate lead time before the retirement. Use the time to frame the message the congregation needs to hear, answer crucial questions, develop recommendations, process the recommendations with the congregation, and get the congregation's approval.

What story do you think your congregation will write when its turn comes?

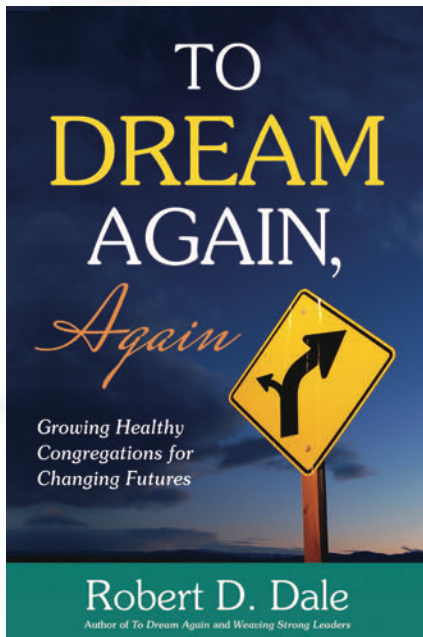
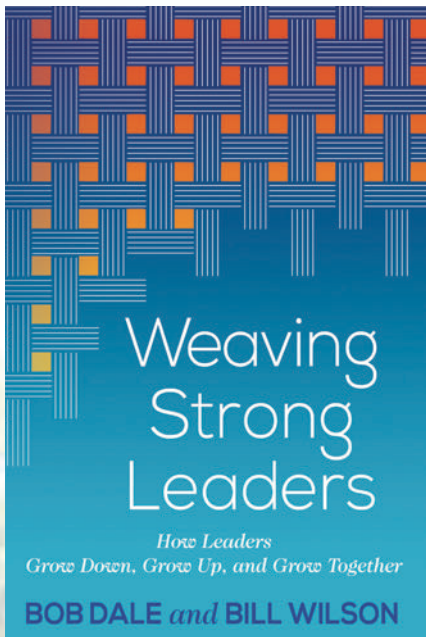
—Michael Smith retired as pastor of Central Baptist Church Fountain City in Knoxville, Tenn. This column is provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches (cbchurches.org).





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.

Good news for all people

By John R. Franke

One of the most basic elements of Christian witness is the notion that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for all people. This fundamental idea is at the core of the proclamation of the gospel in Luke 2:8-11 (NRSV):

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

It is one of the great tragedies of the Christian tradition that all too often the proclamation and living out of the Christian message has not been good news for many of the people of the world. It has frequently not been the cause of great joy but rather of pain and suffering.

In keeping with this observation, missiologists have been concerned that much of the mission activity emanating from Europe and North America over the past 200 years has been an enterprise centered in the assumptions of those settings. The Christian message and its implications have been passed on in the social and cultural shape of the Western church.

This has resulted in the colonization and oppression of numerous communities in the name of God, Jesus and the Bible — and with devastating consequences.

Commenting on the particular encounter between Christianity and the indigenous

people of North America, Richard Twiss, a member of the Rosebud Lakota Tribe, puts the matter succinctly: "Christian mission among the tribes of North America has not been very good news."

Speaking of his own experience, he explains the pressure imposed by white Christians to regard the music, dance, drumming and ceremony of his Native culture as "unclean" and inappropriate for followers of Jesus. The implicit message was that the old and familiar rituals and experiences had passed away and all things had "become white."

This social and cultural colonization in the name of Christianity has been all too typical of the interaction between Western Christians and the indigenous and immigrant cultures it has encountered. A particularly Western set of social and cultural assumptions and presuppositions have stamped the Bible and theology in its image and then imposed it on another group of people in the name of God and truth.

Suffice it to say, Christian witness must not continue in this and be a faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Change is necessary. We must understand that all Christian witness is shaped by the interactions between scripture, tradition and culture.

This is a reminder of the local character of theology and it raises a challenge for the practice of an appropriately catholic theology, the attempt to teach and bear witness to the one faith of the whole church that is truly good news for all people.

In other words, how do we do theology

that is not simply accommodated to our own cultural assumptions?

Lesslie Newbigin addressed this question by observing that while the ultimate commitment of the Christian is to the biblical story, such a person is also a participant in a particular social setting whose whole way of thinking is shaped by the cultural model of that society in ways that are both conscious and unconscious.

The dominant assumptions of an age color the thoughts, beliefs and images of those who live in it. Since these are always with us, they are generally unnoticed. But the fact that we are unaware of our assumptions does not mean they have no effect. Ultimately, they reflect the world in ways that condition all of our lives.

Such cultural assumptions cannot be absolutized without impairing the ability to properly discern the teachings of the Bible. Yet as participants in a particular culture, we are not able to see many of the numerous ways in which we take it for granted.

In light of this, Newbigin maintains that the unending task of theology is that of being open to the biblical story in such a way that the assumptions and aspirations of a culture are viewed in its light in order to find ways of expressing it in terms that make use of cultural assumptions without being controlled by them.

He concludes that this can only be done if we are continuously open to the witness of Christians in other cultures. This openness is central to the proclamation of a gospel that truly is good news to all people. **NFJ**

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



Freedom in the fence, love in the limits

BY GINGER HUGHES

“Move back guys. A car is coming!”

I hollered from my perch on the front steps, when the kids ventured closer to the road, past our fence, to look at something incredible. A special rock, an interesting stick, a muddy patch where the grass doesn't grow — you get the idea.

They glanced up from whatever they were studying and slowly took one small step back, completely unconcerned. Just as I was getting ready to yell at them again, the car turned into the driveway a few houses down.

“Guys, when I tell you to get back away from the road, I mean for you to move quickly and to come back inside our fence,” I reminded them sternly. “Okay, Mama,” they muttered as they continued playing.

A few minutes later they were playing ball when the ball rolled outside of the fence. They both ran to get it as another car was driving up our street.

“Kids, come back this way,” I called. They stood there watching the car drive up the street. “*I said get away from the road this minute!*” I yelled, standing to my feet, heading their way.

They weren't actually in the road, only near it, but I was exasperated that we'd just discussed this very thing, and here we were again. One had taken a small step or two back, and the other was still standing in place near the curb.

“Come here, both of you!” I said. “When I tell you to move away from the



road, or anything else for that matter, I mean for you to do it that very minute. Do you understand? I love you, and I want you to be safe. But you must listen to me.”

One nodded in agreement and apologized, while the other began making a case as to why listening to my directions and obeying what I said didn't suit.

“Mama, the car wasn't all that close. Besides I was watching for it. I know not to be too close to the road, and I'm sure I was far enough away.”

Sometimes my children think they know best. Sometimes they think that since they've lived on this planet for several years now, they are full of knowledge and wisdom. They think I'm being too protective or too demanding.

And I can't help but think so often we do the same thing with God. God gives us clear directions — things to do and things not to do — for the same reason we give our children direction and guidance: because we love them and God loves us.

Yet often we think we know best. God tells us to forgive someone who has wronged us, but we tell God why we shouldn't have to do that. God tells us not to lie, but we

reason that it surely won't hurt anybody.

God tells us to love our neighbor, but we pick and choose who seems “worthy” to be our neighbor. God tells us not to judge, yet we still measure sins against one another.

God tells us not to commit adultery, but we make allowances for why what we're doing isn't all that bad.

God tells us to be merciful, full of grace, abounding in love. God tells us to guard our thoughts and our tongues. And God tells us these things out of love.

God sets boundaries for us because God knows what is best. God knows when we're getting too close to something we have no business being close to. God knows when we are excusing what we know to be poor behavior.

God knows what will bring us joy (not temporary happiness) and what will bring us sorrow. God knows what will bring us peace and what will bring us turmoil. But just as my children think they know best, at times, sometimes we do the same.

Again, I sat my kids down to discuss the importance of listening and obeying. We discussed how much I love them, and that their dad and I set boundaries and have rules for them because of that great love.

Our God does the same. God is good. God does good. God's plans are good. **NFJ**

—Ginger Hughes is the wife of a pastor, a mother of two and an accountant. She is a Georgia native currently living in the foothills of North Carolina. Additional writings may be found at nomamasperfect.com.



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may be found at nurturingfaith.net 



THE LIGHTER SIDE

“Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee” —ST. AUGUSTINE

By Brett Younger

It is two o'clock in the morning and the dog next door will not stop barking at invisible intruders, your beloved who never snores is snoring, the light streaming through the window makes you wonder why they call them blinds rather than light shows, and the mocha you had at seven o'clock is making you think about how much caffeine is in a mocha.

You get up to make sure the door you locked is still locked. You hope that tossing and turning count as exercise. You check your email.

Some people do not sleep because they have insomnia. Others do not sleep because they have the Internet.

What keeps us up? Practically everything. And absolutely nothing. You think, “I have to get to sleep,” but your brain says, “No, let’s stay awake and remember every bad decision you’ve ever made.”

Sometimes work keeps us up. Some of us do not just take work home with us, but we also take work to bed with us. We worry about work when we are at home and worry about home when we are at work.

Just about everyone with children will be worrying about their children long after the children wish their parents would stop worrying about them. We worry about money — expenses we do not yet have and expenses we will never have.

We worry about our country and crazy people with indefensible politics. (Recent research suggests that Green Party members get the most sleep and Libertarians the least. Make what you want of that.)

Guilt keeps us up. We worry about the stupid thing we just said or the stupid thing we said 20 years ago. (One study suggests that women lose more sleep over guilt than men. Again, draw your own conclusion.)

We follow our thoughts around in

circles. We worry that we have forgotten something, worry about something we cannot forget, or worry about our parents starting to forget. We lose sleep until we are neither an early bird nor a night owl, but an exhausted pigeon.

We lose sleep wondering, “Why have we never heard a sermon on sleep?” Why don’t more ministers address how people spend roughly a third of their lives?

The Bible makes it clear that life is too short not to sleep a large part of the time. According to Psalm 127:2, “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest; eating the bread of anxious toil for God gives sleep to God’s beloved.”

The psalmist thinks that if we let worries keep us awake, we are forgetting God, ignoring the truth that God stays awake when we go to sleep. Going to sleep is a chance to admit that the world will be fine without us for a while. It is not a coincidence that the

time at which many of us most consistently pray is right before we fall asleep. When we lie down to sleep we can lay the reins in God’s hands, let go of the steering wheel, and give ourselves to God’s care when we are least able to care for ourselves.

Insomnia shows up for a variety of reasons and some people are born light or heavy sleepers, but it is also true — and there is research to support this — that sleep comes more easily for those who trust in God. If we believe that God will hold us forever, then whatever difficulties we are going through are temporary.

When someone falls asleep while praying, that may be a sign that their prayers were answered: “God gives sleep to God’s beloved.”

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Each night, when I go to sleep, I die. And the next morning, when I wake up, I am reborn.”

God restores us as we sleep. Sometimes when we wake up, the problems of the day before do not seem quite so bad. When we sleep, God gives us help that we cannot receive when we are awake. A good night of sleep is a mini-vacation. We wake up better people than when we went to bed.

When you go to sleep tonight, say a prayer, lay aside your restless heart, and find your rest in God. **NFJ**

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



Nurturing FAITH™

LESSONS FOR
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BIBLE STUDIES



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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Adult teaching plans by **David Woody**, associate pastor of French Huguenot Church in Charleston, S.C., are available at nurturingfaith.net



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

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

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The World Needs the Word

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

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

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

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Isaiah 51:1-6
The World Needs to Remember

Aug. 30, 2020
Jeremiah 15:15-21
The World Needs Mercy

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 3, 2020

2 Peter 2:11-25

A New Example

As the social gospel movement was gaining ground in the late 19th century, a Congregational minister named Charles M. Sheldon sought to encourage his congregation to get serious about following Jesus. He approached this by writing fictional stories about a church in which the pastor challenged parishioners to go a full year in which they would preface every decision with the question: “What would Jesus do?”

Sheldon used the inspirational stories as Sunday night sermons, attracting full houses. Later, the stories were published serially in a weekly Congregational newspaper called *The Advance*, then published as a ten-cent paperback novel called *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*

More than 100,000 copies were sold in a few weeks. *The Advance* failed to secure a proper copyright, however, and other publishers picked up the book, spreading its popularity. Eventually, the book sold more than 50 million copies, among the best-selling books of all time. A movement to wear “WWJD” bracelets in the 1990s promoted the same theme.

Sheldon was not the first writer to encourage such faithful following: in our text for today, the author of

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. (1 Pet. 2:21)

1 Peter calls on believers to learn from Christ’s example and to “follow in his steps.” Our world is much different than first-century Rome, but the challenge still applies.

Called to virtue (vv. 11-12)

In 1 Peter 2:1-10, the author calls for his readers to discard sinful ways and seek spiritual sustenance as they grow toward maturity and ultimate salvation (vv. 1-3). He appeals for them to join together as living stones in a spiritual house that will honor Christ (vv. 4-8), regarding themselves as God’s chosen, holy people (vv. 9-10).^u

But what’s involved in upright, honorable, and God-pleasing living? By choosing to follow Christ, believers inevitably find themselves at odds with a culture that worships other gods, whether they are called Apollo or Dianna, Luxury or Pleasure. That makes Christ-followers “aliens and exiles” in their own land, surrounded by the temptation to behave in ways that “wage war against the soul” (v. 11).^u

Sinful behavior obstructs spiritual growth, so believers who seek maturity must work to overcome it. We don’t do it for eternal rewards alone, though. Living ethical and honorable lives also helps us to be an effective witness to others.

Supporters of Roman and local

cultures in first-century Asia Minor might incorrectly accuse Christians of doing wrong, but the writer insisted that the believers’ good behavior would vindicate them and lead their neighbors to “glorify God on the day he visits us” (v. 12, probably a reference to the day of judgment).^u Whether he hoped former critics would glorify God because they had been converted or because they would confront their errors at the judgment is unclear.

American Christians are rarely ridiculed for their beliefs, though some go out of their way to claim persecution. Have you ever been criticized for behaviors growing out of your faith? If so, how did you respond?

Called to submission (vv. 13-17)

Christians owe their ultimate loyalty to Christ, but we also live under the authority of earthly institutions. The author of 1 Peter insisted that believers acknowledge governmental authorities and submit to them, even when such leaders were self-serving. Model behavior on the part of Christians could promote the faith and show they were not a threat to the government.


“Accept the authority of every human institution” (NRSV) could be translated “be subject to every human creation.” Since the writer goes on to talk about relationships involving governing authorities (2:13-17), masters with slaves (2:18-21), and family members (3:1-7), he probably has the institutional sense of the word in mind (v. 17).

Readers were addressed as “aliens and sojourners,” suggesting that most of them were low on the social or

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economic totem pole. They had little choice but to live in submission to the authorities of the city-state in which they lived.

The author offers a rationale for respecting governmental authorities: “It is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish” (v. 15). In other words, respect for authority has its roots in God’s will, not the leaders’ worthiness. Governmental systems and their leaders are inevitably imperfect, but well-intended authority is still preferable to anarchy. 

Though free in Christ, believers are to live as responsible citizens who do good rather than evil. In this way, no one would have grounds to condemn them.


The gospel of Jesus Christ is liberating. It assures women and men of all stations in life that they are people of dignity and worth. The writer knew, however, that freedom has a dangerous side. Those who have been liberated by the gospel may be tempted to live without restraint, and to use the promise of forgiveness as an excuse to sin. So, he cautions against using Christian freedom as a pretext for evil (v. 16).

The author fleshes out what it means to live as servants of God with a string of four imperative instructions (v. 17). First, Christians are to show respect to all people, reflecting God’s love for everyone.


Secondly, believers are to have a special love for their Christian family. The word “church” does not appear in this letter, but the author urges believers to love the “brotherhood,” which NRSV renders as “the family of believers.”

The word for “love” is from *agapē*, a word that was given a distinctively Christian meaning. It is used in the New Testament to describe the


unconditional love of Jesus, which he calls us to share with others.

While loving others, Christians are to reverence God (the third imperative). The phrase could be translated as “fear God,” but the author is not suggesting that we live in terror before the Almighty. Thoughtful believers live in awe of God’s majesty as creator, sustainer, and ultimate judge. Our greatest reverence belongs to the one who has the final word. 


The fourth imperative again references the emperor, who is to be honored – though not revered. At times the Roman Empire treated its potentates like gods, instructing all subjects to worship the emperor by offering incense and saying “Caesar is Lord!”


There are limits to governmental submission: reverence and worship are reserved for God alone. One’s proper attitude to governing authorities is described with the same word of respect used at the beginning of the verse: believers can honor people in high office without worshiping them. 

Called to endurance (vv. 18-25)

The next few verses are difficult for modern readers. In the first-century world, slavery was pervasive and imperial Roman society depended on it at every level. Slavery was not related to race or ethnicity: the greatest number of slaves were captured in wars and forced to serve the victors. A thriving slave trade bought and sold persons. One could become a slave through kidnapping, being abandoned by parents, being born to a slave mother, or even as a criminal punishment. Though as distasteful then as now, slavery was ubiquitous and regarded as a reality of life. 

In a slave-based society, any discussion of relationships and authority would include slaves. In

contemporary society, most people consider slavery to be abhorrent, but it still exists. By some estimates, many thousands of people still live in involuntary servitude, forced into sex work or thankless labor. 

Peter knew that many of his readers were literally in bondage to others: the Christian message of freedom in Christ was popular among slaves. The author neither condoned nor condemned the practice, but encouraged Christian slaves to be patient and respectful to their masters, including those who were harsh (vv. 18-20). Even when mistreated, believers should remain faithful to God and not give in to the temptation of retribution, he wrote. 

The thought of Christian slaves suffering unjustly led Peter to call upon Christ’s example as a model for believers to follow (v. 21). When suffering comes our way – including undeserved suffering – we are to bear it with grace, trusting that our perseverance will find favor with God and sow seeds of grace in the lives of those who harm us.

To reinforce his position, in vv. 22-25 the author quotes loosely from Isa. 53:7-9, understood by the early church as a prophecy of Christ’s patient endurance in the face of unjust suffering. Interspersed within the citation, the author added his own commentary. As Christ’s suffering was redemptive, he says, so believers should live righteous lives and inspire their persecutors to have faith.

In other words, the writer calls for a Jesus-centered approach as we live and work under the authority of others, whether it is our parents or teachers, our supervisors at work, or governmental authorities. The author believed that the way believers comport themselves as cooperative people could have a positive effect on every level.

What kind of influence are you having? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 10, 2020

1 Peter 2:2-10

A New Hope

The apostle Peter was born as Simon, but the Fourth Gospel suggests that Jesus gave him a new name when they first met: “You are Simon son of John,” Jesus said. “You are to be called Cephas” (John 1:42). Cephas is the Aramaic word for “rock,” equivalent to the Greek word *petros*, which comes into English as Peter. One could argue that Peter was the original “Rocky.”

It’s no surprise, then, that the person who wrote 1 Peter and attributed it to the apostle should use the metaphor of rocks or stones, encouraging Christians to think of themselves as living stones built into the body of Christ. That promotes a Jesus-centered worldview from the inside out.

Drink your milk (vv. 1-3)

The opening verses of ch. 2 build on earlier exhortations calling Christians to live as new and different people (1:13-25). The author had no qualms about mixing metaphors: he addressed believers as babies who need milk, as living blocks of stone built into a temple, as priests within the same temple, and as a specially chosen nation. Along the way, he cited various Old Testament texts to support his views.

Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:5)

Becoming a new person in Christ involves transformation of the old self. Thus, he calls believers to strip away “malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander.”

“Rid yourselves” (NRSV) or “get rid of” (NET) suggests a turning away from one’s pre-Christian behaviors: the same word introduces similar lists in Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22, 25; Col. 3:8; and Jas. 1:21. It suggests the image of taking off an old garment to put on a new one. ↓

The writer’s litany of negative attitude to be discarded includes “malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander” (v. 1). The word for “malice” is a general term for wickedness, while “guile” begins a list of negative behaviors that disrupt community and hurt others.

In Greek, the last three vices are written in the plural form. “Insincerity” is the Greek word from which we derive “hypocrisy” (*hupocrisis*). Envy is at the root of selfish behavior that seeks to advance oneself above others. Slander involves language that intentionally defames or harms others.

The author probably did not know many people in his audience personally. Perhaps that is why he chose rather generic terms for harmful habits to be put away. If you were writing a similar advice letter today, what negative attitudes or practices would you encourage new believers to discard?

Are there things you might accept that other Christians would reject?

You may be able to name specific habits or ways of thinking that you consciously put away when you became a Christian. Are there other changes that remain to be made?

Believers should not only put away what hinders spiritual growth, but also hunger for what enhances it. Peter called on the repentant and newly innocent Christians to think of themselves as mere babes in the faith, seeking to grow through imbibing “pure, spiritual milk” (v. 2a).

This implies that many of the readers were recent converts. “Long for” is a strong verb that suggests a hungry yearning, no less essential to survival than a newborn’s instinctive appetite.

The substance of the metaphorical milk is not identified, though it is described as “pure” (free from deceit) and as “spiritual” or “genuine.” The latter word translates *logikos*, which the King James Version inaccurately renders as “of the word.” The term’s primary meaning is “rational” or “genuine.” The translation “spiritual” is figurative.

This verse is not about Bible study, then, as many KJV readers have inferred and many preachers have declared. Rather, it is a call for new believers to seek every opportunity for trustworthy guidance and spiritual growth. ↓

What might this involve? Fellowship with other Christians, worship as part of the community, communion with God through prayer, and a conscious effort to follow Jesus in loving ways can all strengthen believers.

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Few Christians in Peter’s audience would have access to Old Testament writings, and the New Testament was still being written. They would need to learn about their faith from the teaching of pastors, itinerant evangelists, or letters such as 1 Peter from church leaders. ↓

How would this help believers “grow into salvation” (v. 2b)? The writer is not suggesting that new believers had no experience of saving grace. The phrase speaks to the importance of growing in one’s appreciation and experience of salvation. Those who have truly tasted the good life God gives will want more (v. 3). ↓ Salvation has both present and future dimensions: those who trust in Christ live in a state of grace, but have yet to know the final, full, and eternal extent of salvation. ↓

**Be a rock
(vv. 4-8)**

With v. 4, the writer shifts metaphors. Instead of newborn babes, he now asks believers to think of themselves as stones, citing Christ as “a living stone, rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.” ↓

Christ-followers should likewise think of themselves as living stones that make up the greater temple of Christ’s body (v. 5a). Such stones are not static and unchanging, like the carefully shaped limestone used in many ancient temples. Rather, as we grow in maturity and faith, we continue to be formed and shaped both as individuals and as a church.

Peter calls on believers who have been “built into a spiritual house” to live holy lives as priests who offer “spiritual sacrifices” appropriate to the worship of Christ (v. 5b). The work of Christ rendered animal sacrifices obsolete. Instead, we offer the sacrifices of faithful and worshipful living.

The new believers in Asia Minor

would face many trials, being “rejected by mortals” just as Christ was spurned by many. Yet, they could find comfort in knowing they were “chosen and precious in God’s sight.”

The author reinforces this image by recalling several Old Testament texts (vv. 6-8). The laying of the chosen cornerstone reflects Isa. 28:16, while its rejection calls to mind Ps. 118:22, and its role as a stumbling block for unbelievers derives from Isa. 8:14.

Early believers interpreted these texts as prophetic references to Jesus, who was rejected by mortals but chosen by God and destined to become the cornerstone by which all others would be judged. As Christ stood firm in trials, the new believers were called to do the same. ↓

**Live in the light
(vv. 9-10)**

Those who cherish the doctrine of “the priesthood of the believer” have long loved v. 9, which picks up on the metaphor of believers as priests from v. 5. Quoting from God’s commission to Israel in Exod. 19:5-6 (and possibly Isa. 43:20-21), the author affirms a new status for the new believers: “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” ↓

These labels speak not only to our privilege as God’s chosen people, but also to our responsibility to live as priests who serve God in the world. In ancient Israel, priests were called to intercede with God on behalf of others, and to teach others about God so they could worship in their own words.

In other words, the work of a priest is to represent fellow humans before God, and to represent God to their fellow humans. The author of 1 Peter believed that God has chosen all believers to live as priests, not just ordained clergy or other professional ministers. As such, every believer is called to a

holy life that shows reverence to God and points others to God.

We are not called as God’s chosen people and royal priesthood for our benefit alone, then, but that we might serve as witnesses in the world. As God has called us out of this world’s darkness and into divine light, so God commissions us to lead others from spiritual darkness into light (v. 9b).

The reference to believers as God’s special people led the writer to recall another Old Testament text, this one from the prophet Hosea. With his own broken marriage serving as a metaphor for Israel’s desertion of God, Hosea gave his daughter the name Lo-ruhammah (“Not Pitied”) and his youngest son the name Lo-ammi (“not my people”). Hosea did not give up on his children or on Israel, however, but looked to a day when God would have pity on “Not Pitied” and would say to “Not My People” that “You are my people.” He, representing Israel, would respond “You are my God” (Hos. 1:9, 2:23).

The author of 1 Peter believed that very prophecy was being fulfilled as new believers responded positively to God in Christ: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people,” he said. “Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (2:10). ↓

Have you experienced both sides of the relationship described here? Can you recall a feeling of guilt before God, knowing how far you had fallen short of God’s ideal? And do you recall the sense of relief that comes with repentance and the joy of knowing that God has forgiven your sins?

The author of 1 Peter wanted the Christians who read his letter to remember their former lives apart from God, and to adopt a new way of living, forgiven and beloved and focused on Jesus. NFJ



Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


May 17, 2020

1 Peter 3:13-22

A New Approach

Who wants to talk about suffering? It's not a popular subject of conversation. Then again, talking about adversity is less painful than experiencing it.

Some readers might think just reading 1 Peter brings on a bit of suffering, as the first few verses of ch. 3 reflect the ancient author's male bias: he instructed women to live under the authority of their husbands, adorning themselves with piety rather than jewels and braided hair (vv. 1-6). Husbands, meanwhile, were to honor their wives as "the weaker sex" (v. 7).

Some modern Christians continue to celebrate the writer's endorsement of male dominance as a biblical principle, while others see it as an artifact of his societal context that did not appreciate gender equality. In either case, we may look past the author's cultural coloring and accept his admonishment for all believers to "have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (v. 8). 

Make pain count (vv. 13-17)


In vv. 13-14 the writer turns to the subject of suffering, but not for the first time. In the first chapter, the

... in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. (1 Pet. 3:15)

author addressed his readers as exiles who suffered various trials on the road to a purified faith (1:6-7). In 2:18-21, he encouraged slaves to be patient and respond with goodness even when they suffered under harsh masters. In 3:9, he called for believers to respond to abuse with blessings rather than returning evil for evil.


The author understood that suffering is a part of life, and God does not make Christians exempt from it. Indeed, some may suffer precisely because they are Christian.

When Jesus talked about unjust suffering in Luke 13:1-5 and John 9:1-9, he did not explain why bad things happen to good people, though he did refute the popular idea that suffering is divine payback for personal or family sin. Sometimes adversity has no apparent connection with personal failure on anyone's part: everyone is responsible for his or her own behavior.


The writer chose to speak about suffering because his readers faced regular ostracism and needed encouragement to help them deal with it in a positive way. In 3:10-12 he had cited a psalm that promised blessing to the righteous, and now in 3:13-17 (along with 4:12-19), he offers counsel to Christians who suffer unjustly. 

Common sense suggests that helpful people would seem less likely to get hurt: "Who will harm you if you

are eager to do good?" (v. 13). Yet, we know that suffering is a reality, and sometimes good people are harmed by others.

How could the author say that "even if you do suffer for doing right, you are blessed" (v. 14a)? Can blessing come from suffering? Perhaps he has in mind Jesus' beatitudes about those who are insulted or persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Matt. 5:10-11). Jesus had used the same word: *makarios*, "blessed." 

One of the worst aspects of suffering is the uncertainty of how long it will last or whether it will get worse. We shouldn't be afraid, the author says (v. 14b). "Do not fear what they fear" is a quotation from Isa. 8:12, where Isaiah called on King Ahaz to trust God and not fear the Assyrians, as the kings of Israel and Syria did.

Readers of 1 Peter were not troubled by Assyrian conquerors, but by neighbors or people in power who rejected or discriminated against them because of their faith. The same words can be translated as "Don't let the fear of them make you afraid." 

We know that other people can be mean or hurtful, but that should not intimidate us: the fear of being harmed can be worse than the hurt itself.

When struggles come, we can cope because we have the hope that comes with knowing Christ. Rather than living in service to fear, Peter says, we are to "sanctify Christ as Lord" in our hearts, showing reverence and obedience to Christ. Confident of our relationship with Christ, we can be ready to explain what makes us hopeful and positive despite hardship or rejection by others (v. 15).

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As we defend our faith 1 Peter insists that we do so with kindness (v. 16). Christians are not immune to arrogance and the temptation to speak in harsh or self-righteous ways, but the potential benefit of our witness is more important than any satisfaction we might gain from a verbal retaliation. Others may bring shame on themselves in mistreating us, but we should not bring shame upon ourselves or on the cause of Christ.

We've all seen reports of a small but infamous family-centered "church" whose members regularly picket funerals with grotesque signs accusing the deceased of various sins and predicting eternal torment. While claiming to defend the faith, they serve only to make Christians look foolish and intemperate.


Others may act more quietly, leaving strident and cartoonish gospel tracts in waiting rooms or bathroom stalls that depict sinners burning in hell. These do not serve the gospel well: a positive and hope-filled witness is far more effective than a judgmental screed, and more likely to foster renewed courage and healing for our own hearts, as well.

The power of one's witness can be proportional to the circumstances under which it is given. When life is going well, it can be easy to have faith and easy to talk about it. When times are hard, the ability to maintain our hope in Christ and speak of it may be particularly impressive. Many have been inspired, for example, by the example of believers such as Corrie Ten Boom and others who sheltered Jews during the Holocaust at great risk to themselves.

If we are going to suffer, Peter says, it should be for doing good and not evil. Facing suffering in this way is a part of God's will for us – not in the sense that God causes our affliction,


but because faithful suffering can test and strengthen our faith. As the pain of strenuous exercise makes our bodies stronger and more fit, the testing of our faith contributes to spiritual health and confidence.

Remember Jesus' example (vv. 18-22)

The author consistently pointed to Jesus as the prime example of one who faced unjust suffering with courage and conviction (1:6-7, 2:18-25, 3:18-22, 4:12-19). In vv. 18-22 he reminded readers under duress that Jesus willingly "suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God" (v. 18). 

But what do we make of his following claim that Jesus, dead in the flesh but alive in the spirit, "made a proclamation to the spirits in prison" (v. 19a)? The spirits in question lived in former times, he wrote, during the period when Noah was building the ark, and were disobedient, presumably to God (v. 20).

Just what was the writer talking about? This appears to reflect an early belief that Jesus went to the land of the dead between the time of his death and resurrection. The Apostles' Creed includes an assertion that Jesus "Was crucified, dead, and buried: He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead ..."

While in the land of the dead, according to this view, Jesus preached the good news of repentance and grace to those who came before him – or at least to the disobedient contemporaries of Noah who died in the flood. 

Some who are familiar with other ancient writings believe the reference is to Jesus preaching to the "sons of God" (we would call them angels), who reportedly consorted with human

women in the years prior to the flood (Gen. 6:1-4). These "spirits" were in a special prison, according to the Jewish book of 1 Enoch, which was popular in the first century and cited elsewhere in the New Testament (for more, see "The Hardest Question" online).

The content of Jesus' preaching is not stated, only that "he proclaimed to the spirits in prison." Some believe Jesus' purpose was to pronounce final condemnation on the fallen spirits, while others assume that any preaching of Christ must necessarily allow for the possibility of hope and redemption.

Perhaps the writer's intent is to suggest that Christ will go to any length to reach out to the fallen – even to disobedient angels – and offer them hope.

In any case, the reference to Noah and his family being saved "through water" led the writer to thoughts of baptism, the central symbol of our public faith.

We are not saved by the act of baptism, as a literal reading of v. 21 might suggest, but through repentance and trust in Christ that lead to the waters of baptism. As the public profession of our faith, baptism sets us on the road to faithful living and ultimate salvation through the resurrected Christ, portrayed as sitting at the right hand of God and exalted over all other powers (v. 22).

Suffering is a part of life, and faithfully following the road of a Jesus-centered lifestyle will not deliver us from it. Such is life, but ours is not an ordinary life. As believers, our life is bound up with Christ's life. As we follow Jesus' example of confident endurance in the face of difficult days, 1 Peter claims, we will not only be blessed, but our witness will also become a powerful blessing to others. That's good news all around. **NFJ**



Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 24, 2020

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

A New Strength

How long has it been since you put pen to paper and wrote an actual letter? Email, texting, and social media have virtually replaced letter writing except in the most formal of circumstances, but there was a time when the only way to communicate with friends or family at a distance was through writing letters. Are you old enough to remember writing or receiving handwritten letters?

As we study 1 Peter, it's helpful to remember that it's just that: a letter designed to be circulated among a group of churches in what was then called "Asia" and is now part of western Turkey.

Letters found in the New Testament follow a basic form in which greetings are followed by matters of interest between the parties. Letter-writers then brought the letter to an end with a conclusion designed to convey final words and to say goodbye.

Biblical epistles typically end with words of encouragement and advice, and 1 Peter is no exception. The author closed with a sincere wish that his readers would practice cordial humility toward each other and live in love.

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. (1 Pet. 5:10)

Humble trust (vv. 6-7)

Having spoken to the issue of family and community relationships (3:1-7, 4:7-11), the writer closed with a few words of advice about how members of the church should treat each other (5:1-5). He described himself as an "elder," and spoke to the "elders among you" (v. 1) along with "those who are younger" (v. 5).^U

Whether we are to think of "elder" as a designation of age or of office, the writer appealed to the experience and wisdom of church leaders, urging them to "tend the flock of God that is in your charge" with willing eagerness.^U

Likewise, "younger" members were to respect the leadership of more experienced believers. As with family relationships, all were to live in humble submission to one another, remembering that "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (v. 5; a quotation from the Greek translation of Prov. 3:34).

Can you remember a time when a more mature Christian – whether holding a church office or not – was helpful to you in your pilgrimage of faith? Have you ever sought to encourage newer believers?

The writer's reference to humility in v. 5 led him back to the theme of faithful living in a difficult world. He brought his missive to a forceful

conclusion with a string of imperative verbs: humble yourselves, cast your cares on God, discipline yourselves, and resist evil (vv. 6-9). The closing words include a comforting promise of future hope for those who would follow his advice (vv. 10-11).

Let's look more closely. Faithful living requires a healthy measure of humility. Believers adopt modest attitudes not because they feel worthless, but because they understand their place in the larger scheme of things: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (v. 6).

"God's mighty hand" is a common Old Testament metaphor for God's power to deliver (Exod. 13:3, Deut. 26:8, 1 Kgs. 8:42, Neh. 1:10, Ps. 136:12, among many others). First Peter addressed people who may have been forcibly humbled by the mighty fist of Rome. Involuntary submission is degrading, but humble believers can be confident that God's "mighty hand" will hold them firm and ultimately lift them up. "In due time" translates the word *kairos*, which describes "the appropriate time," in God's time.

Humility before God does not imply going about on our knees or wearing sackcloth. Mainly, it's about putting our trust in God rather than relying on our efforts alone. "Cast all your anxiety on him," Peter said, "because he cares for you" (v. 7).^U

The notions of being humble and entrusting one's cares to God are closely connected. Holding on to our problems and worries points to a prideful belief that we can go it alone – or to a lack of belief that God can be of help. In contrast, entrusting our cares to God

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is a sign of humility as well as faith.

The author’s advice does not suggest that we blithely ignore the pressures, debts, or illnesses that may confront us and just assume that God will take care of everything. It is our worries we are to turn over to God – not our responsibilities. We cannot expect God to make our apologies or pay our bills or improve our physical fitness, but we can look positively to God for help and hope as we do those things, and we need not waste energy worrying about them in the meantime.

As the disciples “cast their cloaks” on the colt for Jesus to ride on his triumphal entry to Jerusalem (Luke 19:35), so Christ’s followers are to cast our cares on God as we walk through difficult times but toward ultimate triumph.

The importance of trusting God in times of trial exists through the ages. Some will remember Charles A. Tindley’s touching hymn, “Leave It There,” written in 1916. The song’s verses sing of troubles associated with poverty, illness, enemies, and aging, each one leading to the chorus “Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.”

Steadfast faith (vv. 8-9)

First Peter calls for readers to trust God in times of need, but not to imagine that life can be lived without effort. Wise believers should discipline themselves and stay alert, for “Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour” (v. 8).

The words for “be sober” (“discipline yourselves” in the NRSV) and “keep alert” (literally, “stay awake!”) were often used together, especially by writers who thought of themselves as living in the last days, urging others to be faithful until the end.

Like other early Christians, the

author believed that an evil foe lurked behind the many temptations and cruelties of this world, opposing the righteous and advocating evil. The word for “adversary” is a technical term for a legal opponent in court, but could be used in the general sense of “enemy.”

“Devil” translates “*diabolos*” (the root of our word “diabolical”). Its root meaning is something like “slanderer.” *Diabolos* is the word typically used in the Septuagint (a Greek version of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew term *ha-sâtân* (“the accuser”).

In the Hebrew Bible, with only one late exception (1 Chron. 21:1), the word *sâtân* always appears with the definite article (*ha*), as a title rather than a personal name. The accuser was not believed to be an evil power who opposed God, but served with other “sons of God” on the heavenly council. His particular responsibility was to observe human activity and report wrongdoing (see Job 1:6-7), like a heavenly district attorney.

By the first century, however, many Jews had come to think of *ha-sâtân* as a demonic power that sought to pervert God’s purposes by tempting people to do evil. Over time, the *diabolos* came to be thought of as a rebellious angel who had been given temporary dominion in the world, but who remained subject to Christ (John 14:30, 1 John 5:19).

Christians make two common mistakes in their thinking about the devil. One error is in taking demonic power too seriously; fearing demonic possession or blaming the world’s ills on satanic influence. The other mistake is in not taking evil seriously enough. First Peter counsels no overt fear of evil — but recognizes the reality of temptations to live at odds with God. Whether we think of the devil as a personal being or a powerful metaphor,

few can deny the reality of evil in the world.

The temptations we face are not only those of a moral or corrupt nature, but also the endemic sins of a greed-based society that values self-gratification more than a healthy community. The first step in overcoming temptation is to recognize it for what it is, and the first step in enduring tribulation is to recognize its temporary nature. Those who stand firm in their faith and in company with other Christians will find the strength to endure.

True strength (vv. 10-11)

First Peter concludes with a reassuring promise of God’s intention to deliver and strengthen God’s people. Verses 10-11 are a powerful benediction, a promise that God will bless those who are enduring trials and will “restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

The piling up of four active verbs that are near synonyms makes for an emphatic statement. The word for “restore” means “to supply what is needed” or “to mend what is broken.” The term translated as “support” can also mean “to make firm,” or “confirm.” Like the next verb in the series, it could also mean “to strengthen.” The end result, found in the final verb, is that believers may become established, firmly grounded in their faith. Does that sound like you?

The author’s promise of divine deliverance does not preclude suffering or hard times, but counsels confidence nonetheless. Difficult days are an integral part of human life, but in the midst of trouble, those who follow Jesus can rest assured that we serve a mighty God who can lift us up. We will be tried, we will suffer pain, we will be wounded in this life, but the restoring power of God is strong, and provides what we need to endure.

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-21

A New Spirit

Church tradition has led to the identification of many days as times of special emphasis. Occasions such as Christmas and Epiphany may fall on any day of the week, but two related biblical events – Easter and Pentecost – always fall on a Sunday. Easter took place on the first day after the Passover Sabbath observed by Jews, and Pentecost (from the Greek for “fiftieth”) took place seven weeks and one day after the Passover Sabbath, which initiated the Feast of Weeks.

Many Protestant churches do not observe Pentecost, but those that follow the liturgical calendar may drape the pulpit or communion table with red. Ministers wear scarlet stoles, and congregants are often encouraged to wear red, as well.

The color reminds worshipers of the tongues of fire that marked the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence in the lives of those who experienced the first Christian Pentecost. It is a day for celebrating the amazing gift of God’s Spirit.

A mighty wind (vv. 1-4)

The story is familiar but worth a closer look. First-century Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city with residents from

*And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.
(Acts 2:1)*

many different countries. During the Feast of Weeks, the population swelled with Jewish pilgrims who flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks. ↓

The story begins with “When the day of Pentecost had come” (NRSV), but the word translated “had come” could also mean “was fulfilled,” an expression that suggests more than a date on the calendar. Jesus began his ministry by saying “the time is fulfilled” (Mark 1:15, using a related word), and he had spoken earlier of prophecies concerning the coming of the Spirit being fulfilled (Acts 1:4-5, 8).

The previous chapter speaks of 120 followers of Jesus who had gathered in the upper room of a large house as they contemplated the meaning of Christ’s ascension, heard Peter speak, and chose Matthias to replace Judas as the 12th apostle (1:12-26). Perhaps we are to imagine the same assembly when v. 1 says “they were all together in one place.”

During that morning meeting, Luke says, “suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting” (v. 2).

The “violent wind” was apparently experienced more as sound than fury. The NRSV’s “rush of” (NET “blowing”) translates a verb that normally means “bringing” or “carrying.” The whistling sound did not

indicate the movement of air as much as the arrival of something remarkable.

That something, we will learn in v. 4, was the Holy Spirit. In another sign of the Spirit’s presence, tongues of flame appeared and hovered over the heads of all who were gathered there (v. 3). Ordinarily, one would think that a sudden wind would blow out small flames: this wind blew them in.

Both wind and flame were common symbols of a theophany, the presence of God. ↓ Author Luke understood the presence of God to be in the form of the Holy Spirit (v. 4), sent in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise (1:8). ↓

In a further sign of the Spirit’s presence, the gathered believers began to speak “in tongues.” In Greek, the same word (*glossa*) is used for the tongues of flame and the other tongues with which they spoke, clearly suggesting that there was a spiritual component to the speech. Although the familiar King James Version uses the word “tongues” in v. 4, “languages” would be a better translation, since the following verses indicate that people from other lands heard them speak in their own languages. ↓

Bewildering speech (vv. 5-13)

With v. 5, Luke shifts the scene from events inside the room to a great crowd that had gathered outside. ↓ As modern folk hearing a crash or explosion might rush to see what had happened, people walking or living nearby apparently heard the same “sound like the rush of a violent wind” that had filled the house, and they came to see what the excitement was all about. If they could have seen the

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flames reportedly hovering over those inside, they might have been even more amazed that the building was still standing.

Luke does not locate the building, but the size of the crowd gathered outside (from whom 3,000 were baptized, according to 2:41) suggests that it must have been on the edge of a large public square or some other open space, possibly near the outer courts of the temple.

Luke also says nothing about how the diverse multitude was able to hear the newly in-spirited persons as they spoke in languages that every person present could understand. Did the empowered believers rush from the building to mingle with the crowd and testify to Christ's mighty works? Did some of the group stand on steps or a raised platform?

Peter reportedly addressed the entire crowd while standing with the other 11 disciples, apparently in view of those gathered (2:14).

The people expressed bewilderment, not so much at what the disciples said, but that they could understand what they said, since all of the speakers were from Galilee (vv. 6-7). Jesus had called his first disciples in Galilee, where most of his active ministry took place, and had many followers beyond the twelve.

Galileans were known for their distinctive regional accent (see Luke 22:59), yet on the Day of Pentecost, people throughout the international audience heard them speaking in their native languages.

Scholars and others have long debated whether the miracle that day was one of speaking or of hearing. Were the disciples given the ability to speak (and presumably understand) a known language, or were they uttering some sort of heavenly language that their audience could miraculously

understand? The text could lend itself to either interpretation, but the plainer sense suggests that they were speaking known languages.

Modern field workers on mission in non-English-speaking countries often spend the first two years of their assignments in language school, learning to communicate with the people they hope to reach. Because of Pentecost, the first wave of missionaries required no such preparation.

Note how Luke combines the observations of many people into what appears to be a single speech as he lists the nations represented that day. Though from different parts of the world, members of the crowd apparently shared a Jewish heritage – but not the same response. Though “all were amazed and perplexed” by the events, wondering what it was all about (v. 12), “others sneered and said, ‘They are full of new wine’” (v. 13).

Some interpreters see evidence in v. 13 that the disciples were speaking in *glossolalia*, or unknown tongues, and that some could understand it, while it sounded like gibberish to others. It's also possible that people could have been overhearing other foreign languages that they did not understand, which could also have sounded like nonsense. Cynically, they accused the speakers of being drunk on new wine.

An insightful sermon (vv. 14-21)

Peter was generally the most outspoken of the disciples, so it's not surprising that he offered a quick response, forcefully addressing the crowd as “You men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem” challenging them to “listen to what I say” (v. 14).

Charges of drunkenness could easily be dismissed, as Peter said it was only 9:00 a.m. (v. 15). Wine

often accompanied evening meals but was not commonly consumed in the morning. Those who were speaking in new languages were not inebriated by spirits, but inspired by the Spirit.

Peter spoke as if his listeners should not be surprised by what they saw. Quoting a familiar scripture, he described the miraculous movement of the Spirit as nothing more than the fulfillment of Joel's ancient prophecy that a time would come when God would pour out his Spirit on *all* people, so that people of every race and gender and age would experience God's Spirit and express their faith through prophecy (vv. 17-18).

Peter reminded his hearers of how Joel had indicated that the day would be marked by signs in the heavens and on earth – signs much like those that had accompanied Christ's death on the cross (vv. 19-20). Likewise, he pointed to Joel's prediction that such an event would throw open the gates of heaven, so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (v. 21).

Our text ends at v. 21, but Peter's sermon continued through v. 36 as he quoted psalms attributed to David. Peter argued that David had predicted the coming of a messiah and called him “Lord,” which would connect back to the closing line of the quote from Joel, that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

As we celebrate Pentecost today, we need not expect to experience wind and flames, for the Spirit of Christ has not left the earth and does not need to be “prayed down” again. Pentecost remains a reminder of the power and importance of our witness, however. The Spirit is still active in the lives of those who seek to see and respond to the world as Jesus did, leading us to show love and grace in such surprising ways that others may still be amazed. NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

June 7, 2020

Matthew 28:16-20

The World Needs the Gospel

Today's text is so familiar that many readers might wonder why we bother to study it anew. As children, many of us were encouraged to memorize Matt. 28:19-20. Long-time church attenders have no doubt heard any number of sermons based on the text, especially during those seasons when donations for missions was being collected.

Our terminology and methodology of mission work has changed considerably through the years, but not our love for "the Great Commission." On close study, we may find more than one reason to call this commission great.

On the liturgical calendar, this week celebrates "Trinity Sunday," which is why the Gospel reading skips to the end of Matthew, where we find what appears to be a Trinitarian formula.

Meeting Jesus (v. 16)

The closing verses of Matthew must be read and understood within the context of the entire 28th chapter, a narrative that begins with Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" standing wide-eyed and open-mouthed before an empty tomb. The careful reader may notice

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:19-20)

that *twice* in this short account of Easter morning (vv. 7 and 10), Jesus sent word to his disciples that he had gone ahead of them to Galilee, and that they should follow him there if they wanted to see him.

Why was this so important that Matthew spelled it out twice to be sure we don't miss it? If Jesus wanted to see the disciples again, why didn't he just drop in on their sullen hideout in Jerusalem, which is precisely what Luke and John describe him as doing (Luke 24:36-49, John 20:19-29)? Why was it important for Matthew to insist that Jesus would go straightway into *Galilee*, and first meet the disciples there? 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

At least two things about this may be significant. First, Galilee was Jesus' earthly home. Though born in Bethlehem, he was raised in Nazareth, a small town in southern Galilee. Though he traveled south for his baptism and may have visited Jerusalem for religious festivals, the bulk of his ministry was spent in the rugged hills and lakeside towns of Galilee. 🇺🇸

During the short years of his active ministry, the closest thing Jesus had to a home was Capernaum, where Simon Peter lived, by the north shore of the sea of Galilee. According to Matthew, as Jesus began his active ministry,

"He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali" (4:13).

More importantly, Matthew may have seen important symbolism in Jesus' return to Galilee.

First-century Galilee was a very cosmopolitan community. There were Jewish towns and villages such as Nazareth and Capernaum and Cana, but Jews were likely a minority. The cities of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee and Sepphoris in the hill country just north of Nazareth were both Hellenistic centers with few, if any, Jews. Many villages were populated then, as now, by people of other ethnic backgrounds. Galilee was a melting pot of the ancient world.

Jesus' ministry stretched far beyond the narrow confines of Judaism. Matthew often cited Old Testament texts that he believed Jesus came to fulfill, so it's often thought that his gospel was directed primarily toward Jews. The author, however, clearly understood Jesus' concern for all people. So, it was important for him to highlight a tradition that Jesus did not stay around Jerusalem but went into Galilee, perhaps because it symbolized the larger world he had come to save.

Jesus was not content to return to Galilee alone, for he had business yet to accomplish with his disciples. Thus, he instructed the women: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (v 10). Jesus in his resurrection was not limited by geography and neither was the mission he was leaving the disciples.

For Jesus' work to continue, his disciples would need to be willing to follow him into the world. And, it was

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only when his 11 remaining disciples had gone by faith into Galilee, Matthew says, that Jesus met them on a mountain and declared to them the church’s great commission.

**Worship, and wonder
(v. 17)**


When the disciples found Jesus, Matthew tells us, “they worshiped him.” The last time they had seen Jesus, he was suffering under the humiliation of Roman cruelty and the cross. Now, however, they saw him resurrected and glorified. Perhaps they had discussed his prior predictions of death and resurrection while on the way to Galilee. No one could do what he had done apart from God. No one could do what he had done unless, in some mysterious way, he was in some way related to God.

Worship was appropriate now; worship that confesses the Lordship – the *Godship* – of Jesus, the Christ, the dead and risen and lifted up; worship that declares our human unworthiness to stand in the presence of the creating and redeeming God. It is no wonder that the disciples were moved to worship.

“They worshiped him,” Matthew says, “*but some doubted.*” What? Here they are on the ground before the risen Christ, but *some doubted*? The Greek text allows considerable ambiguity in translation. Was there doubt among the 11 disciples Matthew identifies as being present? Or, does the text suggest there were others gathered around who doubted that the man before them was truly the risen Christ?

While some worshiped, others doubted. Has anything really changed from that spring day until this present summer Sunday? Some worship, but others doubt. And is it not true that sometimes we who worship may also doubt? Thinking Christians may have honest questions about their faith – even as they worship.

We can be grateful that Matthew’s gospel offers space for the doubters among us. It is possible both to adore and to doubt, and Jesus honors our questions along with our worship.

In that sense, this text is a real gift to those who travel with Thomas, who was portrayed by the Fourth Gospel as harboring doubts before he saw Jesus for himself (John 20:20-25). Jesus appeared undisturbed by the mixed minds of those who worshiped him. He understood their uncertainty and extended the same commission to them all. 

**Witness
(v. 18-20)**

Jesus declared to his confused-but-still-worshiping disciples that he had been granted “all authority in heaven and on earth” (v. 18). Matthew’s gospel begins with the claim that Jesus was the promised scion of David, the true messianic king (1:1), but for most of his ministry, Jesus avoided such language.

Now, despite the lack of regal trappings or evidence in that isolated mountain setting, Jesus affirmed his role as king, not only of Israel, but of all things. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” he said. Think about that claim: *All authority in heaven and on earth.* The resurrection marked a new phase of Christ’s eternal reign.

Jesus’ authority implies the power to command, the power that lies behind the “therefore” of v. 19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .” Jesus’ followers – doubting or not – were called to obey Christ, the last word in authority. When Jesus calls us to “go,” we are expected to go.

But where do we go, and what do we do? We go to every place and to every people who need to see and hear the gospel message of Jesus’ love. Indeed, we are always “going” here and

there, and the responsibility of making new disciples rests with all believers, not just with those who feel called to “go to the mission field.” In this age of post-Christendom, America is as greatly in need of the gospel as any other place – and more than some.

Interpreters often point out that the word for “go” is a participle in Greek, and only the word meaning “make disciples” is in the imperative form. Thus, it is possible to translate the command in this way: “As you are going, make disciples . . .” No believer is exempt from the responsibility of living the kind of life that inspires others to discipleship, and we are to do that as a matter of course in our daily lives – as we are going.

The text reflects an early baptism formula used by the church, but it does not reflect a full-blown understanding of the Trinity, something that developed over many years.

Baptism is important, for it marks the first step on the road of discipleship. But, for too many of us, our spiritual growth stalls along the way. If we take seriously Jesus’ command to care about others’ spiritual formation, however, if we are doing our best to *make disciples*, it’s much more likely that we’ll look to our own spiritual development as well.

Jesus did not promise that the task would be easy. Living with a Jesus-centered worldview calls us away from easy selfishness and toward a life of loving sacrifice. How can we succeed in such an enterprise?

We can do it because we have the full support of God working in us and through us – God known to us as the One who creates all things, the Redeemer who brings salvation, and the Spirit who empowers us for confident action in following Christ’s command.

In this we receive an amazing blessing, but also a major challenge. How are we responding? **NFJ**



Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 14, 2020

Matthew 9:35–10:8

The World Needs Healing

Do you like change? All of us go through times of transition in life. We experience transitions between stages of life, changing relationships, jobs, and in other ways. Perhaps you have been involved in a church or a business that was growing so quickly that additional staff members were needed – or one that was declining to the point of having to combine jobs.

Transitions may come as the result of an intentional change in the focus or operational strategy of an organization or movement.

Whatever the cause, times of transition can be challenging. Today's text marks an intentional transition in Jesus' ministry as he empowered his closest disciples to go out and expand his work of preaching and healing.

That work is not finished: today's disciples still have work to do.

Focus on Jesus (9:35-38)

Our text begins with a summary of Jesus' ministry that is almost a verbatim repetition of 4:23. "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.
(Matt. 9:36)

every sickness" (9:35).

Here the writer of Matthew portrays Jesus as having an inclusive ministry to *all* the cities and villages. He did not avoid places with bad reputations or differing ethnic makeups, but reached out to all people through preaching, teaching, and healing.

This suggests that Jesus may lead us not only to places where we are comfortable, but also to those settings where we may be distinctly uncomfortable.

Jesus' ministry met educational needs as he taught in the synagogues throughout the area. He worked to help people understand how his life and work fit into God's plan through the ages.

Jesus met spiritual needs as he "proclaimed the good news of the kingdom" in the synagogues and elsewhere.

Jesus also ministered to the physical needs of those who surrounded him, ". . . curing every disease and every sickness." He had compassion not only for people's lost souls, but also for their crippled feet, their troubled minds, and their bleeding sores.

This is why Christ-followers through the years have supported not only preaching and teaching, but also education and social ministries. All of these continue the work of Christ.

But why would Jesus give himself to such a mission to begin with? Because of love: "When he (Jesus)

saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36).

When we look at the world with a Jesus-centered view, do we not also see many people who seem lost or troubled? Contemporary disciples can easily get caught up in "cocooning" and become blind to the needs of others. If we don't see their needs, then we are not motivated to feel compassion, and thus we don't feel responsible for helping them.

When Jesus looked at the multitudes, he saw them distressed and downhearted. Jesus still calls his followers to see the needs of the elderly, who are often lonely and afraid. He calls on us to see the disillusioned people who have given up on church, to see the open eyes and tender hearts of youth who are so easily influenced and so in need of good examples and loving friends, to see the grimy hands and innocent hearts of children who are growing up in a world that is far from innocent.

Jesus emphasized both need and opportunity: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (9:37-38).

Surveys show a persistent rise in the number of people who claim no religious affiliation. A small minority of churches are thriving, but most are in decline, some with little hope of recovery. The age of "Christendom" has passed. Sunday is no longer considered sacred: it is a day for sports and shopping and taking it easy. We live in a new world, but the harvest is still plentiful. 🇺🇸

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Jesus told his disciples to pray that the Lord would send out laborers. As it turned out, they were about to become the answer to their own prayer. If we are convicted and compassionate enough to pray earnestly for missions, we will also be convicted and compassionate enough to share the love of Jesus in our own daily living.

Focus on disciples (10:1-4)

The summary of Jesus' activities and his challenge to pray for laborers is followed by the disciples' own commission to head for the fields. "Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness" (10:1).

It's hard for us to imagine being invested with such power, and despite scattered reports of miraculous healings, we don't see evidence of people with a consistent gift of healing today. Jesus' granting of such power to the disciples was a special gift for a special time, and even then it may have been a temporary sign of the gospel's truth and power. Seeing people cured of physical ills in Christ's name could encourage people to believe he could manage their spiritual ills, too.

Only here, deep into his gospel, does the writer of Matthew list the 12 disciples who were closest to Jesus. Mark and Luke name them much earlier (Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:13-16). Listing the disciples' names in conjunction with their impending mission gave a more formal sense to the moment, like a commissioning ceremony in which candidates' full names are called.

The Synoptic Gospels and Acts all have lists of the 12 disciples who became formally known as "The Twelve," and as apostles. There are some differences among them, generally explained

by an assumption that some may have gone by different names (see "The Hardest Question" online for more on this). Matthew lists them with a bit of commentary: "first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him."

The names are listed in pairs, perhaps echoing Mark's account that Jesus sent them out "two by two" (Mark 6:7). The writer has put the two sets of brothers together and identified Matthew as "the tax collector." The second Simon's appellation does not mean he was from Canaan: "Cananaean" is from an Aramaic word sometimes translated as "zealot."

The disciples' names are less important than their number: the selection of 12 disciples parallels the 12 foundational tribes of Israel and has obvious symbolic value: Jesus was laying the foundation of a new covenant.

Focus on ministry (10:5-8)

The following verses begin a lengthy collection of teaching materials that Matthew has combined in the form of instructions to the disciples before they go out on mission (10:5-42). Instructions for the journey in Mark 6:8-11 and Luke 9:3-5 are much shorter. Matthew seems more interested in the collected teachings than the mission itself: unlike Mark (6:12, 30) and Luke (9:6, 10), he says nothing about the disciples' departure or return.

Matthew is also unique in beginning with a stern order that we may find confusing: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost

sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5b-6).

We know that Jesus intended the gospel for all people, as texts such as Matt. 28:19-20 (see last week's lesson) and Acts 1:8 make clear. The writer of Matthew believed, however, that Jesus intended for the gospel to be shared first among "the lost sheep of Israel" before being extended to the Gentiles. His purpose, it appears, was to express a belief that in God's plan of redemption, Jesus came as the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan for Israel. Once the gospel had been preached among the Jews, it could then be extended to all nations.

The disciples' mission, echoing 10:1, was to "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (10:7-8a). In other words, the disciples were to do precisely what Jesus had been doing: preaching the gospel and healing the sick. They were not just to talk like Jesus, but to act like him: with compassion and self-sacrifice.

A literal reading of Jesus' traveling instructions that follow seems to suggest that Jesus sent the disciples out broke, barefoot, and without even a staff. His emphasis was not on asceticism, however, but on expediency: perhaps the point is that they didn't need extra luggage. The mission was apparently to be of short duration, and they were to depend on the hospitality of receptive hosts in each town.

The disciples were to expect both warm receptions and cold rejections, and to continue the work in either case. The fear of rejection has kept countless Christians from sharing their faith or even acts of caring with others. It's important to know that rejection does not indicate failure when we are being faithful.

Fields of need surround us. Where – and when – will we go? NFJ



Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 21, 2020

Matthew 10:24-39

The World Needs Shaking

All of us who read the Bible have our favorite passages. It's inevitable that we may love comforting texts such as Psalm 23 or John 14, or more challenging passages like Micah 6 and 1 Corinthians 13. The creation stories are poetically beautiful, the psalms can be inspiring, and heroes like Ruth, Daniel, and Esther make us smile.

Other texts are more troubling, for example, the psalmist's wish for someone to take his enemy's babies and dash them against a rock (Ps. 137:9). Reading genealogical lists (Genesis 5 and 1 Chronicles 1-9), cultic instructions (Exodus 25-31, 35-40), and tribal boundaries (Joshua 13-23) can be downright boring.

If you read today's text, chances are you won't like it for other reasons. Who looks forward to the prospect of persecution, family division, and self-sacrifice? Who likes language that sounds like all or nothing?

And yet, there it is. It's part of scripture, the Gospel of Matthew's version of several texts found in Mark or Luke, along with a few words from traditions found in Matthew alone.

What shall we do with this troublesome text? Is there more to it than meets the eye?

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 10:30)

Follow the leader (vv. 24-25)

First, we consider the context. The Jewish author who wrote in Matthew's name probably penned his gospel about 50 years after Jesus' resurrection, so he was not only relying on traditions passed down in the early church, but also reflecting the realities of his own day.

Those realities apparently included aggressive resistance to the early church from both Jews and Gentiles. Thus, the author emphasized Jesus' challenge for his followers to be both fully committed to the gospel and fully prepared to expect opposition.

Today's text comes within what the author has constructed as a lengthy set of instructions to the Twelve as Jesus sent them out to preach and heal the sick in his name. Matthew's version (10:5-42) is considerably longer than the instructions given in Mark 6:8-11 and Luke 9:3-5, probably influenced by the difficult situation in which his readers lived in the late first century.

In vv. 16-23, Jesus told the disciples they were going out "like sheep into the midst of wolves," where they could expect to be flogged in the Jewish synagogues and dragged before Gentile authorities (vv. 17-20). These conditions would not have been common during Jesus' ministry, but could have characterized the time of Matthew's writing when family members might

betray one another and persecution had become common in some areas (vv. 21-23).

We must understand vv. 24-25 in the light of this. Jesus had not yet suffered, but his passion was well known by the time the gospel was written, and readers would understand that his reference to disciples not being greater than their teacher or servants than their masters was intended to say that if Jesus faced opposition, his followers could expect no less.

The reference to Beelzebul reflects an earlier reference to the "ruler of demons" in 9:34 and anticipates a more specific charge in 12:22-32. In both texts, certain Pharisees had accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of "the prince of demons," who some called Beelzebul (see "The Hardest Question" online for more). Depending on the source, Beelzebul was thought of as one of the chief demons, or as an alternate name for Satan.

In a play on words, since Beelzebul in Aramaic means something akin to "lord of the manor" or "master of the house," the writer quotes Jesus as using a Greek word (*oikodespotēn*) to say "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!" (v. 25b).

The point, again, is that those who follow Jesus faithfully can expect the same kind of treatment that Jesus received, including painful opposition. Only the masochists among us look forward to tribulation, but have you ever considered the idea that a measure of persecution could be good for the church?

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When all is going smoothly, it is easy for believers to become so comfortable in our faith that we don't take the challenge of following Jesus seriously, and focus on petty things that have little to do with true faith. Believers facing persecution, however, are more likely to realize what really matters, and to get serious or get out.

**Know who to fear
(vv. 26-33)**

The theme of standing strong in the face of trouble continues into the next section, where the author emphasizes the importance of going public with the gospel, even when threatened. Faith in Christ is not something to be kept secret, but publicly proclaimed.

There had been times, early in his earthly ministry, when Jesus instructed his disciples to keep certain teachings to themselves. This is especially evident in Mark, as when Peter professed his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, but Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (8:29-30).^u

But that was then. Things that had to remain under wraps during Jesus' earthly ministry were to be shouted from the housetops after the resurrection. The author set Jesus' instructions as a word to the disciples before their preaching mission, but Matthew's audience was the post-Easter church: truths once held close were to be proclaimed openly and without fear (vv. 26-27).

Boldness could be dangerous. Still, Jesus insisted one should not fear those who could harm the body, but the one who holds sway over eternity. Faithful followers can be fearless when they remember that our present life is but a brief glimpse of what lies beyond (v. 28).

Using a how-much-more argu-

ment, Jesus noted that sparrows were so insignificant that two could be bought for a penny, and yet God took notice of them. How much more could God be trusted to care for human believers, whose every hair was subject to God's attention (vv. 29-31)?^u

Some may wonder why anyone would want to buy or sell sparrows, whatever the price. Like other small birds and even dormice, sparrows were roasted and eaten as delicacies in Roman cuisine. Matthew's readers lived within a Roman culture and would have seen the bargain birds sold in the marketplace.^u

**Expect division
(vv. 32-39)**

Believers need not fear others when God is on their side, but who can be confident of God's favor? The writer believed a person's greatest fear should be what Jesus thinks of him or her. Only those who faithfully acknowledge Jesus on earth can expect Jesus to acknowledge them in heaven, according to vv. 32-33. The allusion to the judgment was a reminder that those who denied Christ in the face of persecution would themselves be denied by Christ.

The closing verses of this section are perhaps the most filled with angst. Though we think of Jesus as the "Prince of Peace" and the source of ultimate peace, being sold out to Jesus is no guarantee of familial peace. "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," Jesus said (v. 34). Choosing to follow Christ when others did not could set parents against children or children against parents (vv. 35-36).

In so many words, Jesus was saying that if push comes to shove, faithful followers will choose the call of Christ over the desires of family. This does not mean such conflict is inevitable: when families are united in trusting Christ – or in rejecting him

– faith may have little effect on domestic harmony. Even within Christian families, however, conflict can arise when one or more family members take Jesus more seriously than others, or if they choose to express their faith in different ways.

What happens when one member of a married couple feels called to full-time ministry or to devoting substantial time and money to social ministries, while the other partner doesn't feel so inclined? Conflict can result.

Similarly, consider the widespread polarization we currently face in America. Untold family gatherings have been ruined by hot debates over whether to support the current president. Some argue that he is serving the Christian cause via his outward opposition to abortion and his support of Christian nationalism, while others argue that his persistent prevarications, lack of respect for the law, and callous approach to immigrants and the poor are abhorrent. People on both sides of the issue believe they are arguing from the position of a faithful Christian.

Christians are not immune to evil's pernicious ability to turn people against each other, not just between nations, but within nations, churches, and families. Choosing to follow Jesus' way can be painful and hard, even divisive. But, those who give first place to their personal comfort and self-fulfillment will find that what they achieve in this life will not last. Those who give themselves fully to the service of Christ are the ones who find the true life that is not only abundant, but also eternal.

Whether we like thinking of such things or not, these are recorded as the words of Jesus (v. 39), so we should best pay attention. Living with a Jesus-centered worldview may not be easy or make us popular, but it will make us whole. **NFJ**



Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 28, 2020

Matthew 10:40-42

The World Needs Kindness

In the summer of 1971, as a 19-year-old college student who had rarely left the state of Georgia, I trusted God and set out for the other side of the world as a summer missionary in Indonesia.

Never before or since have I experienced as many examples of the type of hospitality that today's scripture talks about. When I learned that my airline ticket could become an around-the-world flight for an additional \$200, my home church pastor raised an impromptu offering, and he started it with a \$20 bill from his own pocket (more than \$120 in today's dollars).

Feeling called to missions at the time, I wrote letters to missionaries from Georgia serving in Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Singapore, asking if I could visit with them on my way to Indonesia. All of them welcomed me warmly, offering lodging and food and an introduction to their work.

To this day, when I recall how Griff and Ducky Henderson picked me up from a sweltering airport in Hong Kong and offered me ice-cold lemonade, I think of Jesus' encouragement to offer a cup of cold water to "one of these little ones." I certainly felt very small against the backdrop of new lands and new cultures.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. (Matt. 10:40)

Two different missionary families hosted me during my summer in Semarang, on the island of Java. The Indonesian people were uniformly kind and welcoming, introducing me to their city and their culture and their churches.

While traveling home, my first visit to Israel came courtesy of a missionary family there.


As a young man finding joy in serving and growing and learning all I could about God's work in the world, my experience was enriched immeasurably by people who understood the meaning of Matt. 10:40-42.

Welcoming Jesus (v. 40)

Our brief text for the day concludes what the writer of Matthew has designed as a lengthy discourse on the subject of mission (10:5-42). The discourse begins (10:5-14) in a similar fashion to mission-sending stories in Mark 6:7-13 and Luke 10:1-16, then shifts to various comments on the trials faithful Christians might expect in an unfriendly world (10:15-39) – texts that would have spoken directly to believers in the author's circle of influence many years later.

With v. 40 the conversation turns to what sort of hospitality the disciples-on-mission should expect from people they encountered in their travels. As representatives of Jesus, they should be received with the same kindness that would be offered to their

teacher: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me," Jesus said, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

The teaching recalls a Jewish concept known as *shaliach*, from the Hebrew verb meaning "sent." The principle is that when someone sends a messenger, the messenger should be accorded the same courtesies that would have been offered to the sender. 

In the context of this passage, the 12 disciples were the ones being sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick through the power of Christ. Some people they encountered would welcome them but some would not, and if they should meet with wholesale rejection in a town, they were to leave and ceremonially shake the dust from their feet on the way out (10:14).

During Jesus' public ministry and also when Matthew was written more than a generation later, many people refused to accept either Jesus or his message. Those who follow Jesus on mission can expect a welcome from some, but a cold shoulder from others.

Welcoming the faithful (v. 41)

In verses 40-42, the discourse is spoken to the disciples, but pertains more directly to those who had the option of showing hospitality to Jesus' representatives. The ideal choice would be to show kindness rather than coldness. According to Matthew, Jesus promised significant rewards to persons who welcomed those sent in his behalf.

Verse 41 asserts that those who show hospitality to a prophet would receive the reward of a prophet, while


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those who welcomed a righteous person would receive the reward of the righteous person. This does not mean the prophet or the righteous person would hand out rewards for good service. Rather, it looks forward to eternal rewards, when those who had shown hospitality to prophets or righteous people would receive the same rewards as those they had welcomed.

But who are the prophets and righteous people? It is likely that Jesus used both terms with reference to the disciples he was sending out (see “The Hardest Question” online for more on this).


We need not quibble over distinctions, however. The point is not that we should be so self-interested as to look for prophets or saints so we can host them and receive the reward (presumably greater than our own) that is due to them.

The point is that we are called to show warm hospitality to others because it is the right thing to do, without regard to their reputation or title. The author is thinking of eternal rewards: it’s hard to imagine a better reward than a heavenly home, and we can’t really expect that anyone will have more “stars in their crown” than others.  Showing hospitality to others – and not just to itinerant evangelists – is what faithful believers do.

Welcoming the little ones (v. 42)

The closing verse continues in the same vein, this time promising rewards to “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple.”

Some commentators argue that this should be regarded as a reference to the disciples who were being sent out on mission, suggesting that Jesus also had the disciples in mind when he spoke of “little ones” in Matt. 18:6, 10, and 14.

Verse 40 spoke of one who welcomed “a prophet in the name of a prophet” and “a righteous person in the name of a righteous person,” using the same word at the beginning and end. Here, it is “one of these little ones in the name of a disciple,” so it’s possible that “little ones” and “disciple” are parallel terms. 

In Matthew’s context, vv. 40-42 speak to the believer’s responsibility to show hospitality to various traveling emissaries of Jesus – but how might this text speak to us? Life in our situation is very different. Traveling evangelists who walk from place to place, carry no money or luggage, and depend entirely on local hosts to house and feed them are virtually non-existent.

On rare occasions, a church family may be called on to take a visiting preacher to lunch. If a guest speaker spends multiple days leading a revival or teaching a Bible study, the church nearly always provides a nice hotel room. How can *we* offer the kind of hospitality Jesus called for?

Consider this idea: the people needing hospitality in Matt. 10:40-42 were representatives of Christ. Later in the same gospel, Jesus said those who would inherit the kingdom would be those who had shown hospitality to him; who gave him food and water when hungry; who welcomed him as a stranger; who clothed him when naked, cared for him when sick, and visited him in prison.

People in the crowd who had never hosted Jesus asked him how that could be. When had they fed him when hungry, clothed him when naked, or visited him when sick or in prison? When had they welcomed him as a stranger?

You already know Jesus’ response: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to

me” (25:40). This was not so different from his statement in 10:40: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Welcoming “these little ones” and caring for “the least of these” sound very similar, do they not? But do these terms refer to disciples alone? Are they limited to other Christians?

Jesus’ Jewish heritage was replete with commands for faithful Hebrews to welcome strangers and show kindness to marginalized people (Lev. 19:33-34, Deut. 15:10-11, Prov. 19:17, among others). Early in his own ministry, Jesus announced that he had come to “to bring good news to the poor . . . 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” (Luke 4:18b-19).

As he went about during the years of his ministry, Jesus was constantly healing those who were sick and afflicted, without regard for their religion or social status. When thousands gathered to hear him teach, he fed them.

We recall what the writer of Hebrews had to say: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2).

While we have only the rarest call to entertain an itinerant minister, we do not lack in opportunities to welcome strangers and show hospitality to those who live on the fringes of society. In doing so, do we not also show warmth and care to the “little ones” or “least of these” that Jesus equated with ministry to himself?

When we look at the world through a Jesus-centered lens, there is no question that we will find opportunities for showing kindness and hospitality on every hand. The question is how we will respond to what we see. **NFJ**

REMEMBRANCE

Paul Montacute, global 'Good Samaritan,' 1946–2020

Paul Montacute, director of Baptist World Aid from 1993 to 2014, died Feb. 20. Originally from Great Britain, he was one of the key organizers of the Baptist World Alliance Youth Conference in Scotland in 1988. He later moved to the U.S. to direct the BWA Youth Department and then BWAid, a relief and development arm of BWA. He was named EthicsDaily.com's Baptist of the Year in 2005 for mobilizing and coordinating worldwide relief efforts after destruction resulting from tsunamis, earthquakes and hurricanes.

Wayne D. Martin, interfaith bridge builder, 1935–2020

Longtime Deep South pastor Wayne Martin began building interfaith bridges before it became "fashionable." His work stemmed from his friendship with a rabbi in South Florida, which led to interactions between Martin's church and the rabbi's synagogue and then to interfaith conversations and fellowship among clergy and laypersons in the larger community. His efforts continued during his retirement years in the Atlanta area, including work among Jewish and Muslim communities and the development of a CBF of Georgia task force to work toward developing friendships across faith lines.

Walker Knight remembered for timely vision and wisdom

EDITOR: In the waning years of the life of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, as we knew it, I was privileged to serve eight years as a director. I met monthly with some of the most creative, innovative and courageous persons in the Baptist world.

Walker Knight was one of those talented leaders, a quiet man who was a combination of wisdom and vision. Later I served on the board of *Baptists Today* in its early and exciting years. Walker was the right man for it at the right time. I am thankful that I knew him.

Ann Roebuck
Director Emerita
Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith
Rome, Ga.

Inspirational Reading

From Zion to Atlanta, the memoirs of *Baptists Today's* founding editor Walker L. Knight, is an honest and

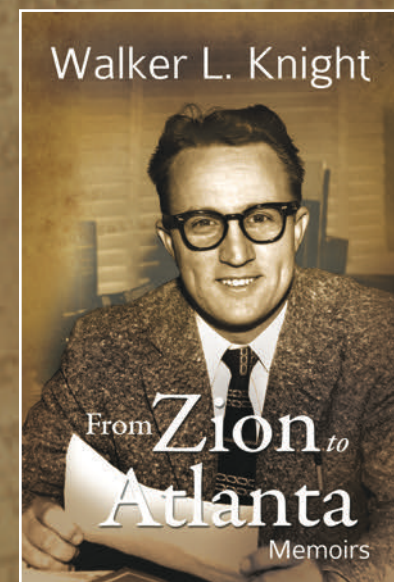
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The temple beneath the bridge

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Beneath a wide bridge on the main road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, just past a huge subdivision called Mevaseret Zion and less than four miles northwest of the Old City, one can find the remains of an ancient temple that may have been used to worship both Yahweh and other gods.

The site — first discovered during salvage operations prior to highway construction and recently revisited — was in a fertile and well-watered basin that contains remains going back to the pre-pottery Neolithic period.

The shrine was probably built in early Iron Age II — about 900 BCE — and remained in use until the late 6th century, after the Hebrews' return from the exile.

The worship center was not only contemporaneous with the temple in Jerusalem, then, but also survived the temple-busting reforms of both King Hezekiah and King Josiah (2 Kings 18, 23; 2 Chronicles 29–31, 34–35), even though it functioned right under the royal court's nose.

How could this be?

Some archaeologists believe the site, known as Tel Motza, must have been under the control of a local chieftain who cooperated with the kings of Judah, but was not under their direct control. A number of granaries and storage buildings at the site indicate that it was a prosperous agricultural area: the temple may have been built in an attempt to ensure continued prosperity.

The temple at Tel Motza helps to disprove a popular misconception that Israel and/or Judah were ever totally unified kingdoms: the Hebrews always lived cheek by jowl with a variety of other ethnic groups generically known as “Canaanites.”



Had there not been readily available options for worshipping other gods, the biblical prophets would not have continually railed against the Hebrew people for choosing to worship local gods that went by names such as Ba'al (a Semitic word that means “lord”) and Asherah (a female deity often represented by trees or wooden poles).

Ba'al was thought of as a weather god, typically depicted in images with an upraised thunder club in his right hand and a lightning spear in his left. Asherah represented fertility. Many people apparently felt closer to such depictions of the gods than to Yahweh, who was proclaimed to be above all gods.

The temple at Tel Motza would have been about the same size as Solomon's temple, though not as elaborate. Like other temples from the period, it was oriented east to west and consisted of a large ceremo-

nial area and a smaller “holy of holies” at the back. At Tel Motza, the most sacred space was elevated and paved with stones.

The temple courtyard featured a large altar made of unworked stones, about 4.5 feet square. Adjacent to it was a pit containing ash, pottery sherds, and the bones of animals typically used for sacrifices.

A rectangular stone podium was apparently used as an offering table: an assortment of cultic figurines and ritual objects were found buried around it, probably indicating that they were ritually broken and buried when they went out of use.

It should come as no surprise that the ancients had options when it came to worship, as do we. The motivation to expend enormous energy on a large temple with walls ranging from three to five feet thick suggests a deep belief in a power beyond human effort, and a desire to communicate with the divine.

Whether their worship was directed to Yahweh or to Baal, the ancients looked beyond human achievement to seek the blessings of a higher power. As we ponder the landscape of our own times, especially the flood of incivility and distrust that marks much public debate, the need to rise beyond self-centered pettiness and aspire to a higher level of living in keeping with Jesus' teachings should be more than apparent.

We're not lacking in the modern equivalent of temples: opportunities for faithful worship that honors God's love over human power are abundant. Taking part would do us good. **NFJ**

Note: Recent stories about the Motza temple appear in Biblical Archaeological Review and the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz. The excavation is ongoing and welcomes volunteers (telmoza.org).



EDITOR'S NOTE: Theology professor E. Frank Tupper, who died Feb. 28 at age 79, influenced generations of Baptist ministers and teachers including Graham Walker, the John and Julia H. Zellars Professor of Theology at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology.

The Scandalous Compassion of God

Remembering E. Frank Tupper

BY GRAHAM B. WALKER JR.

We find our way to celebrating the legacy of E. Frank Tupper by many paths and life experiences. What makes this possible is the multi-dimensional nature of Tupper's theology and the pastoral touch points along the way where he met us.

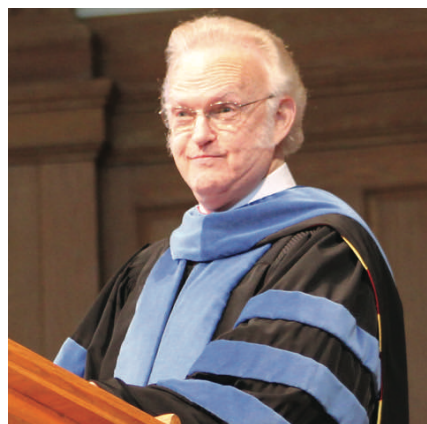
What we encountered with Tupper was a rich diversity of theological tributaries nourishing the deep waters of his growing global, intellectual and always pastoral sensitivities, deeply rooted in southern kudzu culture and juxtaposed to the great spires and steeples of the Christian tradition.

In the late 1970s, when I first met Tupper, he was one of 94 professors at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. A native of the Mississippi Delta, he finished his B.A. at Mississippi College, the M.Div. at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas, and the Th.D. at Southern Seminary in Louisville.

The twang in his voice reflected his journey and along with the perfunctory sideburns could just as easily have been confused for a country-western singer as a Texas revival preacher. Yet to hear him in the seminary hallways or a 120-seat lecture hall provided an almost whiplash effect.

He processes his thinking and theology "out loud!" one shocked classmate remarked. And, we all were privileged to listen in.

In a period known for relegating the instability of life to simple formulas — such



as "in some master plan this is the will of God" — Tupper asked the tough questions, for example, "Where is God?"

Where is God in the patriarchy? Where is God in the aftermath of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Auschwitz? Is my understanding of God that of a white racist?

No question of the providence of God was more personal than the loss of his wife Betty J. Wilkins to cancer in September 1983. The winter of 1983–1984 was cold and harsh. Nothing brought more questions of God's activity closer to home.

Then again, not a full year from retirement at Wake University Divinity School, Tupper suffered a catastrophic spinal cord injury in a fall that left him paralyzed in February 2017.

Following his fall, he lived in Louisville with his children Elgin and Michelle, grandchildren, son-in-law, Michelle's mother-in-law and his caregiver Madilyn Hoffman who provided him a living web of life from which he continued to both struggle with his physical condition and yet flourish in good company.

Tupper came to realize that the priority of "sovereignty" over "love" in traditional theology gravely distorted how we take in the identity of God revealed in the story of

Jesus: The true lordship of God is the ruling of the "God of love."

Tupper was a global theologian. His 1961 experience as a Baptist Student Union summer missionary in South Korea awakened him to worlds beyond the Deep South. Studying with Wolfhart Pannenberg at the University of Munich threw this deeply influenced son of Southern Baptist Christianity into a global catholic reflection on the nature of the church and its place in the world.

That world was changing between 1966, when Tupper took his first pastorate in Edmonton, Ky., and the intervening years to 1971 when he received his doctorate.

The Vietnam War was the most obvious catalyst for discontent, but the destructive forces of corporations and the state in relation to the environment, the global push toward neoliberal consumerism that tore down traditional societies wherever it expanded, the failure to adequately address racism, the growing diversity within the U.S. with the challenges of multiculturalism, and questions of sexuality and of gender roles were very much in play.

As Tupper transitioned from summer missions abroad in 1961 back to Mississippi College, he recognized that he could not be ordained in a congregation that was segregated. He identified his blind spot to racial injustice by seeing himself more clearly in South Korea.

For Tupper, the recognition of a wider Christianity began with the recognition of a racist past. Eventually, he was ordained in 1967 by the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, where the civil rights proponent John Claypool was pastor.

Tupper's love for the local church led him to new and ever-expanding vistas. He included feminists, liberation and LGBTQ



For Tupper, the recognition of a wider Christianity began with the recognition of a racist past. Eventually, he was ordained in 1967 by the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, where the civil rights proponent John Claypool was pastor.

voices in his teaching and provided recognition for a community even when moderate Baptist institutions found that difficult.

Like many of his students and colleagues, he found himself in the midst of the shifting tectonic plates of the culture. He embraced his students and modeled for his colleagues the ability to adapt, criticize oneself, and evaluate our homogeneous past for the task of constructive theology within a mosaic of new voices.

Tupper, from Mississippi and with his academic and pastoral credentials firmly grounded south of the Mason-Dixon line, showed us a way to be progressive Christians with a piety that passionately sang the stanzas of Willie Nelson and with a visceral love of Jesus.

He continued to warn those whose voices claim the Christian tradition in support of patriarchy, homophobia, racism

and the like that there is a more accurate trajectory for this Jesus:

- A Jesus with a legitimate challenge to the conventional religion of his time;
- A Jesus with an incredible vision of the coming kingdom of God in which the sick are healed, the poor are cared for, and the outcasts and despised are welcomed to the dinner table;
- A Jesus whose radical demonstration of the love of God is love of neighbor, indeed love of enemies;
- A Jesus with an unwavering conviction that he must not respond violently against those who were forcing upon him crucifixion;
- A Jesus whose profound hope was that God was bringing in the new age.

In *A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God* (2013, Mercer University Press) Tupper wrote:

This I know: Without the story of Jesus, I would not believe in God. Or more probably, the idea of “God” simply would not matter to me. The story of Jesus enables me to envision God as One who genuinely cares for each and all of us. In Jesus, God confronts the Darkness face to face, Incarnate, for our sake. Jesus is the Light to the gentle face of God. The story of Jesus says that God laughs with us in our joys and weeps with us in our sorrows. God strengthens us in the helplessness of our hoping, God stands with us in the uncertainty of our believing, and God waits for us in our yearnings to be loved. Ultimately the lonely companionship of Jesus in the suffering of his passion made my painful journey a sometime story of faith.

Pax Vobiscum (Peace be with you.) NFJ

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Richard M. Nixon (1969–1974): Part 2

By Bruce Gourley

Perhaps the final straw came on May 13, 1969, the day President Richard M. Nixon abruptly walked out of a meeting with civil rights leaders. A scribbled note expressed his disgust: “This shows that my judgment about not seeing such people is right. No More of This!”

The “people” in the room that day, a contingent led by the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, one of the nation’s most prominent African-American leaders, offered a different perspective.

“Mr. Nixon said we should go back to Africa,” one voiced. As a group, they complained to Nixon officials that the president had no interest in a conversation with them.

A WILL TO WIN

Already, 1972 weighed on Nixon’s mind. He had won a mere 43 percent of the popular vote in the 1968 presidential election. Only 15 percent of African-American voters had cast ballots for him, the lowest percentage ever of black votes for a Republican candidate.

Tentative efforts to reach out to select black voters by dangling the possibility of a vague, non-enforceable jobs program angered fellow Republicans. Wise to Nixon’s history of race-baited politics, African Americans, on the other hand, criticized Nixon’s “calculated” plans to “break up the coalition between Negroes and labor unions. Most of the social progress in this country has resulted from this alliance.”



Richard Nixon gives his trademark “victory” sign while in Paoli, Pa., during his successful campaign in July 1968 to become President of the United States.

Ever ambitious and now plotting for a second term, the contentious meeting with civil rights leaders signaled an evolving change of strategy on the president’s part. The Republican Party, for so long perceived as the party more friendly to African Americans, no longer needed their votes.

“New Federalism,” Nixon’s focus on a smaller federal government and expanded state powers resonated with angry, conservative white Christians in the South resentful of civil rights for African Americans and liberal opposition to the Vietnam War.

Billy Graham, a close ally of Nixon, played his part by helping coordinate politically-infused Sunday worship services at the White House and trotting Nixon out at select evangelical rallies in the old Confederate States of America.

Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society programs designed to uplift America’s less fortunate and once full of promise, but also

opposed by many conservatives, became a primary concern on the part of Nixon. Thrilling white southern churchgoers steeped in generations of racism and conservative politics, Nixon waged war against liberal efforts to effect social change and criticized growing public demonstrations led by liberals against America’s involvement in Vietnam.

A November 1969 “Silent Majority” speech by the president marked another turning point on the road to his re-election in 1972.

Assuring supporters that he felt “a greater obligation than to think only of the years of my administration and of the next election,” the president spoke of his decision to continue fighting to win in Vietnam rather than walking away from the conflict as liberals demanded. “I had to think of the effect of my decision on the next generation and on the future of peace and freedom in America

This is the 38th 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.

and in the world,” he explained.

Framing Vietnam opposition as representative of the evils of liberalism at large, he offered stark words for his critics, asserting that “as President of the United States, I would be untrue to my oath of office if I allowed the policy of this Nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that point of view and who try to impose it on the Nation by mounting demonstrations in the street.”

“For almost 200 years,” he continued in an ominous tone, “the policy of this Nation has been made under our Constitution by those leaders in the Congress and the White House elected by all of the people. If a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails over reason and the will of the majority, this Nation has no future as a free society.”

Holding aloft the specter of the loss of America’s freedom, Nixon offered to lead the nation in a new political direction. “And so tonight to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans, I ask for your support.”

From African Americans yet seeking equality and civil rights, to a new generation of socially-active and liberal young Americans clamoring for women’s rights and the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, Nixon turned his back. Winning the Vietnam War became the rallying cry for reclaiming America from the ravages of liberalism.

“Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.”

SOUTHERN STRATEGY

Nixon’s plan of re-aligning America through a new coalition of white conservatives became known as the “Southern Strategy.” Looking back, historians Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields summarize the Southern Strategy as a three-legged appeal to racial resentment, Christian fundamentalism and patriarchy, non-inclusive values traditionally embodied for generations in the Democratic Party.

But would it work? Could Nixon lure

white conservative Democrats into the Republican Party?

The political and cultural landscape remained volatile as the 1970s dawned.

Racism remained a hot-button issue. Many towns and cities in the South, white and black citizens long segregated into separate housing districts, defiantly resisted federal mandates to integrate schools.

Northward and westward, racial conflicts and riots abounded as impoverished and restless African Americans sought to improve their lot in life, their efforts resisted by many whites. Some northern communities followed the letter of the law regarding school integration on the one hand, even as many white families continued fleeing proximity to expanding black neighborhoods, effectively segregating or re-segregating public school districts.

Women’s rights activism accelerated and moved further leftward, voicing language of “women’s liberation” and “radical feminism.” A campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment arose. The National Abortion Rights Action League emerged.

Some universities debuted Women’s Studies departments. New laws expanded women’s access to contraception. Many Americans felt uncomfortable in the face of the swelling tide of cultural liberalism.

Meanwhile, opposition to the Vietnam War grew as more young men were drafted into military service. Many anti-war college students fled to Canada to avoid enrollment. A South Vietnamese invasion of neighboring Laos in early 1971 further disillusioned the American public. Anti-war protests grew. National demonstrations drew millions. Some protests resulted in localized violence.

STRONG HAND

In a year of national discontent and despite progress of his Southern Strategy, President Nixon’s approval ratings hovered around 50 percent, the lowest of his presidency. Always seeking an edge, Nixon turned his attention to the economy. A 4.5 percent inflation rate outpaced wage growth, causing anxiety on the part of many Americans.

Sensing an opportunity, Nixon blamed

“international money speculators” for the problem. Displaying a strong hand, on the evening of Sunday, Aug. 15, 1971, the president made a bold announcement.

“The time has come for decisive action — action that will break the vicious circle of spiraling prices and costs,” he declared. “I am today ordering a freeze on all prices and wages throughout the United States for a period of 90 days. In addition, I call upon corporations to extend the wage-price freeze to all dividends.”

The “Nixon Shock,” as it came to be known, yielded immediate results. The following day the stock market rose nearly 4 percent and set a new trading record, the beginning of a rally that would last for the next year-and-a-half.

The *New York Times* praised Nixon for “the boldness with which the President has moved on all economic fronts — and most especially his order for a 90-day freeze on prices and wages as a preliminary to a flexible policy for checking the runaway spiral that has eroded the purchasing power of all Americans and made American products increasingly uncompetitive in world markets.”

Despite the sudden public acclaim and stock market boost, the president’s approval ratings improved but little for the remainder of the year, finally creeping upward by early 1972. Still uncertain if the combination of his economic policies and Southern Strategy would generate victory in the November elections, the president quietly created a shadow political operation tasked with illegally surveilling his Democratic opposition in order to tip the political scales further in his favor.

No matter the cost, “Tricky Dick” intended to win re-election.

WATERGATE

For months in the summer and fall of 1972, *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein followed the trail of a June burglary of the Democratic Party’s Watergate headquarters in the nation’s capital.

Immediately in the wake of the burglary five men were arrested, four with White House connections. Nixon distanced

himself from the scandal and, in August, announced that an internal investigation had cleared the White House of any involvement.

Woodward and Bernstein, not persuaded, worked all the harder to unravel the truth.

In September, a grand jury indicted the five men. Two additional suspects were also indicted. One, G. Gordon Liddy, counsel to the Finance Committee to Re-elect the President, clearly brought the expanding scandal into the White House, despite Nixon's disavowals.

Late that month Woodward and Bernstein in the *Washington Post* broke the news that John Mitchell, currently Nixon's re-election campaign manager and previously the president's attorney general, had, as AG, led a secretly-funded intelligence-gathering operation against Democrats.

Mitchell retaliated, however, threatening reporter Bernstein and *Post* editor Kathryn Graham. Unbowed, the *Post* published the threat.

October brought more revelations. Courtesy of Woodward and Bernstein's dogged sleuthing, the *Post* reported FBI evidence of coordination between the president's aides and the Watergate burglary.

Investigative stories by the two reporters expanded the scope of the president's "dirty tricks" to include additional criminal activity earlier in the year: a secret effort, financed by Nixon surrogates and designed to damage the ultimately unsuccessful presidential candidacy of Democrat Edmund Muskie.

RELIGIOUS REINFORCEMENT

Billy Graham, meanwhile, remained an ardent Nixon apologist. In coordination with the White House, Graham campaigned for Nixon in key states, rallying white evangelicals to vote for the conservative Republican candidate and strike a blow against the rising tide of Democratic liberalism. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, also campaigned for Nixon behind the scenes.

Meanwhile, the introduction of a new Nixon talking point enhanced outreach efforts to conservative Christians. Prior to *Roe v. Wade* (1973), Republican leaders aligned with Nixon signaled opposition to

abortion in a bid to detach Catholics and socially conservative Protestants from the Democratic Party.

Reversing his own pro-abortion policies recently enacted for military bases, Nixon on April 3, 1971 implemented abortion as a campaign strategy by issuing a statement with language reflective of that of the Roman Catholic Church. Declaring "unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand" incompatible with his "personal belief in the sanctity of human life — including the life of the yet unborn," he argued for the enshrinement of legal rights for the unborn.

Conservative religious Democrats took note of the president speaking to their concerns about abortion. The following year Nixon endorsed the efforts of New York Archbishop Terence Cardinal Cooke to reinstate New York's criminal prohibition of abortion.

At the same time and with the same goal of bringing conservative Democrats into the Nixon Republican fold, Graham quietly worked with Nixon's White House to convince segregationist George Wallace to forgo a presidential run in 1972. Their efforts worked.

With Wallace's candidacy shelved, Nixon's Southern Strategy fell fully into place. Mere weeks before the election, in an effort to ensure Nixon's victory, Graham told the president of his willingness to do "anything you can think of you want me to do ... you just tell me and I'll do it."

The president responded that he did not view Graham as in "need of any guidance ... Your political instincts are very good." In reality, Nixon at this late date in the election season needed no further help from the evangelist.

RE-ELECTION

The president's approval ratings, lifted by the rising tides of an imminent peace treaty in Vietnam, a strong economy and the Southern Strategy — all three carefully orchestrated by Nixon — and floating above the background noise of Watergate, now touched 60 percent.

When the votes were counted, Nixon won re-election by the largest Electoral

College margin of victory in Republican history. More than 60 percent of voters cast ballots for Nixon.

Massachusetts was the only state to vote against Nixon. For the first time in U.S. history all the states of the old Confederate States of America voted for a Republican president.

Good economies and peace treaties had long been helpful to sitting presidents in election years, yet both of these factors told only part of the story of Nixon's record 1972 presidential victory. Historians Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields analyzed the electoral data and uncovered the clear emergence of a new Republican Party constructed not primarily on economic or foreign policy, but rather the creation of a new religious foundation that transcended more than a century of voting patterns.

"In 1972, Nixon had the support of 86 percent of white southern regular churchgoers, although many of them were registered Democrats," Maxwell and Shields concluded. "He won 76 percent of Southern Baptists and lower-income voters. The racism of Nixon's Southern Strategy arrived on the political stage holding the hands of patriarchal, religious conservatives."

Historian Steven Miller mined Nixon's papers and the Graham archives in a search to establish the evangelist's perspective on the hallmark 1972 election. Graham "strongly" influenced the evangelical vote for Nixon, Miller concluded.

In return, "Graham viewed Nixon as an ideal conduit for his own concerns, specifically his desire to maximize the influence of evangelicals in national politics. Of utmost importance in this respect was the re-election of the president in 1972 ... Graham helped to secure the coalition that gave Nixon a triumphant second-term mandate."

Also reflective of Nixon and Graham's ploy, only 12 percent of African Americans cast ballots for Nixon, a new historical low.

'COURT PROPHET'

In years prior to the 1972 election, a few Christian leaders had begun paying attention to the close relationship between the evangelist and the president in advancing Nixon's Southern Strategy. Will Campbell,



a southern liberal and civil rights activist, and Berea College Professor James Y. Holloway, both defenders of Graham in earlier years, in “An Open Letter to Billy Graham” published in 1970, castigated the evangelist as a “court prophet” for Nixon.

Following the conservative electoral landslide of 1972, liberal Christian leaders leveled heightened criticisms against Billy Graham’s politicking on behalf of Nixon. Seemingly late to fully recognizing Graham’s key role in realigning the Republican Party along a white evangelical axis, they criticized him as an opponent of liberalism and, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, the architect of the “unofficial establishment” of conservative religion in the White House.

More broadly, critics denounced Graham and the Nixon White House for fostering “Christian Americanism,” or Christian nationalism.

Even as he basked in the victory of re-election, Nixon’s political future played out in two stories of stark contrasts. In December and early January his approval ratings dropped amid ongoing Watergate allegations, only to recover dramatically in late January during the president’s second inauguration and the Paris peace accords ending America’s involvement in the Vietnam War.

On Nixon’s second inauguration Graham, ignoring Watergate, preached a sermon to the president and invited guests that offered a vision of a conjoining of God and government prohibited by the U.S. Constitution.

“I believe that our young people today are foundering because no one is saying to them with authority in the classrooms, this is right and that is wrong,” Graham pronounced. In the presence of a corrupt president in whom he saw no wrong, the evangelist declared that the Ten Commandments should “be read in every classroom in America so that our students throughout the country will know that there is a right and there is a wrong.”

INAUGURATION

In his 1973 inaugural address Nixon praised his own success in the imminent signing of a peace treaty ending American involvement

in the Vietnam War and also criticized and pledged to downsize the federal government, all the while ignoring the Watergate investigation.

“Government must learn to take less from people so that people can do more for themselves,” the president declared, framing freedom as existing not because of government safeguards against excesses of corporate power, but rather as possible only in the virtual absence of government.

Repeating a long-used pattern of seemingly embracing popular, liberal Democratic presidents of the past while slyly twisting their words to satisfy his own conservative political agenda, Nixon both appropriated and skewered John F. Kennedy.

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of stark contrasts.*

“My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” President John F. Kennedy proclaimed in his inaugural address of Jan. 20, 1961.

“In our own lives, let each of us ask — not just what will government do for me, but what can I do for myself? In the challenges we face together, let each of us ask — not just how can government help, but how can I help?” said a re-elected Nixon.

Even as the evidence in the Watergate investigation closed ever tightly around the president and pointed to criminal actions on his part, Nixon boldly stated: “Above all else, the time has come for us to renew our faith in ourselves and in America.”

Ten days later six of Nixon’s co-conspirators pled guilty in the Watergate burglary, sending the president’s approval ratings into a downward slide from which they would never recover. The indicted were urged to reveal what they knew or face lengthy imprisonment.

UNRAVELING

Shortly thereafter Nixon and Graham talked by phone, their conversation preserved on White House tape recorders. Graham lamented the Jewish “domination” of the media. Connecting the Jewish establishment to the public’s fixation on Watergate, Graham in the February 1973 conversation with the president darkly referred to some Jews as comprising “the synagogue of Satan.”

Meanwhile, in March the real conspiracy began unraveling in public view as Watergate burglar James McCord confessed to his role in the affair. The following month White House counsel John Dean agreed to cooperate with Watergate prosecutors.

Additional evidence emerged of efforts on the part of surrogates close to Nixon to pay off Watergate burglars. Near the end of April acting FBI director L. Patrick Gray resigned, admitting his guilt in destroying documentary evidence days after the Watergate break-in.

As his approval ratings plunged and evidence against the White House grew, Nixon began throwing his associates under the proverbial bus in order to save himself. On April 30 he announced the resignations of White House aides John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman and the firing of John Dean. That evening he went on public television and fiercely proclaimed his innocence of the “senseless, illegal action” of the Watergate break-in.

Only in recent days had he realized “that there was a real possibility” that “some” of the charges against his close political aides were true. Determined to get to the bottom of the matter, Nixon properly directed his staff and aides to “testify voluntarily under oath before the Senate committee which was investigating Watergate.”

No evidence had surfaced pointing to guilt on the part of anyone, and the subsequent resignations of Ehrlichman and Haldeman hours earlier did not reflect any “personal wrongdoing on their part,” Nixon assured America. Nor did the removal of John Dean as attorney general point to his guilt.

“How could it have happened?” Nixon rhetorically asked the question on everyone’s mind. “Who is to blame?”



DEFIANCE

“I will not place the blame on subordinates — on people whose zeal exceeded their judgment and who may have done wrong in a cause they deeply believed to be right,” a defiant Nixon insisted, projecting himself as a hero in the midst of the political storm.

“Watergate represented a series of illegal acts and bad judgments by a number of individuals,” the president conceded in vague language. Contradicting his own hatred of the press, he expressed faith that the free press alongside the judicial system would “bring those guilty to justice.”

The president, meanwhile, had more important things to do than dwell on unintentional political abuses. “Since March, when I first learned that the Watergate affair might in fact be far more serious than I had been led to believe, it has claimed far too much of my time and my attention.” Now, he must turn his attention to the continuing quest for world peace and efforts to make America “more than ever a land of opportunity.”

To this list of goals Nixon expressed his desire to reform America’s “political process” that allowed not only Watergate to transpire, but also “other inexcusable campaign tactics that have been too often practiced and too readily accepted in the past” in both political parties.

Calling upon Democrats to work with him in reforming the nation’s politics, he committed himself to a “strengthening and renewal for America,” ending his speech of innocence and heroism with the words “God bless America and God bless each and every one of you.”

Shortly thereafter Graham called Nixon to congratulate him. He called Nixon’s speech the president’s “finest hour.” You “stood steady, and you won a victory tonight, a big one, maybe one of the biggest in history,” America’s most prominent Christian leader gushed.

The evangelist also passed along a message from Ruth, his wife, who saw dark forces trying to harm the president. “You know, Ruth, she thinks it’s all a communist plot, left-wing and everything else,” Graham said of the escalating Watergate storm.



Demonstrators in Washington, DC, with their “Impeach Nixon” sign.

“It is, it is, it is, you know that,” Nixon responded.

Offended that CBS had covered the speech in a negative fashion, Graham lashed out at the television network. “I felt like slashing their throats,” the evangelist said of media critics.

Pushing aside the irritant of critics, a fawning Graham praised Nixon’s strong and unwavering Christian faith: “Your sincerity, your humility, your asking for prayers, all of that had a tremendous impact.”

“You really think so, Billy?” Nixon responded.

“I’m telling you the truth, and I’m not just trying to encourage you,” replied Graham. “I know you get all that. I really mean it.”

Toward the end of the call that at times elicited foul language from a besieged and despondent president seemingly drunk, the conversation turned sentimental.

“You know how I love you,” Graham said.

“Well, I love you,” Nixon replied.

THE TAPES

Meanwhile, in October 1973 the unfolding saga of Watergate reached a critical juncture as Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox sought to obtain White House tapes

that would prove Nixon’s guilt. Enraged, the president fought back in bold fashion. In what became known as the “Saturday Night Massacre,” in a rage of obfuscation and retaliation the president attempted to fire Cox.

Networks covered live the dramatic events unfolding. Holding the line against Nixon’s efforts to hide the truth, Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William French Smith refused to obey the president’s orders, then resigned in a show of protest. But Solicitor General Robert Bork, an unflinching conservative reluctantly protecting Nixon, subsequently carried out the president’s order and fired Cox.

Ousted but refusing to be silenced, Watergate Prosecutor Cox sounded the alarm to a stunned America. “Whether ours shall continue to be a government of laws and not of men is now for Congress and ultimately the American people,” he warned. Ten days afterward the House of Representatives initiated impeachment proceedings against Nixon.

One month later in a November press conference the president dismissed the impeachment proceedings. In “all of my years in public life I have never obstructed justice,” he declared. “People have got to know whether or not their President is a crook. Well, I am not a crook.”

The public did not buy Nixon’s denials, his approval ratings sinking to a mere 25 percent, where they would remain for the rest of his presidency.

Fighting the release of evidence each step of the way in the months to follow, Nixon’s defense of innocence slowly and painfully unraveled before a rapt national audience.

“No questions on Watergate,” Graham told reporters as Nixon yet refused to release the Watergate tapes. But in January 1974, troubled and subdued, in a wide-ranging interview Graham voluntarily broached the subject with Jack Thomas, longtime reporter for the *Boston Globe*.

“I don’t know how Mr. Nixon got caught in this buzz saw,” Graham declared. Defending the president despite mounting evidence of criminal activity on his part, he

continued: "I'm not sure Nixon knows the whole story."

His dreams of a Christian nationalist America fading, Graham's crusade against liberalism nonetheless remained foremost in his mind. But now the cultural and political currents were complicated. "Vietnam and Watergate were judgments by God that if we don't heed, it's going to get worse. God, in great love, is speaking to this country, saying 'Turn around before it's too late.' But if we continue. . ."

His voice trailed off, the sentence unfinished.

RESIGNATION

"Should Nixon Resign?" read the headline of the editorial page of the June 7, 1974 edition of the conservative magazine *Christianity Today*. A defiant Nixon in recent weeks had released some, but not all, of the White House tapes demanded by impeachment investigators.

For *Christianity Today*, the limited release of evidence necessitated a reassessment of the president. The taped transcripts revealed Nixon "to be a person who has failed gravely to live up to the moral demands of our Judeo-Christian heritage. We do not expect perfection, but we rightly expect our leaders, and especially our President, to practice a higher level of morality than the tapes reveal."

Although not calling for Nixon's removal from office, the *CT* editorial approved of "the constitutional process" of impeachment.

Following months of legal stonewalling on the part of Nixon, paralleled by growing concerns from religious conservatives so carefully cultivated by the president, a unanimous Supreme Court decision on July 24, 1974 forced the release of the long-sought tapes.

Three days later the House Judiciary Committee filed three impeachment articles against the president, all 21 Democrats and a minority of Republicans voting in the affirmative. The three charges took the form of Obstruction of Justice, Abuse of Power, and Contempt of Congress.

The tapes provided direct evidence of Nixon's involvement in the Watergate burglary. The congressional Republican

firewall protecting the president collapsed. Facing the prospect of impeachment in the full house and a Senate trial following, in disgrace but putting on a bold face, Nixon on August 8 delivered a resignation speech to the nation on live television.

Citing the loss of his Republican "base" in Congress, Nixon lamented: "I would have preferred to carry through to the finish whatever the personal agony it would have involved, and my family unanimously urged me to do so. But the interest of the Nation must always come before any personal considerations."

"I have never been a quitter," he declared. "To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interest of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress, particularly at this time with problems we face at home and abroad."

He voiced his commitment to nation over political instincts. "To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home."

"Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office."

The following day, August 9, President Richard M. Nixon voluntarily left the White House and walked into an uncertain future.

POST-PRESIDENCY

Returning to California, Richard and his wife Pat, a steadfast defender of Nixon throughout the Watergate crisis, left the political spotlight. Although pardoned by Gerald Ford, disillusionment and illness initially consumed the former president. But in time, Nixon's craving for one more political comeback brought him off the sidelines.

Capitalizing on his foreign policy expertise, Nixon eventually became a foreign policy consultant with future presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and

George H.W. Bush. A 1986 *Newsweek* headline blared, "He's Back: The Rehabilitation of Richard Nixon."

Four years later presidents Ford, Reagan and Bush attended the dedication of the Nixon Presidential Library in Nixon's hometown of Yorba Linda, Calif. Due to concerns that Nixon might destroy his presidential papers if provided the opportunity, the documents remained in safekeeping in Washington, D.C. for the remainder of his life. Some presidential papers were later transferred to Nixon's library following his death.

On April 22, 1994, Nixon died from complications of a stroke. Graham spoke at his funeral, praising Nixon while Watergate remained unmentioned. Few would remember Nixon as a great man. The evangelist was among them.

"Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel," the evangelist quoted from the Bible. "Today, we remember that with the death of Richard Nixon, a great man has fallen."

Seemingly without a touch of irony, Graham continued. "During his years of public service, Richard Nixon was on center stage during our generation. He had a great respect for the Office of the President."

America's evangelist, as he was commonly known, had reason to be optimistic.

Twenty years earlier Watergate had cast a public pall over Nixon and Graham's coalition of conservative white evangelicals, sidelining Graham's quest to enshrine Christian nationalism in American politics and culture.

Both Graham and Nixon, however, lived long enough to witness the reemergence, political elevation and permanent establishment within the Republican Party of the conservative religious cultural values they had so carefully cultivated in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Richard Nixon in his 1969 "Silent Majority" speech had reached for a legacy that would extend into "the next generation." Graham could both celebrate Nixon as having been "center stage" during their earlier generation, and be pleased that Nixon's Republican Party endured and thrived in a new generation. **NFJ**

Eve or Mary?

Seeking better options for teaching Christian women about sex

BY REBEKAH GORDON

Early proclamations of Jesus' teachings were often given orally by those who had encountered him personally. In the following centuries, however, more literary works emerged.

Some of the most well-known and influential written works from this period come from the early church fathers. These men were an early generation of believers, qualified as "church fathers" due to their orthodox theology, biblical understanding and holy lives.

To understand the church fathers as individuals helps us grasp the grandeur of the community of Christianity to which we belong and their directional influence on the faith. Long-standing and pervasive Christian ideas were shaped, in large part, by this handful of theological giants.

While the historical situations are

different from our own, we can see how current Christian ideas frequently parallel those of the church fathers. For example, their outlook on sex, particularly in the lives of women, corresponds with much of the modern-day Christian narrative on the subject.

The first church fathers, in the second century, shared a fundamental view of sexuality that maintained there was a clear division between the mind and the flesh. The mind and spirit were considered good, while the flesh was considered something needing to be overcome.

Therefore, the good Christians were told to draw themselves toward that which is spiritual over physical.

Origen of Alexandria, a church father from the third century, even castrated himself to rid himself of the flesh. These ideas on extreme self-discipline of the body in order to better the soul led to lives of asceticism, meaning avoidance of all forms of indulgence.

But the recommendations were different for men and women. The teachings were rather stifling for women, spurring two main options for the good Christian woman: the virgin life or the submissive life.

Additionally, when writing about women and sexuality, the church fathers often compared them to either Eve, portrayed as the sinner and seductress, or Mary, the pure virgin. The comparison to Eve supported the idea that women were weak, temptresses or even wholly evil.

Tertullian, a second-century author

from Carthage, wrote to women: "And do you not know that you are an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so early God's image."

Based on Genesis 3, many of the church fathers wrote about woman being responsible for the fall of mankind. While harsh and unwavering in judgement, this belief was not uncommon.

Women were often compared to Eve, especially surrounding the question of their sexuality. Even marriage was risky because women were considered temptresses prone to sin. This dialogue often led to women being accused of dragging their husbands down into sinfulness. Women were physically weaker and therefore thought to be spiritually weaker.

Instead of being forever plagued by the narrative of Eve, all faith was not lost for women due to the goodness of Mary. One church father Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the fourth century, wrote: "What Eve had lost through her unbelief and betrayal of God's trust in the Garden, was restored to all women by the Virgin Mary."

Not only did Mary set a model for a holy woman, but she also repaired the image of women after the destructiveness of Eve — at least, according to Irenaeus. In the birthing of Jesus Christ, she helped provide salvation for all of humankind.

Mary's life heightened the option of virginity. Since she was chosen by God to be the mother of Christ, it was assumed that Mary's lifestyle was ideal for women. By





staying virgins, women could refrain from spreading their impurity.

Both childbirth and menstruation were closely associated with the body and were thought to make women impure. The fear of female impurity stemmed in large part from the Levitical codes, particularly Lev. 12:2-5 that references both childbirth and menstruation.

While the comparison of women to Mary may have been preferable to Eve, it was still a troubling comparison in many ways. The idealization of Mary's virginity made chastity the holiest option for women, to the extent that even women in faithful marriages were considered lowly next to a virgin.

Ambrose, Archbishop of Milan in the fourth century, said of Mary and the angel: "When greeted, she is silent; but when questioned, she responds. And while at first she was troubled, afterwards she promises obedience."

The expectation was that women were not only virginal, but also silent, submissive and obedient — all based on Mary as the ideal. With these difficult expectations, how could Christian women be expected to grow and flourish?

The rhetoric of these men is important because it can help us understand the history behind theological social patterns present in the Christian sphere. In *Sex in Christianity and Psychoanalysis*, professor and psychoanalyst William Graham Cole outlines the social sexual patterns of early Christianity, arguing that it was not until after the Gospels that Christianity began a deep rhetoric about the evils of the flesh.

Particularly, he points to the writings of St. Paul as a turning point — although even Paul, he says, did not write with the strong inhibitions that thwarted some of the church fathers, such as St. Augustine. The church fathers took some "theological leaps" from those who went before them.

While Paul's writings suggest women should be submissive in marriage, he also states that there is neither slave nor free, male nor female. While Genesis 3 refers to the sin of Eve, Genesis 1 refers to God's creation of humankind in God's image.

Still, these biblical themes have often been used in unsavory ways in Christian literature — with long-lasting effects.

While the writings of the church fathers may seem of ancient irrelevance to our contemporary situation, this is most definitely not the case. The church seems to repeat these ideas, theoretically and practically.

Katherine Pershey wrote about her modern-day experience in *Fully Naked, Fully Known: Field Notes on Sex and Marriage*. She lost her virginity in high school, saying it was more curiosity that drew her in than sexual desire. One day, right after they had sex, her Christian boyfriend said he wanted to marry a virgin.

Pershey writes: "I felt no anger at the egregious double standard; it did not dawn on me to be vexed that he didn't seem as concerned about his own lack of virginity as he was about that of his ideal future wife."

Years later, however, Pershey became more aware and angered by the double standard that plagued her sexual adolescence. Questioning why this double standard existed, she explored some of the ways in which the modern-day church teaches about sex.

One example Pershey found was with her friend's experience in her church's youth group. The youth pastor passed around a glass of water, telling all the boys to spit into it. He followed this up by saying to the girls, "This is what you are like if you have sex before marriage. . . This is what you are asking your future husband to drink."

At first glance, this exercise sounded absurd to me. I thought, my church would never do something like that. But thinking about it more, I am not so sure. True, I was never told to spit into a glass, but I was told to be quiet, to cross my legs, to change my outfit — when my male peers were not told the same thing.

Most of us were raised on lingering Christian traditions in our churches. The resulting comments we grew up with in church have an effect, even if they seemed small at the time.

The narrative has changed in that the option of marriage is equal to the option of



virginity. Or is it? I don't remember learning about sex that is good, holy or pure. I don't remember learning anything close to that from my ministers or my parents.

I do remember learning about abstinence. I do remember being told to wait. As a minister now myself, I do not blame my childhood ministers for not teaching me about this more. The culture of church does not provide space for open and honest dialogue about sex, especially questions regarding sex outside of marriage.

The current rhetoric, with intense focus on virginity, is like that of the church fathers. Much of the language we use today parallels that used in the second to fifth centuries.

Given the drastically different climate of modern culture, the church needs to broaden its understanding of female sexuality to move past the first few centuries. Particularly for women, we need to move away from the Eve-or-Mary spectrum that was created for us by the church fathers.

It can be damaging to young women to shame them for "being Eve," but it can be equally damaging to herald them for "being Mary." In reality, they are neither.

They are a new creation, an individual made in the image of God. Nothing, including their sexuality, can change that. **NFJ**

—Rebekah Gordon is associate pastor for college and young adults at Trinity Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., and a student at Campbell University Divinity School.



“It turns out that what modernity produces is not secularity but plurality.”

A generous space

Living between the powerful forces of secularism and fundamentalism

BY FISHER HUMPHREYS

Today many Christians find themselves living between two powerful forces: secularism and fundamentalism. My objectives are to interpret these forces in order to understand how best to live in between them. Fortunately, we have massive sociological studies of both these forces.

SECULARISM

Sociologist Peter L. Berger has been writing about secularism since the 1960s. He initially accepted the secularization hypothesis that says the arrival of modernity inevitably results in a decline in religion and an increase in secularity.

He now thinks that hypothesis, which is still widely accepted, has been empirically falsified. He says that widespread secularity is found almost exclusively in just two places today.

One is western and central Europe. The other is an international, influential, relatively small class of intellectuals. Most of the rest of the world is religious.

It turns out that what modernity produces is not secularity but plurality; that is, societies in which people who hold different beliefs and values manage to live side by side in relative harmony. This is a recent development.

Throughout most of human history people have lived in homogeneous societies with a single set of beliefs and values. In that situation individuals did not choose their beliefs and values — they inherited them. Occasionally an individual would experience doubts about an isolated belief or value, but this was done from within the inherited belief system and value system.

In the modern world, however, apart from a few small pockets of pre-literate peoples, no society on earth is homogeneous in this way. In every society diverse beliefs and values jostle one another.

This forces people to decide: Will you accept this belief or that one, commit to this value or that one? In other words, plurality relativizes beliefs and values.

Many people experience this as a total loss of confidence in beliefs and values — that is, as secularism (see Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt*, 2009).

THREE COMMENTS

To these very shrewd observations by Berger I will add three comments.

First, people who are secular relate to religion in different ways. Some secular people are wistful about religion and regret that they themselves do not have religious faith.

Others are uninterested in religion and rarely think about it. And others are confident in their secularism and combative toward religion.

Second, in the past many secularists looked to philosophy for support of their beliefs. Today they tend to look to science. This is understandable. Modern science is

committed to a secular methodology.

A modern physicist would never describe the behavior of sub-atomic particles in terms of actions by God or angels or demons. But the use of a secular methodology does not logically entail the acceptance of a secularist system of beliefs and values.

Third, many secularists declare themselves to be persons of reason and not of tradition. This is not entirely accurate. Secularists are influenced by secular traditions in the same way that religious people are influenced by religious traditions.

The secularist tradition includes texts, narratives and personalities just as the Christian tradition does. Charles Darwin's book *The Origin of Species* is as dear to some secularists as the Bible is to some Christians.

Many secularists are as troubled by the trial of Galileo as Christians are by the trial of Jesus. Conversely, many Christians appreciate reason as fully as secularists do.

This is easily confirmed by reading a book by a Christian theologian such as Paul Tillich or David Tracy. The contest between religion and secularism is not a contest between reason and tradition.

FUNDAMENTALISM

The largest study of fundamentalism is a five-volume work edited by Martin E.



Marty and R. Scott Appleby and titled *The Fundamentalism Project*. In an introductory essay the editors describe in sociological terms some of the family resemblances found in the fundamentalisms of the various religions. Here are nine of those family resemblances:

1. Fundamentalism originates in religion. It can be difficult for observers who are not religious to appreciate the fact that fundamentalists are not using religion as a cover for something else but really are motivated by their religious faith. Any interpretation of fundamentalism that does not take into account its religious character is to that extent incomplete and flawed.

2. Fundamentalists are traditionalists. They are, however, selective about the aspects of their tradition they do and do not retain. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures describe a world in which slavery, polygamy and patriarchy were routinely practiced. Jewish and Christian fundamentalists today retain the patriarchy but not the slavery or the polygamy.

3. It is intrinsic to fundamentalists that they react against aspects of the modern world. This means that fundamentalism did not come into existence until the rise of modernity. Religious traditionalists who lived before the modern era should not be described as fundamentalists.

4. Fundamentalists reject aspects of the modern world for a specific reason; namely, they perceive modernity as a threat to their personal and corporate identity.

5. Fundamentalists engage in a struggle against modernity. They fight it to protect their religious faith and way of life from what Walter Lippmann called “the acids of modernity.” Fundamentalism is intrinsically militant.

6. Fundamentalist movements are led by authoritarian males. Appleby and Marty write: “In the process of interpreting the tradition, evaluating modernity, and selectively retrieving salient elements of both,

charismatic and authoritarian male leaders play a central role” (their emphasis).

7. Fundamentalists have a specific understanding of history. They think the past was better than the present. They think the present is bad and getting worse. They look to a future when, they believe, their tradition will prevail over all others.

8. Fundamentalists distinguish very carefully between true believers and everyone else. They draw a bright line between insiders and outsiders, and they keep the outsiders outside.

9. The ultimate objective of fundamentalists is to replace modernity with their own worldview and value system. They do not work toward coexistence with those whom they see as their enemies, but toward control of their society. Marty and Appleby refer to this as the “totalitarian impulse” in fundamentalism.

TWO COMMENTS

I will add two comments to those of Marty and Appleby.

First, I said earlier that some secular people look wistfully at religious faith, others are not interested in religion, and still others confidently combat religion. The same is true of fundamentalists.

Some look wistfully at secularism, some are not interested in secularism, and still others confidently combat secularism. I believe that Marty and Appleby are right that fundamentalists see themselves as engaged in a struggle against modernity, but there are some fundamentalists with kindly and peaceable dispositions who are not especially strident in their resistance to the modern world.

Second, some fundamentalists carefully separate themselves not only from non-fundamentalists but also from fellow fundamentalists who have not separated from non-fundamentalists. This is known as “secondary separation.”

A good example of a non-separatist fundamentalist is the late Jerry Falwell who founded the Moral Majority in which fundamentalists worked along-

side non-fundamentalists on contested social issues such as abortion. Because fundamentalists worked together with non-fundamentalists in the Moral Majority, the separatist fundamentalist Bob Jones described it as “Satanic.”

BELIEFS

Now we turn from sociology to theology and consider some of the beliefs of secularists and fundamentalists.

Secularists believe that the present world is all that exists. There is no God who transcends the universe and is responsible for its existence. Many secularists prefer to be called agnostics rather than atheists because they suspect it is not possible to prove that there is no God.

However, they themselves do not believe there is a God. There is no one whom we may thank for the gift of life or the beauty of the earth, or who supports us human beings in our struggles for justice and peace, or to whom we may offer our worship and unreserved loyalty.

For secularists the arc of the moral universe begins and ends in time, with human societies, rather than in eternity, with God. The rest of the universe is indifferent to us humans, indeed, unaware of us.

The only meaning there is for our lives is whatever meaning we create for ourselves; there is no ultimate meaning given to us from beyond ourselves. As the Nobel laureate physicist and atheist Steven Weinberg famously wrote in *The First Three Minutes*: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.”

The word “fundamentalist” was coined in 1920 by an American Baptist newspaper editor named Curtis Lee Laws to describe himself and his fellow Christians who were “prepared to do battle royal” for the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

They felt the Christian faith was threatened by (1) the Enlightenment ideas of freedom, reason and progress; (2) the historical-critical study of the Bible; (3) Darwinian evolution; and (4) liberal Protestant theologies that accommodated ideas from the Enlightenment, the historical-critical study of the Bible, and evolution.

Unfortunately, fundamentalists did





a poor job of identifying the fundamental Christian beliefs. Here are some examples:

One influential early expression of fundamentalism was a series of 12 booklets published from 1910–1915 titled *The Fundamentals*. In the booklets are 90 separate articles by 65 writers representing many of the large Protestant denominations.

Several of the writers defend, for example, the fact that one person, not two or three, wrote the book of Isaiah. But none of the articles offers a defense of, for example, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which is arguably the most fundamental doctrine of the Christian church. God is the first fundamental.

Fundamentalists defended the virgin birth of Christ, but they did not give much attention to the Incarnation. They defended the penal substitutionary understanding of Christ's death, but they did not preach that Christ's sacrifice, quite apart from any theory about it, is good news for the world.

They defended the bodily resurrection of Christ, but they did not unpack the biblical teaching about the meaning of the resurrection. They defended the inerrancy of the original manuscripts of the Bible, but they did not affirm that modern translations of the Bible are God's Word.

In short, fundamentalism is a poor guide to what is fundamental in the Christian faith. Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, so the fundamentals of the Christian religion are too important to be left to the fundamentalists.

LIVING IN BETWEEN

Here in the U.S., millions of Christians find ourselves living with secularism on our left and fundamentalism on our right. Here are some observations about what this involves:

- The space between secularism and fundamentalism is extremely broad. In this space there is room for Catholics and Orthodox and Protestants, for theological progressives and traditionalists, for centering prayer and social justice activism, for evangelism and missions, and for social ministries and educational work.

It's a generous space, a great space for living out our Christian faith. It's a good place to be.

Some people are not aware of the space between secularism and fundamentalism. They assume that all those who pray or give a witness to their faith or maintain a hope for heaven are fundamentalists, when in fact these things characterize the entire Christian church from the beginning.

- We share some things in common with secularists and with fundamentalists. In common with secularists we appreciate the dignity and respect the rights of all humans.

We love this world and the present age just as secularists do (and just as we believe God does), and we welcome what modern science tells us about the physical world and how it operates.

In common with fundamentalists we believe in a personal God who both transcends and permeates the universe and who has been revealed in Jesus Christ, and we believe that all people have been created in the image of God.

We believe there is a divine purpose in history and for our lives, and we live with the hope that in the end God's will is going to be done.

- Secularism and fundamentalism exercise powerful influences on those of us who live in between them. These influences are not the same for all of us.

If we have been bullied by fundamentalism, we may spend so much energy resisting it that we overlook the problems of secularism. Likewise, if we have been bullied by secularism, we may spend so much energy resisting it that we overlook the problems of fundamentalism.

All this is understandable, but it is important to resist both secularism and fundamentalism.

- People who are secularists and people who are fundamentalists are not our enemies. Our enemies are the worldviews of secularism and fundamentalism.

We should pray for the people and wish them well personally. We should be fair and kind to them. We should not caricature them, ridicule them or condescend to them.

We should speak of them at their best, not at their worst. Having said that, however, we do not wish them success in winning minds and hearts, and we vigorously oppose both their worldviews.

FINALLY

We should be perfectly clear in our own minds that we are not secularists and we are not fundamentalists. As much as we love this life and this world and the people of this world, we dissent from the secularists' claim that this world is the whole story.

We affirm that there is a transcendent, immanent, personal God who created the universe and who has given a self-revelation in Jesus.

Likewise, we dissent from the fundamentalists' account of the Christian faith and of themselves as the only true Christians. We affirm there is a wideness in God's mercy that includes all the world.

Because we live in the generous space between secularism and fundamentalism, we are able to see clearly the good news that in Jesus Christ God has taken steps to forgive all sins and to deliver us from all evil.

God is the savior of all people, especially of those who believe. God's kingdom shall come. God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Even death can never separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus. In the end every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (See 1 John 2:2, Matt. 6:13, Col. 2:15, Heb. 2:14-15, 1 Tim. 4:10, Matt. 6:10, Rom. 8:38-39, Phil. 2:10-11.)

This is the Christian gospel and the Christian hope. We understand it most clearly when we carefully distance ourselves from secularism and of fundamentalism.

—Fisher Humphreys is Professor of Divinity, Emeritus, Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. You may write to him at fisherhumphreys@gmail.com.



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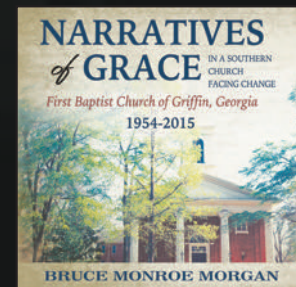
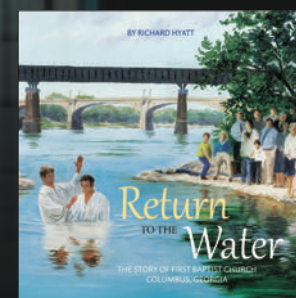
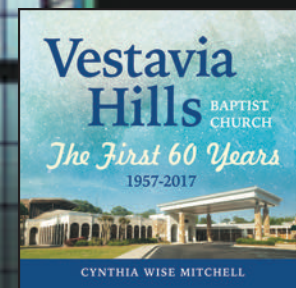
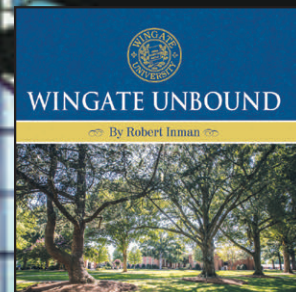
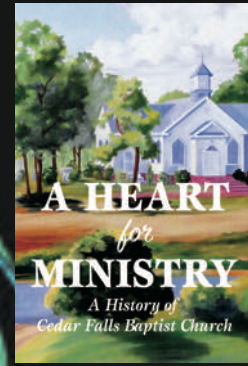


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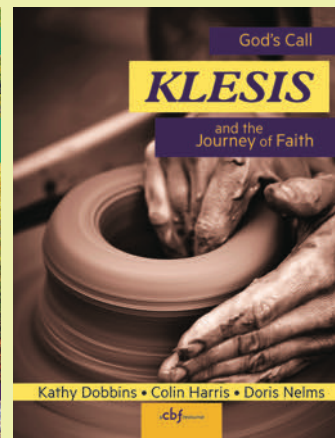
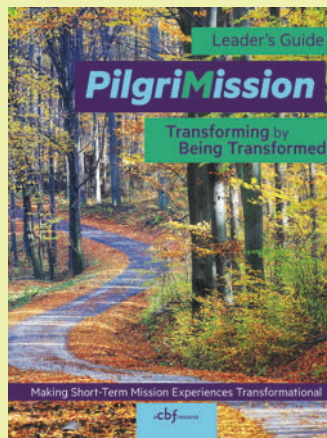
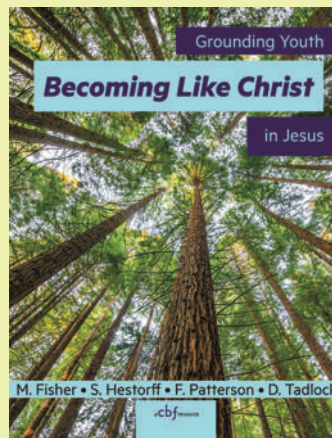
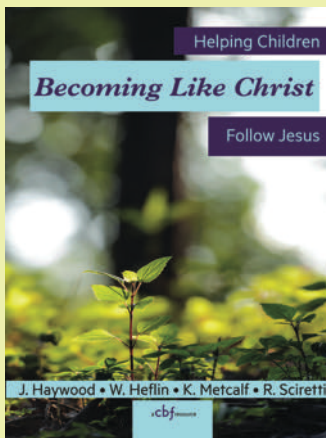
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Blazing Pastoral Paths

Nancy and Ken Sehested model unconventional, merciful approaches to ministry

**STORY AND PHOTO
BY JOHN D. PIERCE**

A SHEVILLE, N.C. — Nancy and Ken Sehested have not charted typical pastoral paths. In doing so, not only have they been uniquely effective but also have created a likely entrepreneurial, patchwork model for future ministers.

They are pastors, peacemakers, prophets and pioneers. While they didn't do things by "the book" — following customary paths of serving one larger church or filling

increasingly important institutional roles — their callings and careers have flowed from The Book and their faithful responses to divine summons.

The evolving ministries of their lives, however, are deeply rooted in a Baptist tradition of faith and freedom that, as much as some try, can't be fenced in.

"What I caught most deeply was the grand story of Jesus," said Nancy, reflecting on an upbringing in which she could have never imagined the course her life of faith has taken.

BAPTIST DNA

Nancy Hastings grew up immersed in Southern Baptist congregational life in Dallas, Texas — taking in every aspect of church and denominational programming — including the missions education program G.A.s, when it was called "Girls' Auxiliary" while the male counterpart was called "Royal Ambassadors."

"I became Queen Regent with a Scepter," said Nancy with a smile, recalling her coronation upon reaching the peak of G.A. faith and practice.

She took to heart the nurturing of faith she received from church and family.

“Those early years as a child, when we were singing ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus,’ have never left me,” she said. “The stories of Jesus lodged deep within me — and still give me life.”

Her calling to ministry seemed as natural as what her father and grandfather, both ministers, had experienced.

“I got a deep sense that we are all called,” said Nancy, noting that her early faith formation emphasized the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

“It never dawned on me that some are called and others are not,” she added. “Everybody has a voice and makes a decision how they will live out that calling.”

Ken, who grew up Southern Baptist as well, but in Louisiana, said those outside this deeply-ingrained denominational tradition often wonder why Baptists who get disenchanted or embarrassed by other Baptists just don’t leave.

Noting both the sociological and spiritual factors in shaping religious identity, as expressed in Peter Berger’s book, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Ken said: “It’s not that easy; it’s still mama.”

IDENTITY MARKS

Those who know Ken as a seasoned progressive, peacemaking, pastoral presence may have a hard time imagining him in his first, youthful ministry role: “traveling evangelist.” He even ambitiously proclaimed that he would one day replace Billy Graham.

Ready to charge hell with a squirt gun was all he knew to do after a “mystical experience” that could only be processed in his church and his mind as a call to go preach the gospel. So, he did — as part of a three-member youth evangelism team that crossed Louisiana and into Texas and Mississippi on occasions.

“However, I began having profound doubts and sensing the manipulation” at play in such efforts, he recalled.

Another big part of his personal identity was as a football player that led to a scholarship at Baylor University where he and Nancy met briefly for the first time.

Neither would finish their college years at the big Baptist school in Texas, however.

Nancy spent a year teaching English in Japan and then attended Seton Hall University to study Japanese. And Ken would transfer to New York University, putting them in proximity to one another yet again.

TURNING POINTS

After his freshman year at Baylor, Ken was appointed as a Baptist student summer missionary to Long Island, N.Y., where a Southern Baptist pastor was seeking to establish a Southern Baptist outpost.

Ken recalled someone asking the pastor where Baptists came from and the pastor pointing him to the baptizer named John who dunked Jesus. Ken’s young but reflective mind whirled, thinking: “You mean there were Baptists before there were Christians?”

The church’s risky innovation matched that of the Sehesteds, who found various ways to fulfill their callings while paying the bills for a growing family.

He began to rethink the “mystical experience” of his calling in the context of what he was seeing and hearing. “That summer was the fiercest internal debate I’ve ever had.”

The struggle was so real that Ken didn’t want to lose it in the Baptist cocoon of Baylor. So, after his sophomore year, he took advantage of a program to spend one’s junior year at New York University — during which he declared: “There’s no chance I’m going back to Baylor and Texas.”

He took a variety of religion courses and “even flirted with Buddhism” briefly. “But the God question wouldn’t go away,” he said. So, he decided to explore that sense of calling through theological education.

REALIZED ROOTS

“Union Seminary allowed me to do a lot of theological kicking and screaming, which is exactly what I needed,” said Ken.

The seminary brought an awareness and connection that fit Ken’s growing understanding of biblical faith and practice.

“I was introduced to the Anabaptist tradition I knew nothing about,” he said. Not only did the Anabaptists share familiar Baptist beliefs of believers’ baptism and religious liberty, but they also held a strong commitment to nonviolent peacemaking — something that would become a major part of Ken’s ministry.

Though distressing, the growth pains were worth it, said Ken.

“Slowly but surely I built a theological foundation and sense of vocation in proclaiming the gospel,” he said.

He and Nancy had met, again, on a Baptist Student Union retreat in 1971 while both were studying at colleges in the New York City region. Marrying, they both enrolled at Union Seminary to prepare for their ministry callings — whatever shapes those might take.

Upon graduation, they headed to Atlanta for two reasons. One, Nancy’s parents lived south of the city and had a rent-free basement apartment for use while Nancy and Ken searched for jobs. And, two, they had read Walker L. Knight’s book, *The Struggle for Integrity*, about the costly faithfulness of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga. — and wanted to be part of that kind of Christian community.

“Our very first Sunday there we went to Oakhurst,” said Ken, “and felt very much at home.”

OAKHURST

The congregation had resolved to open its doors widely to a changing community. The resulting loss of membership and money meant abandoning a partially completed building project at midpoint.

A lot of creativity took place within that fellowship, however, resulting in effective community ministries along with the launch of wider ministries including the hunger resource SEEDS and the national newspaper *SBC Today* (now *Nurturing Faith Journal*). Oakhurst would also provide space for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, which Ken would lead for 18 years.



The church's risky innovation matched that of the Sehesteds, who found various ways to fulfill their callings while paying the bills for a growing family. After three years in the church, Nancy was called as a part-time associate pastor.

"They drew things out of me I didn't know were there," said Nancy, commending the church for its affirmation and confirmation of her calling.

Ken assisted fellow church members Gary Gunderson and Andy Loving who had started SEEDS in 1978, just after the Sehesteds arrived. The hunger ministry's efforts, run by scrappy volunteers out of Sunday school space at Oakhurst, soon received one of country singer Kenny Rogers' first World Hunger Media Awards along with a much-needed grant. *People* magazine told their story.

Ken said he would assist Gary, who was doing some carpentry on the side, to help pay bills. Such bi-vocational ministry was often in the mix.

Nancy said of the church family: "I learned to speak theology in seminary, and I learned to live theology at Oakhurst."

WALKER KNIGHT

One of the most influential church leaders was the short, soft-spoken journalist whose book had drawn them to Oakhurst — and whose outsized courage and integrity were undeniable: Walker Knight. He had demonstrated sacrifice personally in leaving a secure denominational job to start what would become this journal.

Walker readily taught Ken and others how to write, edit and publish — even leading to a typesetting business to provide much-needed income.

Ken had offices at the church for both SEEDS and the Baptist Peace Fellowship, which with some American Baptist heritage was formed in 1984.

Ken said he got to know Walker and his wife Nell as part of a Tuesday night volunteer group that showed up to do "grunt work" at the church.

"It was a weekly connection and, at first, none of us fully recognized what a giant he was," said Ken. "He never had any desire to promote himself."

Soon, however, Ken and Nancy discovered Walker to be a positive, contemplative influence on the community of faith at Oakhurst and beyond.

"I thought of him as fearless," said Nancy. "He had a capacity to live into the moment with a curiosity and spirit of goodwill."

Walker, she added, was crucial to helping the church and individuals within the fellowship to create courageous paths — and "he was never worried."

By example, she said, "he taught us what it meant to be community: You show up!"

REJECTION/AFFIRMATION

Although she had James Forbes for a preaching professor in seminary, Nancy said she envisioned her own gifts leading more toward social ministries than the pulpit. However, at Oakhurst she was asked to preach and affirmed in that ministerial role.

When Nancy became a third-generation pastor, though, not all other Southern Baptists offered such affirmation.

"I understand differences of opinions, but it shocked me how mean Christians can be and use the Bible for cruelty," she recalled. "It was a source of grief; it didn't seem like we were reading the same [biblical] story."

Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., called Nancy as pastor in 1987. The local association of Southern Baptist churches aggressively disfellowshipped the congregation, although Baptist tradition has long affirmed congregational autonomy regarding such decisions.

Southern Baptist Convention President Adrian Rogers, with his golden voice and a Memphis congregation claiming 17,000 members, had unequalled influence in West Tennessee.

Nothing draws Baptists like controversy, so the association's annual meeting was packed to throw out this wayward congregation with a woman as pastor. Following the motion to exclude the church, proponents and opponents of the motion were given two minutes each to speak, Nancy recalled.

When she reached the microphone, someone called for the question and the body voted to cease discussion and to vote on the motion without hearing from her.

"Every Baptist bone in me rose up," recalled Nancy, who asked for the chance to speak.

There were shouts of "No!" and "Too late!" coming from the assembled preachers and other representatives from surrounding churches. But Rogers had more power than all of them *and* Roberts Rules of Order.

"In the name of Christian charity I think we should allow the little lady to speak," Nancy recalled Rogers saying. So, she decided to take full advantage of the opportunity.

She took her Bible, and only her Bible, and moved from the floor microphone to the pulpit. And she testified — with one scriptural reference after another — to her calling to proclaim the gospel.

"It's my first language of the heart," she said of the Bible.

In her impromptu 12-minute sermon, not a two-minute argument, she ended with Jesus' words from Luke 4:18 — "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel..."

"I closed my Bible and said, 'Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,'" she said to her fellow Baptists. "Then they threw me off the cliff."

MOUNTAIN CALLING

After Nancy's eight-year pastorate in Memphis, where Ken also had moved the Peace Fellowship headquarters, they crossed Tennessee to the North Carolina mountains.

"I was tired and needed to step away," said Nancy, who was often on the front lines of Baptist battles over women in ministry and other aspects of the growing fundamentalism in the convention.

The Sehesteds' original idea of starting a retreat center in Western North Carolina didn't develop, so their patchworks of ministry added some new pieces of cloth.

"I floundered doing a variety of things including an interim pastorate," said Nancy. "But we fell in love with the mountains and wanted to stay."

An opportunity to serve as a chaplain in a men's prison came along. It was not on Nancy's "to-do" list, but she accepted the job, having no idea how it would shape her ministry for the next 13 years.





“Ken and I have always been engaged with justice issues,” said Nancy, “because Jesus was engaged in justice.”

On a mountain hike with friend Joyce Hollyday, a United Church of Christ minister, a dream took root for forming a congregation to draw together those who might seek community but have felt excluded from traditional church life.

Following the national shock and grief of Sept. 11, 2001, the Sehesteds and Joyce started Circle of Mercy that December — with the three of them sharing pastoral duties. The congregation meets on Sunday evenings and is affiliated with both the UCC and Alliance of Baptists.

Currently, Nancy shares pastoral duties with Missy Harris, but notes that worship leadership involves numerous participants of all ages: “You could be in one of our services and not know who the pastor is.”

Ken, who served as the founding director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship from 1984 until 2002 and continues his writing and editing ministry called *prayer&politics*, said the congregation has “become the center of our lives.”

Also, Nancy has led a home church in Boone, N.C., called Shekinah Gathering, for 23 years.

REDEMPTION

For 10 of the 13 years Nancy served in prison chaplaincy, she was head chaplain at a maximum-security prison for men.

“It asked the hardest questions of my faith: What do I really believe about forgiveness, grace, transformation, redemption?” she said. “Those questions are asked every day.”

The justice system itself can be frustrating, she noted, but “the breakthrough of God” was often evident. Her experiences and reflections are shared in *Marked For Life: A Prison Chaplain’s Story* by Nancy Hastings Sehested (2019, Orbis Books).

“The inmates taught me more than I can ever convey about what it means to be human in the midst of struggles for meaning, identity and redemption,” she writes. “Each has a story to tell because each is part of the human family.”

Her tenure was longer than she had

imagined when unexpectedly becoming a prison chaplain.

“I stayed, holding fast to the conviction that truth coupled with mercy can lead to making amends and new starts,” she writes. “The biblical stories of my faith were alive in me, creating doorways of possibility within the hallway of ‘no exit’ signs.”

She added: “Even in my bleakest of days, I knew that God has a particular fondness for showing up among the lives in the ruins, for using us flawed and failed human beings for redemptive purposes.”

OLD/NEW MODEL

A ground-breaking, tent-making apostle renamed Paul could rightly argue that the patchwork of upstart and evolving ministries of the Sehesteds is nothing new.

However, their often surprising and varied routes of ministry have been quite different from many of their contemporaries who followed educational preparation with more predictable professional ministry paths.

Yet this innovative, even risky, approach may well serve as a model for the near future as congregational and institutional life shifts.

“Being bi-vocational is not easy,” admitted Nancy. But she said it allows for creativity and flexibility in fulfilling one’s call.

“Even the mistakes you make clarify where you should go,” she said. “You learn to be nimble.”

As a pioneering woman Baptist minister, Nancy has blazed some paths that others can follow in the face of continuing patriarchal power dynamics.

“We’re still fighting that,” she said, noting that pastoral opportunities for Baptist women today are often in declining historic congregations with many challenges rather than the prestigious pulpits of the past.

She expressed appreciation for “a terrific spouse and family and friends and church communities that have been very encouraging and affirming” of her ministerial calling.

“And I’ve had the Jesus story,” she said. “The Spirit is at work.” **NFJ**

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Questions Christians ask scientists

Some people in the Old Testament lived to be hundreds of years old, but people have never lived that long. Were the years shorter? — Rebecca Tinsley Anderson, S.C.

We all know about the birth of Adam; he was made by God “from the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7). But we don’t talk about his death very often, even though the Bible mentions it.

In Gen. 5:5 we read that, after having Cain, Abel, Seth and a number of other children with his wife Eve, “all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred thirty years; and he died.” Nine hundred and thirty years!

There’s more. All of Adam’s descendants mentioned in Genesis 5 lived enormously long lives; the shortest life is that of Enoch, who lived 365 years. Most had lives much nearer in length to that of Methuselah, who, at 969 years, is the longest-lived person in the Bible.

The genealogy in Genesis 5 takes us through Noah, who became the father of Shem, Ham and Japheth at the nimble age of 500 years. After this he lived 450 more years, for a total of 950.

Then, post-flood, the average age gradually declines until we finally get to Abraham’s death in Genesis 25, where we read that he lived only 175 years.

According to the Bible, the average length of human life eventually wound down past Abraham’s 175 to the more standard lifespan cited in Psalm 90, “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong” (v. 10).

What does all this mean? How can it be that humans lived so long, and why would the length of life shorten so dramatically after the flood? You’ll not be surprised to know that several theories have been proposed to explain all of this.

Some scholars suggest these ages



of 900-plus years have been created by mistakes in translation. Perhaps the word for “year” had different meanings to those Greeks who first translated Genesis; perhaps it meant a season (three lunar cycles) or a month (a single lunar cycle). This understanding of the word was acknowledged by none other than Augustine.

The problem with this view is that, though it works in some cases for the overall life spans of the early patriarchs, it does not make sense of the ages at which they begot children. For example, if we take Adam’s age at death and divide it by 12, we find that he would have lived a total of 77 years. This makes sense.

But using the same logic, he would have fathered Enoch at age 11. Similar problems arise if we convert using seasons instead of months. Therefore, this theory seems unlikely.

Others have put forth astronomical explanations. One of these involves the rotation rate of the earth, which is not constant. The earth has in fact slowly transferred angular momentum to the moon, sending the moon further away from the earth and increasing the length of our days. One consequence of this phenomenon

is that people long ago would have lived through more days than we do now.

Two problems immediately arise. First, though the length of the day has changed, the length of the year has not, and the ancients would have known the same cycle of seasons and they would have lasted a single year. Therefore, on a rapidly-rotating earth they would have lived through more *days* but not through more *years*.

Second, the length of the day is growing longer *very* gradually. Today is only about *two milliseconds* (that’s 1/500th of a second) longer than the same calendar day 100 years ago. This means that there were about 420 days per year about 400 million years ago, long before humans made their appearance in the cosmos. The effect is far too subtle to account for such dramatically long lifespans.

Perhaps these numbers — 930 for Adam, 912 for Adam’s son Seth, 905 for Seth’s son Enosh and so on — are not meant to be literal but are instead symbolic in the same way that the numbers 3, 7, 12 and 40 are symbolic numbers in the Bible. This is yet another possible explanation.

On the face of it this seems unlikely; what possible significance could there be to numbers like the ones listed above, and to others that appear in Genesis 5 — for example, 910, 895, 962, 365 and 969? Some researchers have suggested that, in the Babylonian system of numbers, based as it is on the number 60 (and not 10 as ours is), these lifespans are important symbols with hidden meanings.

The trouble with this theory is that, other than a few numerical coincidences, no support can be found for it. No other part of scripture has any relation to the Babylonian

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system of numbers, and no extrabiblical sources back up this claim.

Yet another idea to explain these numbers is that the ages do not indicate spans of individual lives but the length of time that tribes, dynasties or clans exercised dominion. But this theory is contradicted by some of the details of the stories of the patriarchs, and it also has no biblical or extrabiblical support.

Of course, many people reject all these theories and believe that if the Bible says Adam lived 930 years, then that's how long Adam lived. To them the simplest explanation is that the early patriarchs really did live long lives.

Their reasoning goes something like this: Humans were made to live forever, but when we were shut out of Eden we no longer had access to the fruit of the Tree of Life and therefore became mortal. Early on we were nearer to our primeval state of sinlessness so we lived longer, but over time we fell further from the edenic bliss for which we

were designed and the corrupting effect of sin accumulated slowly and ate away at our longevity.

But reading the Bible like this, as word-for-word physical truth, is not possible if one takes science seriously. We know that the human race is far older than the 6,000 years demanded by such a literal reading. We also know there is no evidence that people in the Bronze Age — the time of the patriarchs — lived much beyond about 40 or 50 years. Every line of scientific inquiry leads us to believe that the average human lifespan has only increased with time.

The problem at hand is most easily resolved when we realize that, at the time Genesis was written, there was no recorded history in the modern sense of the word. Genesis 1–11, the so-called Primeval History, tells stories that run from the creation of the cosmos to the introduction of Abraham.

These tales were passed down from one generation to the next orally; literacy was extremely rare and even those who

could read and write did not emphasize factual, detailed record-keeping the way we do today.

The writers were not intent on telling the literal, physical history of Israel but in crafting a story that would make sense of the vast gulf of time that preceded them. The long lives of the early patriarchs were likely meant to span that gulf while at the same time assisting people as they sought to understand their past and their relationship to God.

In other words, it is not really possible, or even responsible, to read Genesis 1–11 literally. These stories are meant to teach about the foundations of morality and our relationships with God, creation and one another and to establish Israel within a cosmic theological narrative.

They are more poetic than physical or factual, but please remember: this does make them untrue, but it makes them vessels of truths that transcend simple, literal language. **NFJ**

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