

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2020

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Part Two

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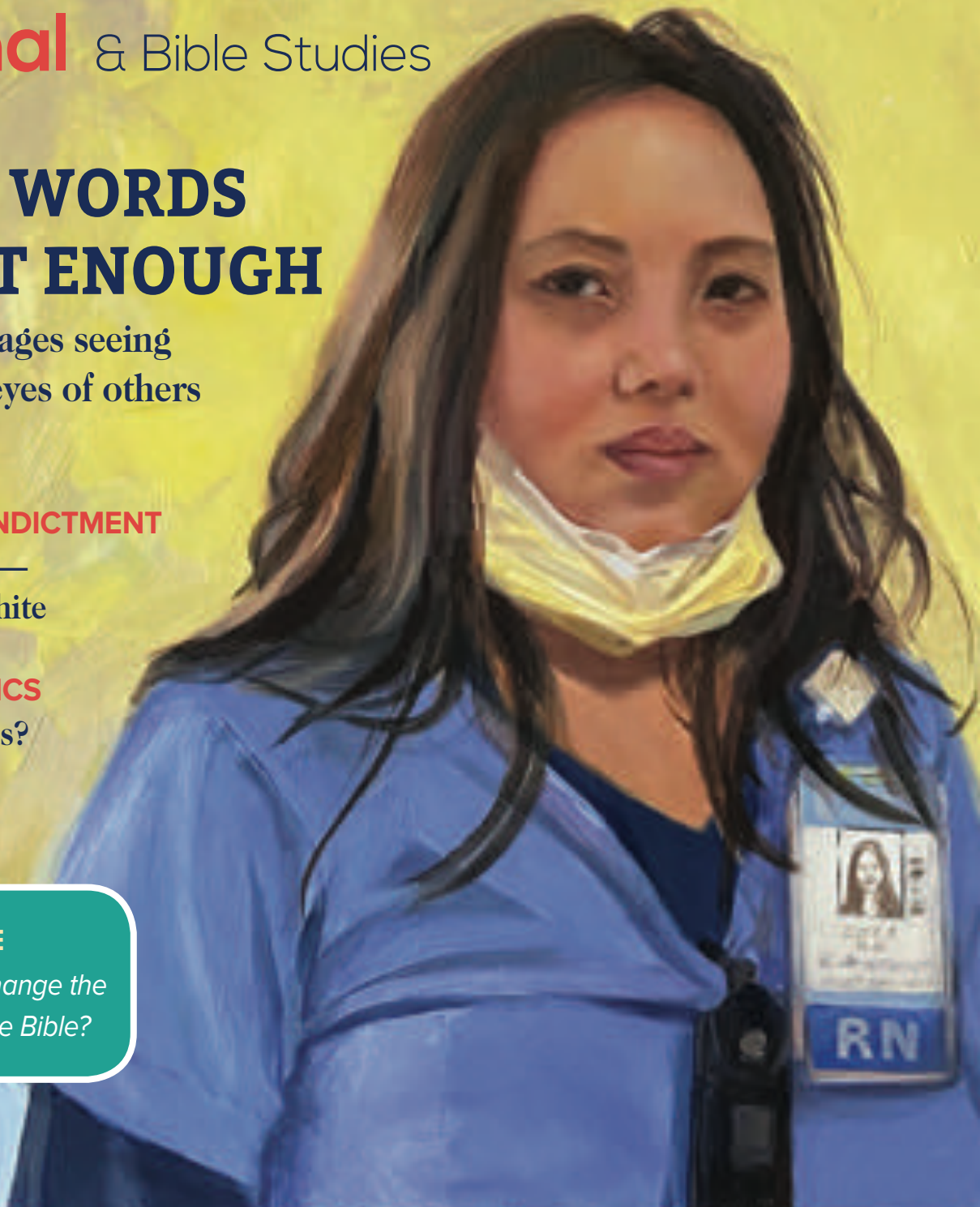
It's right there —
in black and white

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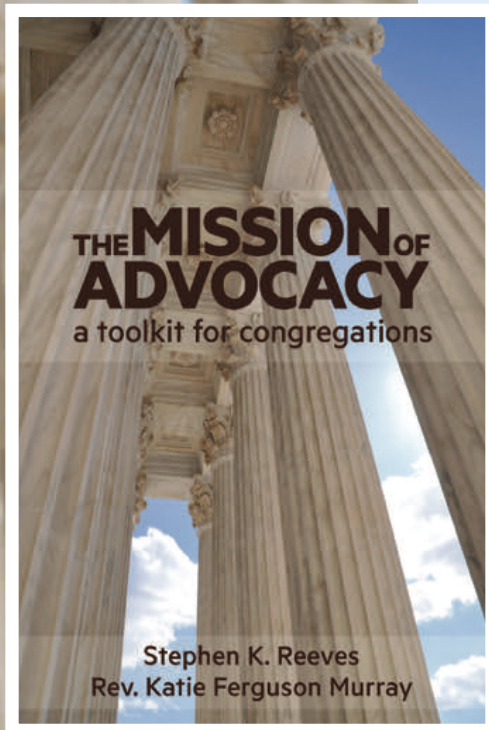
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See page 21 for more information.

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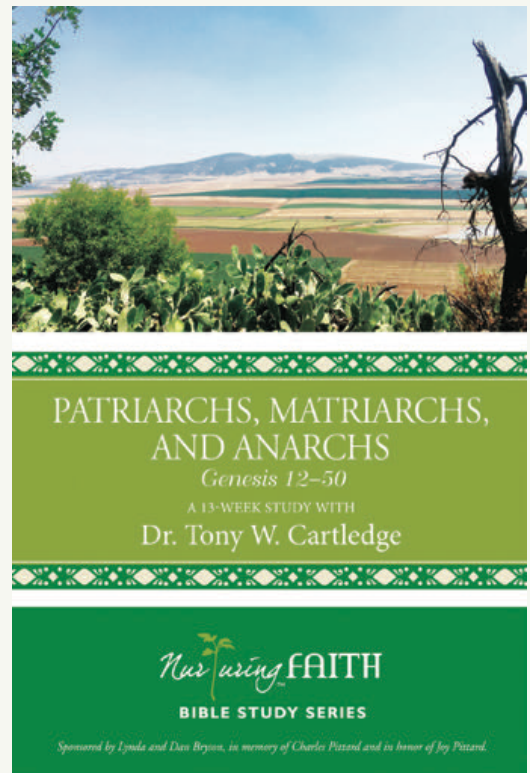
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OUR MISSION

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

Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, found inside the journal with teaching resources online, provide weekly lessons by Tony Cartledge that are both scholarly and applicable to faithful living.

Good Faith Media (goodfaithmedia.org), our new and expanded parent organization, fulfills the larger mission of providing reflection and resources at the intersection of culture and faith through an inclusive Christian lens.

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Cover image: Evie, by Susan Baker Cartledge. See story on page 6.

Worth Repeating

“For that rare friend who wants to see and understand all sides, I advise: ‘Read widely. Don’t leave cable news or talk radio on in the background all day.’”

Lay leader Ella Prichard of Corpus Christi, Texas (BNG)

“There is a power in knowing that you and your feelings and desires are not at the center of the universe.”

Norris Frederick, retired ethics professor from Queens University of Charlotte, N.C., blogging at philosophyforlivingtoday.org.

“On social media right now, people of conscience are deluged with opportunities to speak up or speak out. In this frenzy, we must choose what to ignore, what ethically demands response and what can be constructively engaged.”

Amanda Hiley of Birmingham, Ala., on making wise social media choices (GFM Opinion)

“Good news isn’t good if it isn’t true. In this age of conspiracy theories and fake news, church leaders can empower parishioners, giving them tools to be tenacious truth-seekers.”

Rhonda Abbott Blevins, pastor of Chapel by the Sea in Clearwater, Fla. (BNG)

“QAnon is predatory drivel that undermines the authority of Scripture and pilfers trust we owe only to Christ. American Christians have a responsibility to learn to identify it — and flee.”

Columnist Bonnie Kristian, writing in *Christianity Today*

“It’s almost impossible to be a Christian in a culture where Christians are in power.”

Pastor and author Brian Zahnd (Twitter)

“Although this movement is still fringe, it is likely that someone in your church or social-media circles has either already bought into the conspiracy or thinks it’s plausible and worth exploring.”

Executive Pastor Joe Carter of McLean Bible Church in Arlington, Va., who published a FAQ on QAnon in *The Gospel Coalition* (MIT Technology Review)

“Conscience was and remains an internal guide by which citizens determine and act in response to good and evil, right and wrong, freedom and oppression.

All persons, especially Christian persons, are to function as citizens on the basis of their consciences.”

Church historian Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University (BNG)

“When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war.”

John Lewis, in an essay written just before his July 17 death and published just after in the *New York Times*



The expectations of Advent and blessings of Christmas are especially needed during this unique and challenging year. The Board members and team of Good Faith Media appreciate making this journey with you. We wish for you all the hope, joy, love and peace this season might bring.

Whether a lost year, or a year of losses, 2020 will have ‘lasting effects’

By John D. Pierce

Year 2020 has shown us its destructive and lasting impact. It came without an appointment — and stands out unlike any other year most of us have known.

What was expected to be a rough spring continued producing trauma into the summer and beyond. Those who survive this pandemic in the best of conditions will remember it as the lost year.

It will be recalled for the disruption of life as usual — especially rites of passage such as weddings and graduations. The absence of anticipated vacations, sports, family gatherings, church events, and casual times with friends will long be recalled.

Historians will use it as a reference point. A “lost year” is the best of possibilities — though pandemics don’t count the days or celebrate new years.

More tragically, others will remember this as the year of losses — much greater than a missed celebration or social inconveniences. They grieve the deaths of family members and close friends — compounded by the inability to gather and remember in comforting ways.

Others suffer the loss of income, insurance and the simple expected meeting of life’s most basic needs. The continuing stress on healthcare workers takes its toll on those who face daily risks in a seemingly uphill battle against the virus that doesn’t go away. For them and others, it is not merely a lost year but a year of losses.

Compounding this challenging time is the lack of unity and compassion in confronting a common enemy. Those most

responsible for managing a national health crisis deny reality and seek scapegoats on which to project their blame.

Social media fills with crazy conspiracy theories and cheap political deflections that do nothing to move the nation toward healing and hope. And professing Christians are not only among those advancing harmful misinformation, but also often lead the pack.

We keep proving ourselves to be less exceptional than long claimed.

It’s too soon, however, to only be looking back. There is a challenging future to be shaped by our attitudes and actions.

Choices we make during these continuing uncertain times will determine the extent of our losses — as well as how this loss-filled year is shaped and remembered.

Will we recall friends rallying to support one another or angrily arguing over the varied responses to the virus? Was this the time we finally slowed down enough to re-evaluate our priorities, and think about our mortality in ways that make our remaining time more faithful and fruitful?

Grave markers with chiseled dates are stark reminders that each of us is given a defined slice of history that is uniquely ours. Those of us with the latter date still blank should consider how best to use those limited but undefined days, months and years.

Whether this unusual time becomes the Great Disruptor or Great Destroyer for us personally, it will surely have lasting effects. We look ahead with both fear and hope:

Fear that the disruptions and devastation will continue in painful and irreversible ways for a long time. And with hope that medical science will stabilize our lives to some manageable degree.

However, we need more hope than that. Much of this year showed little promise that constructive lessons are being learned on a large scale. But the possibilities are still there.

We could learn to live less selfishly, and not allow fear to drive us away from gratitude, faith, compassion and hopefulness — those things we hold as markings of a well-lived life.

If the Bible and specifically the life of Jesus reveal anything, it is that we should be open to change. The word “conversion” — tossed around in church circles — means precisely to move from a lesser condition into something better.

Conversion is preceded by confession, which requires re-examination. And re-examination requires something in short supply now: honesty.

Honest re-examination calls for looking into our own hearts to see where self-interest, self-preservation and self-service reside. Surely, some Sunday school teacher once pointed out that at the center of “sin” is the letter “I.”

“Lasting effects” apply both to the virus’ long-term impact on health and economics — as well as to the ways we choose (or don’t choose) to live differently as a result of this unfolding lost year or year of losses.

Perhaps the most defining question is not whether this trying time was full of losses or just seemingly lost — but whether it was also wasted. **NFJ**



WHEN WORDS AREN'T ENOUGH

Artist captures real feelings, encourages seeing through the eyes of someone else

BY REBEKAH GORDON

APEX, N.C. — As a young girl, Susan Baker Cartledge was pulled out of church one Sunday for being too loud. Outside her father said, “OK, buddy, when we go back in there you are going to be quiet as a mouse.”

With a hand on her hip, she quickly responded, “My name’s not Buddy, and I’m not a mouse!”

Today, Susan is a gifted painter with the same passion and spunk she had as a little girl in church. In her impressive self-portrait, she even painted a small mouse earring on herself as a reminder to always keep that fierce spirit.

In addition to her moxie, Susan has a love of stories, an active faith life and a deep desire to care for others.

EXPRESSIONS

For 30 years, Susan has used her deep compassion as a nurse in both hospitals and homes. As she cared for patients, she learned their stories — and saw into their faces.

Each story revealed an individual life with meaning. And in each face Susan saw a myriad of expressions: joy, grief and humor. She grew more attuned to when a patient was in pain or experiencing relief as she cared for them.

Now Susan brings those perspectives and skills to painting detailed, expressive portraits. Down to the muscles, the grin, and the glimmer in the eyes, each painting is intricately crafted.

She insists on getting the presence of the person right, weaving their personal stories into the specifics of the painting.

In the striking piece on the cover of this journal, Susan painted her colleague and friend, Evie. The painting shows a strong sense of resolve — the tired eyes and



frazzled hair of a hardworking nurse who recently lost her grandmother back home in Vietnam.

Susan based the work on a moment she shared with Evie, who expressed frustration and guilt for not having been there when her grandmother died. In doing so, Susan captured her friend’s grim determination.

Often it is challenging to find the right words to empathize with someone else’s grief. But Susan captured it beautifully in her painting of her friend and colleague

Evie, showing not only sorrow and fatigue but also strength, poise and endurance.

During the pandemic Susan has painted portraits of other dedicated nursing colleagues, for example, Justin and Mia. It is a way to honor their commitments and hard work, and to show their humanity.

Susan struggled to fully describe these paintings of her heroic friends, adding with a shrug and a laugh: “I paint them because I can’t think of the right words.”

However, Susan did speak of these



frontline health care workers with devotion and pride. She intimately knew the stories of their lives. And she talked about the meticulous details of the paintings she worked on for hours in order to capture the right essence of her dear friends.

She was proud of her friends who have shown great courage and toughness despite the added stress of COVID-19. She reflected on the strength it took for Evie to share her story of grief, which she navigated while working a 12-hour shift at the hospital.

“Women do what’s needed,” said Susan. “I’ve found that over and over again.”

STRONG WOMEN

Impressive, hardworking women have surrounded Susan during her entire life. She watched her grandmother work in the kitchen, her mother learn Spanish just so she could teach ESL classes, and countless women work alongside her in the hospital.

Her art teacher, Alia El-Bermani, is another one of the tough women in her life. The figurative contemporary painter has works showcased in museums across the country and is the co-founder of the blog *Women Painting Women*.



Susan Cartledge paints images of strong women (left) and children in series that highlight those who might be less noticed.

The blog highlights paintings from scores of women around the world, focusing on the female figure. The promotion of and advocacy for women is one of the many ways Alia has influenced Susan’s work.

Inspired by her teacher, Susan began a series of paintings featuring women at work. On one of her many trips to Israel and the West Bank with her husband Tony Cartledge, who teaches at Campbell University Divinity School and writes for this journal, Susan began photographing Palestinian women selling produce on the streets of Jerusalem’s Old City.

She was struck by the way these women carried themselves: They were focused, diligent and persevering. Some Israelis did not want them to be in the market, ignoring the women or at times harassing them.

Yet the women continued to work, selling grape leaves and other goods, because that is what they had to do to survive — women doing what they needed to do, again and again.

Each of the women Susan photographed had a precious piece of property, a valuable item of jewelry or a detailed purse. They wore them with a sense of pride, said Susan.

She was struck yet again by the inherent dignity that can be found in all people, if only others would take the time to look. In painting these portraits of oft-neglected women, Susan hopes to help people see through the eyes of someone else — to gain a new perspective.

And, she added, bringing a smile to someone’s face is always nice, too.

The persistent Palestinian women do not hold positions of status, power or wealth, but have value and beauty. They have within them the strength that all women have, said Susan, like the many who have shaped her life.

DEVOTION

When discussing these paintings, Susan spoke of the details of their lives she could only imagine: They have stories she doesn’t know, unlike those of her work friends.

Yet, portraying the sense of dignity of these complete strangers was just as important to her as painting familiar faces.

“Women are change agents, and they should not be undervalued,” said Susan, as she gazed upon her painting of a hard-working Palestinian.

Her passion for the many laboring women whose stories she was highlighting felt like a prayer, one that deserved an “Amen.”

Susan puts her faith into action as she tends to patients as a nurse — and cares for others as a mother, wife and child. And she paints to tell people’s stories in ways that words alone can’t express.

She paints with thoughtfulness and dedication. She crafts with devotion.

Half of the proceeds from her current series, *Children of Hope*, is given to Teach for America, an organization dedicated to providing educational resources to undervalued communities. Sales of the paintings of Palestinian women (available online) will be given to a charity that benefits these women.

The living of good faith can look differently for every person. As a painter, Susan uses her wonderful gift to highlight the stories and faces of God’s people.

Each piece is purposefully and carefully crafted. In them, she calls attention to a deep biblical truth: *Imago Dei* — all people are made in the image of a good God. **NFJ**

—Rebekah Gordon of Raleigh, N.C., is an inaugural Ernest C. Hynds Jr. intern with Good Faith Media. More of Susan Cartledge’s work can be found at paintberrystudio.com.

Good Faith Media launches memorial internship

REBEKAH GORDON, CHRISTOPHER ADAMS SERVING THIS SEMESTER

A gift by the foundation of First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., honors the memory of Ernest C. Hynds Jr., a longtime church leader and professor emeritus of journalism at the University of Georgia, and supports a new internship program for Good Faith Media.

“We are deeply grateful for the generosity and commitment of First Baptist, Athens, to the future of our movement,” said Mitch Randall. “Through their investment we developed an internship program that educates and engages young Christian leaders.”

Randall, CEO of Good Faith Media, announced that Rebekah Gordon and Christopher Adams are the first two Hynds Interns, serving this semester.

Gordon, a native of Durham, N.C., is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Campbell University Divinity School. She serves as associate pastor to college students and young adults at Trinity Baptist Church in Raleigh.

“Rebekah is a sharp young woman with a keen eye for social justice issues and a special interest in valuing women’s equality in all aspects of society,” said Tony



Cartledge. “She writes with both clarity and passion, and offers valuable contributions to Good Faith Media.”

Cartledge was one of Gordon’s professors at Campbell and is helping supervise her internship for Good Faith Media where he serves as contributing editor and curriculum writer.

Christopher Adams grew up deeply involved in the First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., and is a communications studies graduate of the University of Georgia. In May, he graduated from Duke Divinity School.

“Christopher has a deep interest in scripture and theology, and a strong appetite for learning,” said Frank Granger, minister of Christian community for the Athens congregation. “He is an excellent critical thinker, with communication and writing skills.”

Granger, a member of the Good Faith Media Strategic Advisory Board, assists in guiding Adams’ internship experience.

“First Baptist Church is honored to

have this internship named for one of its longtime, faithful leaders and examples of Christian commitment,” Granger added. “And we are proud and excited for one of our own young adults to serve as an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Intern.”

John Pierce, executive editor/publisher for Good Faith Media, and longtime editor of *Nurturing Faith Journal*, said this new collaboration brings together many positive factors.

“More than two decades ago I enjoyed supervising some of Ernie Hynds’ journalism interns from UGA, and getting to know him even better when visiting the church,” said Pierce. “This internship is a great way to honor his memory and extend his legacy.”

Additional gifts are being sought to continue and expand this internship program for future years as experiential training for gifted, young communicators.

“To support the next generation of journalists of ‘good faith,’ please consider giving to Good Faith Media,” said Autumn Lockett, executive director of development and marketing.

For information on supporting this educational and practical experience, please contact Autumn Lockett at (615) 627-7763 or autumn@goodfaithmedia.org.

Prospective interns may inquire about upcoming internships by writing to CEO Mitch Randall at mitch@goodfaithmedia.org. **NFJ**

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

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More than a voice on the phone, Jannie is everybody's friend

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

For many years those calling the Nurturing Faith office were greeted by the friendly voice of Jannie Lister. Kind and courteous to all, Jannie would respond to whatever questions arose — often patiently guiding a frustrated caller through the web site or updating a subscription.

Upon ending such calls, many felt like they'd spent time talking with a friend rather than just conducting business. Those managing group subscriptions, especially, quickly developed personal, trusting relationships with her.

Indeed Jannie is a dear friend to those of us privileged to work with her — as well as those who only know her as the voice on the other end of a call.

“Customer service” was more than a

job to Jannie. She was genuinely friendly with coworkers, donors, subscribers and anyone else who might come her way.

“Jannie is probably the easiest person I've ever worked with,” said longtime managing editor and now senior copyeditor, Jackie Riley, who recruited her to join the team about 15 years ago. “She is willing to learn whatever is asked of her, and is always cheerful, optimistic, and supportive of our mission.”

In addition to answering the phone and handling customer service matters, Jannie picked up and sorted mail, handled credit card payments, shipped journals and books, updated subscriptions (willingly learning new software) and much more.

Jannie wrapped up her good work at the end of September and is missed by all of us. We want to publicly thank her and wish

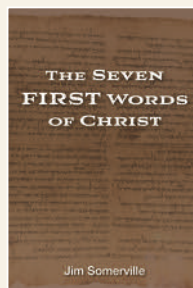


Jannie Lister with her husband Bub.

the very best for her in the days ahead.

A high standard has been set. But be assured that the Good Faith Media team is ready to answer questions and assist subscribers, book purchasers, authors, supporters and anyone else interested in or engaged in this expanded work.

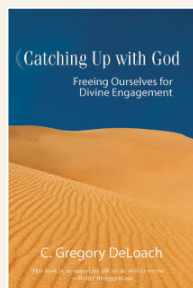
Again, thanks, Jannie! You are loved and appreciated. **NFJ**



NEW FROM NURTURING FAITH BOOKS THE BOOK PUBLISHING IMPRINT OF GOOD FAITH MEDIA

“What would happen if we looked at the opening chapter of this earliest Gospel and let Mark tell the story of Jesus in his way? What if we paid attention not only to the seven last words of Christ but also the seven first?”

—Author Jim Somerville, Pastor, First Baptist Church of Richmond, Va.



“I cannot remember when I have seen such a sustained embodiment of the good work of preaching. Greg DeLoach has taken up both the plotline and the specificity of the book of Exodus in order to summon us to fresh faith and to missional living.”

—Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann

These volumes, along with many other timely books and resources, are available at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore.

Facing our **INDICTMENT**

Ignoring white supremacy within American Christianity is costly

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

It is right there in black and white. Page 185.

“To put it more bluntly, if you were recruiting for a white supremacist cause on a Sunday morning, you’d likely have more success hanging out in the parking lot of an average white Christian church — evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant or Catholic — than approaching whites sitting out services at a local coffee shop.”

Read it again. I dare you.

REALITY

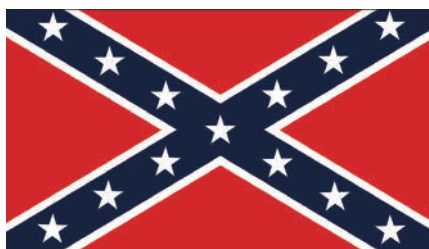
Frequent church attendance doesn’t make white Christians less racist. In fact, among white evangelicals, holding racist views increases the predictability of frequent church attendance. This reality is not merely someone’s opinion.

These are the solid findings of Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), as conveyed in his eye-opening book, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (2020, Simon & Schuster).

This indictment of the influential and widespread Americanized version of Christianity that has nurtured so many of us cannot — or should not — be ignored. But it is not easy to face.

Jones found American Christianity to be a “conductor” of white supremacy. And his historical recollections as well as current data back up this claim.

“White churches served as connective tissue that brought together leaders from other social realms to coordinate a campaign



of massive resistance to black equality,” he writes. “But at a deeper level, white churches were the institutions of ultimate legitimization, where white supremacy was divinely justified via a carefully cultivated Christian theology.”

Put another way: “White Christian churches composed the cultural score that made white supremacy sing.”

Therefore, it is not surprising that needed societal changes regarding justice and equality have long met the most resistance within white Christian churches, denominations and institutions.

It’s not a matter of simply changing someone’s mind; it requires admitting that what one claimed as indisputable biblical truth does not have such divine justification.

And such confessions open the hard-to-admit possibilities of being wrong on other tightly-held doctrines of condemnation and exclusion. Ironically, the church seems to have the hardest time with confession.

Fear and blame are aimed outward rather than inward. As Jones notes, when history finally reveals the racist underpinnings of institutionalized Christianity, “the culture rather than Christianity takes the fall.”

ROOTS

Jones is not simply a detached researcher and observer; he’s intimately familiar with the subject matter. His family roots go deep into the South. And he grew up actively involved in a Southern Baptist congregation in Mississippi.

He graduated from a Southern Baptist college and seminary, before doing doctoral work at Emory University.

Those denominational roots go back to 1845, when Baptists of the South severed ties with brothers and sisters from the North for the express purpose of sending missionaries who were slaveholders.

Less than two decades later, Jones records, the American Civil War commenced and references in the Southern Baptist Convention constitution to the United States of America were changed to “the Southern States of North America.”

“While the South lost the war, the secessionist religion not only survived, but thrived,” he writes. “Its powerful role as a religious institution that sacralized white supremacy allowed the Southern Baptist Convention to spread its roots during the late 19th century to dominate southern culture.”

Though steeped in Southern Baptist life — including denominational doctrinal teachings in Church Training — Jones notes that he did not learn the true story of the convention’s founding until sitting in Leon McBeth’s church history class at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

“Slaveholder religion,” as author Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove defines it in his book, *Reconstructing the Gospel* (2018, InterVarsity Press), continues to linger long after the end of slavery.

BELOW CONSCIOUSNESS

Many church and denominational leaders, as well as laity, consider the racist past just that — in the past. There is no acknowledgement that the roots are strong and new growth still finds its way to the surface.

“After centuries of complicity, the norms of white supremacy have become deeply and broadly integrated into white Christian identity, operating far below the level of consciousness,” Jones writes.

Therefore, he notes, many well-meaning white Christians today can’t distinguish between Christianity, as they know it, and the cultural norm of white supremacy. And any criticism of the latter is considered to be an attack on their faith.

Jones said that it wasn’t until he was in “the full swing of a career steeped in public research” that he “realized just how fully these attitudes still haunt Christians today.” But the evidence is unmistakably clear.

“In survey after survey, white Christians stand out in their negative attitudes about racial, ethnic and religious minorities (especially Muslims), the unequal treatment of African Americans by police and the criminal justice system, their anxieties about the changing face of the country, and their longing for a past when white Protestantism was the undisputed cultural power.”

Those with eyes to see and ears to hear will not dismiss this rightly applied indictment, but will humbly see the undone work of conversion well after the waters of baptism into this expression of Christianity have dried.

The fear of losing cultural dominance has led many white Christians to align with any political effort to protect or restore such a sense of security — regardless of how those politics contrast with Christian values. Hence, as Jones puts it, many white Christians have moved from being “value voters” to “nostalgia voters.”

INDIVIDUALISM

Jones traces historically what many of us know firsthand, that white Americanized Christianity was shaped into a belief system that ignores social injustice and concerns itself specifically with individual piety.

Personal sins — limited to a narrow list often related to sex — are the only failings in need of repentance. Participating in corporate or societal evils is ignored or excused.

You don’t rob a bank, but it’s OK if the deacon who is bank president charges a higher interest rate to African Americans or if the real estate agent who teaches Sunday School doesn’t show people of color the available houses in her neighborhood.

Even worse, membership in racist organizations and the church were not regarded as being in conflict. And today white nationalism finds a comfortable home within Americanized Christianity.

Preaching and teaching from selective biblical texts — while avoiding the many calls to social justice from the prophets and Jesus — was an intentional effort to keep the focus on individual piety without challenging the societal evils propagated by the church.

Well-crafted doctrinal support of white supremacy was an integral part of advancing the Lost Cause effort to justify the treasonous role of Southerners and to present those who led the failed effort in a heroic light — hence, the statues and monuments that arose throughout the South in highly public places.

In the same way preachers during slavery — with the slaves in the back or balcony — were “light on Exodus and heavy on Paul,” the sermons and Sunday School curriculum during the Jim Crow era avoided or soft-sold the prophetic calls to justice.

They watered down Jesus’ calls to love neighbors as oneself. Or they simply defined neighbor as what one sees in a mirror, and ignored the more sacrificial call to love even one’s enemy.

Likewise, sanitized public school textbooks skipped the wide-ranging atrocities that whites carried out against Native people and those of African descent, both during slavery and long after.

Even today, many preachers must take note of which toes listeners are willing to be stepped on. Calls for racial justice in the present time have led to loss of membership and money, and resulted in vacated pulpits.

So the temptation is to keep the focus

on the acceptable individual sins in need of forgiveness.

EVIDENCE

While overt language of white supremacy has lessened over time, the attitude still can find a comfortable home within many churches. It simply gets cast in cultural and political terms such as protecting one’s “heritage” or supporting “law and order.”

One of the biggest challenges, that Jones addresses, is the great denial that white supremacy still resides in American Christianity or in the hearts of its adherents. Having “warms feelings” toward some particular African Americans is somehow considered enough to absolve them of any claims of racism.

The well-built structures of racial injustice within the church and larger society are simply dismissed. Yet neither denying nor ignoring such injustice makes it go away. And the stark indictment — for those willing to face the mounting evidence — is that the problem is not an outside threat, but is clearly present on the inside of congregational life.

Yet raising the consciousness of congregations, as noted, comes at a high risk and therefore is usually avoided or softened to the point that it doesn’t make the needed point.

However, not facing the reality of inbred white supremacy threatens churches as well. Historic congregations with some of the deepest racist roots often worry about their future but resist addressing the issue that alienates potential members who consider the church’s Christian witness to be compromised.

Mark Tidsworth, founder of Pinnacle Leadership Associates that often consults with congregations in transition, said his team has seen a pattern to be consistent enough “to call it a trend now.”

A declining, older congregation will call a younger pastor in an effort to reach people under age 40. In the pulpit the new pastor addresses concerns such as racism, poverty, consumerism, environmentalism and gender issues — connecting the gospel to what people the pastor’s age are actually discussing.

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“More is required — especially of those who claim to follow Jesus but have ignored his most basic teachings on human value and equality.”

“Some older people in congregations think those topics are out of bounds,” said Tidsworth. “So they launch a campaign to run off the younger pastor and new younger people, ensuring their demise.”

Churches also lose their moral authority to speak publicly about any ethical concern when known widely to have never faced their own historic role in preserving and advancing white supremacy.

Americanized Christians might do well to call a moratorium on moralizing to give more time and attention to the deep moral rot within that creates a breeding ground for white nationalism and other values at odds with the life and teachings of Jesus.

ANY HOPE?

Facing such damning evidence can lead to despair and hopelessness. Or, perhaps, just perhaps, it can lead to reckoning and hope. But it has to be the right kind of hope.

Believing that white supremacy will simply die out is blind hope, not based in reality. It ignores what Jones describes as “its tenacious ability to endure from generation to generation.”

The legacy of white supremacy, so ingrained in institutions and ideology, and finding new adherents in rising nationalism, will not go away on its own.

The title of Jones’ book comes from the *New York Times* in 1968, when James Baldwin said he saw little chance of “moral rehabilitation” of the “bulk of this country’s white population” because they have been “white ... too long.”

Yet even Baldwin didn’t give in to the impossibilities for a brighter day. However, he insisted, any real hope is not blind, but bitter.

“If we are going to build a multiracial society, which is our only hope, then one has got to accept that I have learned a lot from you, and a lot of it is bitter,” testified Baldwin to a US. House subcommittee in 1968. **“But you have a lot to learn from me, a lot of that will be bitter.”**

He adds: “That bitterness is our only hope. That is the only way we get past it.”

Drawing on Baldwin’s words, Jones affirms that no truly hopeful future can occur without first “coming into fuller acknowledgement of the harm we have done.” That, he writes, “is the beginning of the path to freedom.”

Jones points to some late but hopeful signs of steps along that path. He dedicates the book to the two First Baptist Churches of Macon, Ga., where his family has roots.

In recent years, the neighboring white and black congregations — with shared history going back to slavery that was long ignored — have been slowing but surely building relationships that get to the deep and troubling issues that have kept them apart.

Also, he points to the recent removal of Confederate imagery from the state flag in Mississippi, and the removal of Confederate monuments and statues in southern towns and cities.

But more is required — especially of those who claim to follow Jesus but have ignored his most basic teachings on human value and equality.

“We white Christians must find the courage to face the fact that the version of Christianity that our ancestors built — ‘the faith of our fathers,’ as the hymns celebrate it — was a cultural force that, by design, protected and propagated white supremacy,” writes Jones in conclusion.

An indictment has been issued. The witnesses are many, and the evidence is clear. Yet the questions remain open:

Will (or can) white American Christians finally acknowledge and confront the deep-seated racism — which can’t be fully concealed or easily erased with resolutions and warm feelings — and faithfully and humbly move toward reckoning and repair?

Or is that beyond the capacity of an institution so steeped in white supremacy? Has Americanized Christianity simply been white too long? **NFJ**

Kudzu, kinfolks and me

This column first appeared at goodfaithmedia.org, where daily news and opinion can be found.

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Concluding his book, *White Too Long*, Robert P. Jones acknowledged that his personal narrative of growing up white in the South was not unique.

Many people, he notes, could uncover “ways in which white supremacy, like kudzu, has crept its way forward through the family tree.”

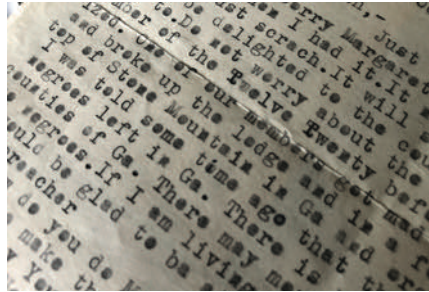
His story so resonated with mine that I went digging through some old files and notebooks of family history. Aunt Edith Nuckolls was the keeper of such information for my maternal branch of the tree.

After her death, I gathered some of those scattered pieces to learn more about my roots. Among the items I found was her correspondence with a beloved cousin in Decatur, Ga.

Alex Nuckolls, who had the same name as my grandfather, died when I was one year old. But there were many warm references to him I heard over the years.

In a typewritten letter, dated Oct. 2, 1957 and addressed to “My Dear Cousin Edith,” he thanked my aunt for her recent correspondence and expressed sorrow that “Margaret’s boy has chicken pox.” (That would have been my brother Rob who was about to turn three.)

His advice was to “just scratch and it will soon be over.” I don’t think Cousin Alex was a dermatologist.



In just the second paragraph he turned to lamenting current events. Then he offered this bit of encouragement for my aunt in Chattanooga to not worry about the Ku Klux Klan.

“I was a full fledged member of the Twelve Twenty before the KKK was organized,” he wrote. “One of our members got mad and told the secret and broke up the lodge...”

Then, without a break, he added: “...and in a few weeks they met on top of Stone Mountain in Georgia and organized the KKK.”

Hopeful Cousin Alex said he was told “some time ago that there would not be any negroes left in Georgia.” He reported there were “no negroes” in 12 Georgia counties now, and “there may be more counties without negroes.”

Then he added: “If I am living, I’ll be glad about that.”

In the very next sentence he assured my aunt of how much he would enjoy attending a surprise birthday party, to which she had apparently invited him, “for the old preacher.”

He then joked a bit with his cousin and talked about other family members before returning to the subject that clearly had him in its grasp.

“The integration worries me so I listen to the radio and television very little, and decided not to read the papers,” he wrote.

“That is hard for me to do, for I can read better than I can hear.”

He returned to discussing various relatives — including one “that didn’t turn out too well” — and apologizing for any typing errors. Then he concluded the letter:

“If I never see you again, please remember I am expecting to meet you on the other side. God bless and keep you. Love, Alex.”

Soon after reading this letter I came upon a yellowed clipping from *The Atlanta Journal*. It was the obituary for Henry Alexander Nuckolls, who had died at age 87. The date of his death was two days after pecking out the letter to his beloved cousin.

The former schoolteacher was memorialized at the First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., and buried at the massive Westview Cemetery in Atlanta.

His thoughts and comments on race were surely not an outlier opinion within the broader family. He just put his thoughts into writing. I heard others speak them to one another while eating homemade ice cream on a front porch.

It would be easy to excuse such perspectives on race as being typical of the times. But these people had access to better ways of thinking and loving — including the Gospels in which Jesus so clearly revealed, in word and deed, the value of every person.

We should not let anyone off the hook for demeaning or mistreating other human beings. And we must never excuse ourselves from acknowledging our own white privilege and seeking to rectify that which continually gives us an advantage.

Like author Robert P. Jones, whose story parallels mine and others willing to face the facts, I am committed to not only prune back the inherited, invasive and strangling evils of racial injustice for a season, but also to “kill it, root to stem.” **NFJ**

We should not let anyone off the hook for demeaning or mistreating other human beings.

White supremacy and theology

By John R. Franke

In my last column, I wrote about the importance of recasting theology so that it might be more faithfully anti-racist. A key idea is the decentering of the dominant forms of theology to make space for the voices and perspectives of all people.

Another challenge is the disentangling of theology from the assumptions and intuitions of white supremacy. In his recent book *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (widely referenced on page 10 of this journal), Robert Jones, CEO and founder of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), lays bare the deep and longstanding connections between the two.

For many people, this will come as new information, finally exposed by a trained historian and sociologist. However, the effects of white supremacy have long been the subject of Black theology.

The late African-American theologian James Cone began writing on the significance of the Black community for theology in the late 1960s. He became the most prominent figure in the articulation of Black Theology and two of his books, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), stand at the headwaters of the movement in the North American context.

Cone's book, *God of the Oppressed* (1975), offers a detailed account of the challenge of doing theology from the perspective of the Black experience in the midst of a Christian tradition formed by, and committed to, the dominant power structures of white supremacy and cultural privilege.

Cone laments that white church leaders "have convinced themselves that only the white experience provides the appropriate context for questions and answers concerning things divine. They do not recognize

the narrowness of their experience and the particularity of their theological expressions. They like to think of themselves as *universal* people."

In so doing they fail to understand that other people, with different experiences, have thought about Christian faith and have something significant to say.

Throughout *God of the Oppressed*, Cone provides a *tour de force* of the devastating consequences of concluding that the white experience is the only normative perspective for theology. The result is injustice and indifference to the humiliation and suffering of others.

It is nothing less than a form of oppressive idolatry by which a particular group is empowered by the idols they have constructed, while others are painfully disenfranchised.

He points out that the dominant theologies in North America were so committed to the presumptions of the Enlightenment that they failed to question its consequences, including notions of cultural superiority that led to colonization and slavery.

Cone asserts that while it is regularly claimed that the European Enlightenment represents a revolution in the thinking and consciousness of Western man, it is crucial to remember that not all people are Western — or male — and that not all Western people experienced the Enlightenment in the same way.

He observes that it has not been the liberating force that it has so often been portrayed to be: "For black and red peoples in North America, the spirit of Enlightenment was socially and politically demonic,

becoming the pseudo-intellectual basis for their enslavement or extermination."

Nevertheless, white American theologians from across the ideological spectrum from conservative to liberal interpreted the gospel and the Christian faith from the perspective of the dominant white culture and seldom sought to transcend the social and political interests of this group for the sake of the gospel.

As Cone remarks, "White theologians, because of their identity with the dominant power structure, are largely boxed within their own cultural identity."

In other words, it's not that white theologians simply *intended* to serve the interests of their own particular constituency; this means that white theologians interpreted the gospel in terms of their own outlooks and interests because they have too readily assumed that *their* cultural assumptions and interpretations of Christian faith provided *the* cultural assumptions and interpretations of Christian faith.

In this procedure the gospel is not only domesticated by the conventions and perspectives of assumed white supremacy, but it is unwittingly and perversely turned into an instrument of oppression of other social, ethnic and cultural people groups who do not participate in the social, political and ideological "givens" of the dominant culture.

A recent review of *White Too Long* in the *New York Times* concludes that the book "seems to present a stark choice: Hold onto white Christianity or hold onto Jesus. It cannot be both."

Black theology has been making this point forcefully for more than 50 years. Are we finally ready to listen? [NFJ](#)

—John R. Franke is theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis.



“Franke’s reframing of Christian ‘unity’ as ‘solidarity’ is both timely and urgent.”

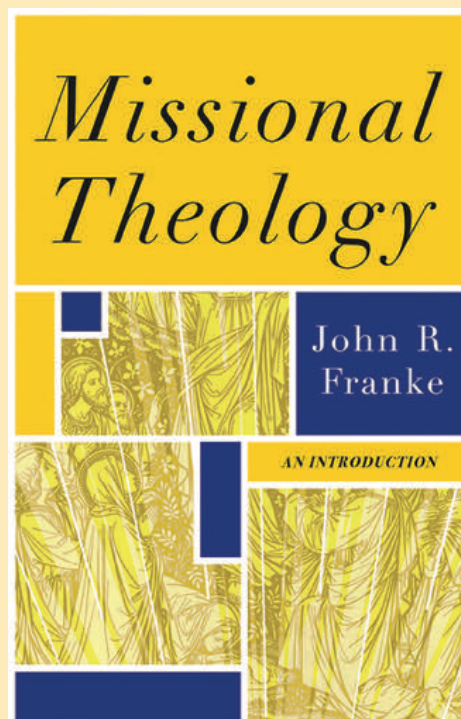
MEGAN K. DEFRANZA

Boston University School of Theology

“Theology as traditionally done – by the topics – has been undergoing such changes, shifts and significant alterations that the topics are no longer what they were. We need a theology where the eschatological design of God reshapes Christian theology into its own image. This is it.”

SCOT MCKNIGHT

Northern Seminary



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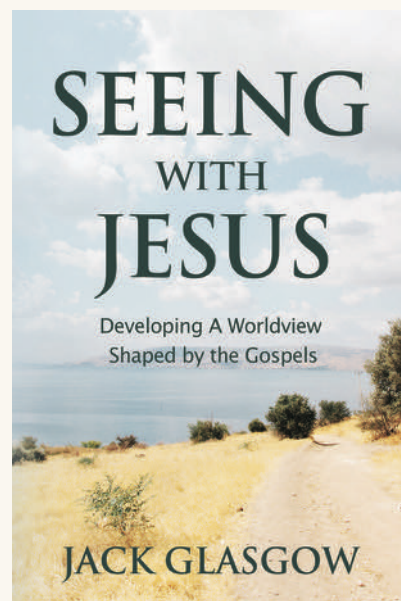
“Christians, congregations and the larger Christian community have the capacity to center their thoughts and actions around the thoughts and actions of Jesus. A gospel-informed, Jesus-centered faith is both imminently possible and urgently needed.”

—Author Jack Glasgow, Pastor,
Zebulon (N.C.) Baptist Church



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—Jackie Baugh Moore, Vice President,
Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation



This book (available at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore) is made possible through a Baugh Foundation gift to support the continuing development of the Jesus Worldview Initiative.

The Gathering

of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina



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Here's a peek into our current magazine. . .

From the beginning of our introduction to Rev. Richard Joyner, founding director of The Conetoe Family Life Center and pastor of Conetoe Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, we have been interested and invested in the work he has begun there. What started as a friendship has grown to a partnership and a collaboration in ministry that continues to unfold and inspire us in ways we could not have dreamed possible eight years ago when we first met.

Conetoe is a tiny town in Edgecombe County in northeastern North Carolina—one of the most economically challenged areas of the state. It's classified by the government as a "food desert," which is a geographic area at least 10 miles from fresh food access and most commonly found in Black and Brown communities and low-income areas.

The Conetoe Family Life Center began as an agricultural project with a two-acre community garden. Growing fresh vegetables so that the people in this community could have better access to healthier, fresher food was one of the main

goals of the Center. Today, students and the community come together to grow and distribute about 50,000 pounds of fresh produce from that garden each year.

Soon beekeeping and honey production came along; summer enrichment programs for youth in the community came along; after school help for children; literacy enrichment programs—all sorts of things targeted to the goals of healthier and more productive lifestyles for those who live in persistent, generational poverty.

The church was doing some things, the schools were doing some things, but Rev. Joyner always felt that there was more that could be done. . . [Read More at cbfnc.org.]

EMBRACING NEIGHBORS

By Meeting One of Their

MOST BASIC NEEDS

by Anne Anderson | CBF Field Personnel

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Called from Africa to America to Plant and Grow a Church

Through the Diversity Immigrant Visa Lottery Program, my wife Annie, our three children and I moved to the United States in late 2009 from Sierra Leone in West Africa. We were sponsored by Tom and LeDayne Polaski and located in Charlotte.

It is my dream to use my skills to start a church. I also wanted to continue to promote social justice and compassion in today's world by either teaching at a high school or college level, or by providing skills to young leaders.

Prior to our immigration to the United States, I was

the senior pastor of Victory Baptist Church in Sierra Leone, president of All Africa Baptist Youth Fellowship, and vice president of the Baptist World Alliance Youth Department. My wife was a middle school teacher and president of Baptist Pastors Wives in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

A combination of gifting, desire and affirmation all informed my call to plant a church in the United States. When my family was leaving Sierra Leone, two proclamations were made in the farewell service. . . [Read More at cbfnc.org.]

by Brockton Sam
Senior Pastor, Together in
Civil International Ministries
(A CBFNC church staff)



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In memory of Robert

BY LARRY HOVIS

AI was growing up in the same town as my widowed grandmother who lived with her two sisters, these three women exerted a profound influence on my father, my sister and me. To earn a living, my grandmother ran a boarding house.

She provided several men with a place to live and two meals a day. Although the popularity of boarding houses was beginning to wane, I still remember several of her boarders and the primary place where everyone came together: the dinner table.

Much of my family's Sunday routine centered around food. We would have a big breakfast cooked by my mother, then dress for Sunday School and worship. Next came dinner at Grandma's house.

It's a good thing we had a big breakfast since Sunday dinner required a long wait. While the women finished preparing the meal, the men watched whatever sport was in season. When dinner was served, however, it was always worth the wait.

The big, cherrywood table was loaded down with at least two meats — chicken, beef, turkey or pork; too many vegetables to count; biscuits or rolls; various relishes and pickles; potatoes or rice; enough gravy to cover everything; and at least two kinds of desserts.

Those seated around the table were as diverse as the fare. Joining my grandmother and great aunts, along with my mother, father, sister and me, were usually several boarders and other relatives and friends.

The guest list changed Sunday to Sunday, but the food was always fantastic. Even more important was the fellowship that accompanied the whole experience. However, I would be less than honest to imply that my memories of meals at Grandma's were all positive.

My sister and I sometimes spent Saturdays at Grandma's house where Aunt Belle was in charge of the yard. She loved working the soil and planting flowers. An old, Black man named Robert helped with yard work for many years.

Since he started early in the morning and stayed until late afternoon, he was there at lunchtime. Everyone would go to the dining room except Robert. His meal would be served in the breakfast room or on the back stoop. Nancy, my sister, and I didn't understand this.

When we would ask why Robert didn't eat with us, we were told, "Robert would be more comfortable eating by himself." We didn't buy their explanation, and Robert being left out of the table of fellowship didn't seem right. At an early age, Nancy and I saw injustice firsthand.

Lately I have been thinking more about my grandmother's table. On one hand, it brings back good memories of family and friends, comfort and nurture. On the other hand, it reminds me of the inequality and injustice that characterized my upbringing and gave me significant advantages over others.

My family wasn't considered "privileged." My grandfather died when my father was only six, and life was difficult for widows. Any safety nets had huge holes. My grandmother and her sisters established a non-traditional household to support themselves.

But my family did have advantages others simply did not. My father received an education on the G.I. Bill and, with my mother, started a business and bought a home with government loans. Those advantages weren't available to Robert's children.



My family worked very hard, but no harder than Robert's family. It was as if we were both running a 100-meter race but Robert's family had to start 50 meters behind us.

Reluctantly, I've concluded that although I didn't come from a wealthy family and my parents taught me to respect all people as being equal in God's eyes, my whole life has been advantaged by a system of white supremacy. And the white church — from the slave trade to the Civil War to the lynching era to unjust economic and social structures today — has helped perpetuate that ungodly system.

The first verse of "Amazing Grace" says, "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." That's the way I feel about race.

I was blind to a system that for hundreds of years stacked the deck against people of color in order to provide advantages to white people like me. And rather than fighting against that injustice, the white church has supported it.

It's past time for white Christians to repent of our sin and join Black Christians and all people of good will who are striving for justice and equity to dismantle white supremacy. That task is core to our mission of bringing about God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

As I engage in that work, I do so in the name of Jesus and in memory of Robert. Both deserve my best effort. **NFJ**

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



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

God works through honest conversations

BY PATRICK DEVANE

Before COVID-19 became a reality, we already were inundated with a daily barrage of opinions and outrage. After the outbreak and ensuing shutdown, this intensified. It is challenging to discern which conversations deserve our attention.

We can too easily wear out our words and witness on moments and matters that do not have eternal relevance or kingdom importance. It takes constant prayer and intentional discernment in order to match the right words to the right moment.

In the wake of the horrific murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, I knew this was a moment for response. Silence and inaction would be a shameful mistake in this moment. Yet I still struggled with how to respond.

I struggled as a parent to know what to say to my two children about such hate and violence. I struggled as a pastor, knowing that anything I said to my congregation about these murders would result in backlash.

Perhaps most of all, I struggled because when prompted by the Holy Spirit to speak previously, I had shamefully stayed silent. I grieved those moments of fear and knew I had to say and do something, but I did not know where to start.

My constant prayer became: “God, show me where to start. Show me what to say.”

One morning after praying this prayer again, I opened Facebook and saw a post from an African-American pastor named Dallas. He said, “I desire to have authen-

tic, genuine, spiritual conversations with WHITE people on what it means to be BLACK in America. I also want to listen.”

I knew this was the first step. Among his almost 5,000 Facebook friends, I was the only white person to reply.

We began a conversation spanning multiple phone calls trying to get to know each other better. Our only shared experience was a two-week doctoral seminar seven years earlier. We had not talked or communicated since, and honestly neither of us remembers communicating even in the seminar.

Through the conversations we came to see the striking differences in our lived experiences. Yet, we were united in the desire to begin a conversation with each other to see what God could do to bring healing and hope to our churches and the world.

Our private phone calls led to public conversations on social media. We titled those talks, “Deliver Us From Evil: Race, Religion, and the Long Road Ahead.”

My moderate Baptist congregation outside Annapolis and his Church of God in Christ congregation in Atlanta came together to watch and participate. Over the course of three weeks, we shared our stories, our struggles, our failures, and our hopes for how we could move forward.

We did not claim to be experts or have the perfect answer to difficult issues. Through the Holy Spirit’s prompting, we simply started talking. We talked through how childhood shaped our worldviews, our perspective of police, the “n” word, how we teach and talk to our children, and how the church can work to bring change to the world.

Within the first conversation it was clear that God was working among us. One of the most meaningful experiences was reading the comments after the conversations. You know that God is working when reading a Facebook comment section can be an edifying experience.

Members of our two congregations, total strangers minutes before this conversation started, shared openly their fears and brokenness. People cheered each other on, lifted each other up to Jesus, and began the work of connecting instead of dividing.

After three weeks of intense conversation, we knew that we needed to move beyond talking. As we were ending our conversations, we framed this process by paraphrasing Winston Churchill: “This isn’t the beginning of the end. This is only the end of the beginning.”

Dallas and I are organizing a pulpit swap, and our two congregations are planning two mission trips next summer as an opportunity to serve together in both Annapolis and Atlanta. We ended our conversations with a joint sermon where Dallas and I shared our reflections and learning from the previous few weeks in light of Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan.

A few weeks of conversations won’t solve centuries of systemic and personal injustice. But we have to start somewhere, and staying silent when God moves you to speak is no longer an option.

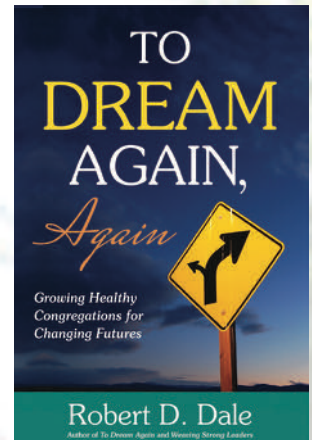
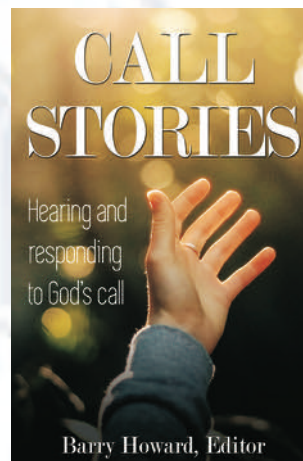
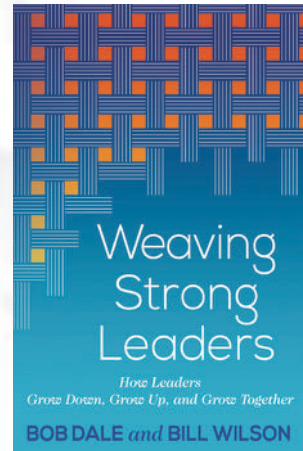
The conversations are available to view at youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIQEKMpZVkBcshoRLtZBvtgAjsf5JiOau. [NFJ](#)

—Patrick DeVane is the pastor at College Parkway Baptist Church in Arnold, Md.



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A life lesson from my seventh-grade Sunday School class

By Brett Younger

Mr. Akers must have been 80 when he taught our class, but he seemed older. His hair was winter white, and his face had lines like a subway map. My father called him “spry” — a word seldom used for young people.

Seventh-grade Sunday School was boring. Mr. Akers’ plan each week was to read a long passage from the King James Version, then lecture on the three life lessons that the biblical authors had put there for 12-year-old boys.

Our plan each Sunday was to listen for an opportunity to get him off the subject. Boxing worked better than anything else. Mr. Akers was short and wiry — a middle-weight. He understood that junior high boys needed the lessons he learned in the boxing ring — preparation, strategy, mental toughness — almost as much as we needed the three implications of King Saul consulting the Witch of Endor.

One question always did the trick: “Mr. Akers, do you think Gene Tunney would’ve beaten Jack Dempsey if the referee had counted straight to 10?”

Mr. Akers was off and running, reliving the Battle of the Long Count — Soldier Field, Chicago, Sept. 22, 1927; 100,000 spectators, including Al Capone: “Who wants to play Tunney?”

Dave always got to play Tunney because he was the biggest. Mr. Akers told Dave to circle him, explaining that Tunney kept his distance for six rounds. Then in the seventh, Dempsey pushed Tunney against the ropes. Mr. Akers trapped Dave in the corner. Two rights and two lefts to Tunney’s chin sent him to the canvas, and Dave to the floor in slow motion. The referee ordered Dempsey to a neutral corner, but Dempsey



did not go, so Tunney and Dave got six extra seconds to recuperate. He stood up at nine and won the fight. Dave raised his arms in triumph. I don’t remember many of Mr. Akers’ life lessons, but to this day I am frustrated that Jack Dempsey didn’t go to the corner.

I remember one other life lesson. This one was not about boxing, but about the church. One Sunday Mr. Akers brought Duane, an African American, to our class. He was a grandson of one of Mr. Akers’ friends, who was staying with him for a couple of days. As far as we knew, no black person had ever been in Saltillo Baptist Church, Saltillo, Miss. The seventh-grade boys were stunned. Mr. Akers got through all of the life lessons without interruption.

Duane and Mr. Akers did not stay for worship. The rest of us did not say anything until, on the way to the sanctuary, Dave announced that he did not want those people in his church, using more brutal language than “those people.”

The church did not need a business meeting to discuss Duane’s visit. If we had voted, it would not have been close. The church leadership made it clear to Mr. Akers that Duane was not welcome, and that if Mr. Akers insisted then he was not welcome either.

Like most people my age, I have some stories about seeing racism at work. But mostly I have stories about failing to

notice prejudice. I attended a Christian university with classes in social justice, but the student body was 95 percent white. I went to a church that held seminars on the evil of racism, but that had only two black members — students from Nigeria.

I heard sermons on racial justice at my almost all-white seminary, but with the exception of one visiting professor, every teacher I had was white. The four churches Carol and I served after seminary were made up primarily of white people who were sure they were not prejudiced.

Sometimes privileged people think that the point of diversity is to share the abundance we have been given. The truth we see in Jesus — a homeless, unschooled Middle Eastern Jew is that we need diversity because we are impoverished without one another. We need those with different experiences to push us to be better, teach us to love, and force us to think.

In the unlikely event that Duane reads this column, here is what I want to say: “I’m sorry that I didn’t act like a Christian when I met you. Our congregation failed miserably at being a church. You did not miss much by skipping worship. Compared to most African-American worship our music was sad, our preaching dull, and our prayers shallow. Privilege gets in the way of worshiping honestly. My church and my life would have been better if our seventh-grade class had learned the right lesson.” **NFJ**

—*Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York, and the author of The Lighter Side: Serving Up Life Lessons with a Smile and Funny When You Think about It: Serious Reflections on Faith.*



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.



Youth teaching plans by **Jeremy Colliver**, minister to families with youth at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga.

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 1, 2020

Matthew 23:1-12

The Right Stance

Have you ever received a package labeled “Handle With Care”? Usually that means the contents are fragile and could be broken if the box was thrown around in the back of a truck or put at the bottom of a heavy stack.

Other packages might need careful handling because they contain dangerous materials. A case of muriatic acid used by masons to clean bricks could cause a messy and hazardous situation if dropped on the floor at the builders’ supply.

Our scripture for the day is more like a case of TNT. Careless mishandling of the text has led to explosive results through history, and has no doubt contributed to the deaths of many, many Jews.

What’s so dangerous about this text?

Consider the context

Matthew 23 is unlike most of Jesus’ teachings. The author has fashioned it from a variety of materials that appear in different contexts in the other synoptic gospels (Mark 12:37-40; Luke 11:46-52, 20:43-47).

The discourse stands as a sharp rebuke to certain scribes and Pharisees, including a series of scathing

*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.
(Matt. 23:12)*

“woe” oracles (vv. 13-36) that could lead a casual reader to think that Jews in general were crooked and worthy of condemnation.

That kind of reading has contributed to spells of violent anti-Semitism in which people claiming the name of Christ have perpetrated heartless atrocities against Jews. Centuries of persecution under the Church-sponsored Inquisition during the Late Medieval period come to mind, as does the Nazi-led Holocaust during World War II. While those are the most alarming pogroms, a current of anti-Semitism has continued throughout the modern age. Jews have often been the targets of bigotry in America. A long-running conspiracy theory claims that rich Jews have a secret plan for world domination.

It is appalling that words attributed to Jesus have been used to fan the flames of prejudice and persecution against Jewish people.

Jesus, we must remember, was a Jew. In this text, to the degree it accurately reflects his words, Jesus was critiquing a subset of his own people, just as the Hebrew prophets often spoke against faithless Israelites. Similarly, Christian pastors may feel moved to speak prophetically concerning the church’s complicity in social evils.

Interpretation is important. Think about those who claim biblical justification for the slavery of Africans based on a wildly misguided interpretation

of Noah’s curse on Ham’s son in Gen. 9:20-27. Domestic terrorists parading as patriots once called themselves “the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.” We rightly condemn the twisting of scripture to promote white supremacy and racist attitudes, but that does not imply a condemnation of all Christians.

Neither should Jesus’ chastisement of some outspoken critics be taken as a blanket denunciation of all scribes and Pharisees, much less all Jews.

As we keep this in mind, we should also remember that the gospel of Matthew was probably written at least 40 years after Jesus’ time on earth, when synagogues had become more prominent. Addressing a community of Christians who were facing opposition from Jewish leaders, the gospel writer intentionally constructed Jesus’ speech to encourage trust in Christ rather than competing views from the synagogue.

One can disagree with rabbinical teachings without thinking less of the Jewish people, even as we can disagree with other faith groups and still respect them as persons.

Not that way . . . (vv. 1-7)

Matthew has placed the teachings in the context of Jesus’ last week on earth as he spent time teaching at or near the temple. Chapter 23 begins an extended discourse following a series of testy conversations with Jewish scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees.

Jesus spoke “to the crowds and to his disciples” (v. 1) as he turned from disputations with the authorities to a discourse about them.

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“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat,” Jesus said (v. 2), an indication that they were responsible for interpreting the commandments and other laws associated with Moses.

By Jesus’ day, rabbinic Judaism had added considerably to teachings in the Hebrew Bible, seeking to “build a hedge about the law” by creating hundreds of minor rules designed to prevent people from breaking the larger ones. 📌

The scribes were specialists in remembering and interpreting both the written and the oral law. The Pharisees focused on keeping every nuance of the law. Many were wealthy laymen who sought to separate themselves from ordinary Jews by publicly keeping even the finest points of the law — and some apparently lorded it over those who did not.

“Moses’ seat” may describe a ceremonial chair to be occupied by teachers in the synagogue. We recall that when Jesus taught for the first time in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, he sat down to teach (Luke 4:20).

Wooden chairs would not have survived the centuries, but the synagogue at Chorazin, from the 3rd-4th century CE included a low seat made of volcanic basalt that may have represented “Moses’ seat.” 📌

Jesus recognized that knowing and interpreting the law was important. In other contexts, he took issue with certain teachings of the rabbis, but here Jesus was concerned with their actions: “do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach” (v. 3).

Jesus charged the scribes and Pharisees on two fronts. First, they devised heavy burdens to be borne by others, but did nothing to help them (v. 4).

Many of the laws were designed to preserve ritual purity but made it impossible for ordinary people to

do everyday jobs without becoming impure. Only people wealthy enough to pay others to do their dirty work could afford to be fully observant.

Jesus’ second charge was one of misplaced motivation: “they do all their deeds to be seen by others” (v. 5a). As evidence, Jesus pointed to their ceremonial garb: “they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long” (v. 5b).

Phylacteries were leather boxes containing small scrolls that strictly observant Jewish men tied to their forehead and upper arm with long leather bands — an over-the-top effort to obey the command attributed to Moses that the Israelites should keep the law, teach it to their children, and “bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:8-9). Similarly, Deut. 22:12 contains an instruction to wear tassels on the four corners of one’s cloak. There is no apparent rationale for that practice other than distinctive dress as a sign of obedience. 📌

To better display their piety, Jesus said, the scribes and Pharisees also loved to sit in places of honor, be greeted with respect, and have people call them “rabbi” (vv. 6-7).

“Rabbi” literally means “my great one,” but it came to be used as an honorific for teachers, and for some it was music to their ears. We have all probably known people with doctoral degrees of various sorts who act as if they have traded in their given first name for “Doctor,” and dislike being addressed by anything else.

Neither education nor piety are grounds for excessive pride.

But this way . . . (vv. 8-12)

With v. 8 Jesus turned to his disciples and instructed them to take a different approach. They were not to seek titles,

for “you have one teacher, and you are all students.” The word “disciple” (*mathētēs*) means “learner.” No one knows even a small part of all there is to know. Whether it relates to science or relationships or scripture, we are all learners.

Likewise, Jesus said, the disciples should avoid the term “Father” as a sign of respect for teachers, acknowledging that the title should be reserved for the “one Father — the one in heaven” (v. 9). Verse 10 repeats the thought of v. 8, using a different word for teacher, one that could also mean “master.” 📌

Jesus wanted his followers to learn from the scribes and Pharisees how not to act, not pridefully or pretentiously, but with humility and service: “The greatest among you will be your servant,” Jesus said, promising that “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (vv. 11-12). The reversal of fortunes was not promised for this life, but for the next (compare Matt. 18:4).

We should remind ourselves that Jesus was talking both to and about his own people: both he and his early followers were Jews. We must be careful not to let Jesus’ insider language prompt us to think he was criticizing Judaism in general.

Rather than leading us down the path of anti-Semitism, this severe text should prompt our own solemn introspection. How much of our faith is practiced out of guilt rather than love, or for the sake of our reputation rather than an innate desire to do right?

Within our churches, do we seek to serve, or to control? In our living, do we truly act to please God, or to impress others?

Jesus considered such questions to be serious business. If we truly want to follow Jesus, so should we. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 8, 2020

Matthew 25:1-13

The Right Preparation

Do you like waiting? Whether it's sitting in a doctor's aptly named "waiting room" or standing behind an overloaded grocery cart at the only open checkout lane, we generally have little patience for waiting.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new meaning to the pain of waiting. How long before I can eat out without fear, socialize with my friends, sing in a choir, or go on a normal vacation? When can I go back to the office and the kids go back to school?

While medical experts counseled patience despite the difficulties and inconvenience, "reopen" advocates pressed for an end to restrictions. Political leaders and ordinary citizens were divided as tensions mounted and we wondered — and still wonder — if the former state of normalcy will ever return.

Waiting is hard, but sometimes we have no other option. While waiting, however, we have choices about what we will do and how we will act. We can make the most of the time in creative ways, or we can devolve into self-pity.

The church people addressed in the gospel of Matthew were also waiting, and increasingly frustrated. Teachings of Jesus such as those in the apocalyp-

Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matt. 25:13)

tic discourse of Matthew 24 gave the distinct impression that Jesus would not only return, but soon.

Many people expected Jesus to return in their own lifetimes, and they were disappointed when decades passed with no sign of the Parousia, no evidence of Jesus arriving with the angels to redeem the righteous and judge the world. Some may have lost faith and turned away because of the delay.

At least 40 years had passed before the gospel of Matthew was written, and they were still waiting. The Apostle Paul had blazed missionary trails and expected Christ's return and passed from the scene, but they were still waiting. Roman armies had sacked and burned the temple in Jerusalem, bringing to mind the apocalyptic predictions of Matthew 24, but there was no angel band heralding the Parousia.

They were still waiting.

Waiting for a wedding (vv. 1-5)

To encourage his readers, the author of Matthew followed his account of Jesus' fiery apocalyptic prediction by putting together several parables designed to counsel both patience and continued faithfulness. 📖

The second parable is unique to Matthew. 📖 It offers an image of the kingdom of heaven from the standpoint of who can expect to enter it fully at Christ's return. The story begins with 10 "bridesmaids" (NRSV). The

Greek word literally means "virgins," though another word meaning "young women" was available. "Virgins" is probably the intended meaning, indicating the ideal that those who know divine forgiveness would remain chaste in their commitment to Christ (compare 2 Cor. 11:2).

The maidens were likely young women associated with the bridegroom's family. They were awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom on the evening of his wedding, which would culminate in a party that would last for days.

Where they were waiting is unclear, but their obvious intention was to escort the bridegroom (and possibly the bride) to the site of the wedding, probably his family's home. Because it was late, the women carried lamps that may have been attached to poles and used as torches so they could lead the wedding procession (v. 1). 📖

Here's the rub: Five of the maidens were "wise," far-sighted enough to bring extra oil in case the bridegroom should run late. The other five were "foolish" in that they did not consider the possibility of delay and therefore brought no extra oil with them (vv. 2-4).

The bridegroom was, in fact, late in arriving (v. 5). No explanation is given, though some fancifully imagine he was tied up with last-minute financial negotiations with the bride's father. 📖 The delay was so long that all of the virgins fell asleep, presumably with their lamps still burning.

Ready or not ... (vv. 6-10)

The bridegroom arrived at last, "in the middle of the night," preceded by a shout that alerted the maidens to his

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arrival (v. 6). All of them trimmed the wicks of their dimming flames and five were able to replenish their supply of oil, pull out more wick, and make their lamps shine brighter. The other five watched sadly as their lamps flickered dimly, on the verge of going out.

The foolish virgins asked the others to share, but were told there wasn't enough to go around, leaving them with the task of finding a midnight merchant who sold olive oil (vv. 7-9).

While searching for oil, the girls who were unprepared missed the parade as the wise maidens joined the procession to the wedding venue, where the door was closed behind them (v. 10).

Questions arise as we read the story. We may wonder about the ethics of those who refused to share their oil or ask why the five foolish virgins could not have joined the procession even if their lamps had gone out. Such questions, however, are beyond the purview of the story, which is about the importance of being prepared.

Too late now (vv. 11-13)

The foolish maidens succeeded in obtaining more oil, but alas, it was too late. They knocked at the door, crying "Lord, lord ('Sir, sir'), open to us," but heard only what must have seemed a callous reply: "Truly I tell you, I do not know you" (vv. 11-12).

The bridegroom's rejection may strike us as unrealistic and harsh. The maidens left outside may have been foolish but were hardly unknown. Again, that's not the point of the parable: because the women were unprepared, they missed their chance.

"Keep awake therefore," Jesus said, "for you know neither the day nor the hour" (v. 13). Keeping awake is to be understood in the sense of being aware and prepared: even the wise virgins could fall asleep, knowing they

would be ready when the bridegroom arrived.

Questions, questions

So, how do we interpret this parable? It is obvious that certain elements are allegorical. The trick is determining how far the allegory goes.

It is clear that the bridegroom is Jesus, and that his unexpected tardiness represents the delay of the Parousia. The maidens are members of the church, the bridegroom's arrival signals the return of Christ, the closed door marks the judgment, and the wedding banquet represents life in the new age.

But should we extend the allegory further? Do the maidens' lamps, and by extension their provision of oil, also have allegorical significance? Some interpreters think the oil lamps represent good deeds, recalling Jesus' instruction to "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Others imagine that the extra oil represents faith that endures, or love for Christ that lasts and does not grow cold.

Such interpretations may be appealing but are likely to be overreaching. We do not earn our way into heaven by works, and good deeds cannot be purchased, like oil, from a merchant.

The point is that the women were not ready for the bridegroom's arrival. Church members who are wise should take note and live faithfully, ready to meet Christ whether at the Parousia or at their own death.

For some theologians, eschatology is all about the future, looking to a day when Christ literally returns to earth, judges sinners and saints, and inaugurates the next age. Believers would certainly want to be ready for that event.

Looking at the story from this position, some see the wise and foolish as true believers who are spiritually prepared, as opposed to pseudo-Christians who may go through the motions or adopt church culture but still live for themselves rather than Christ. Others might see it as a warning to hold tightly to one's faith rather than giving up and falling away: to keep one's "spiritual oil" replenished and ready to meet Jesus.

Others prefer to think of eschatology more in the present than in the future. A school of thought known as "realized eschatology" holds that Christ inaugurated the kingdom of God while on earth, and that New Testament references to Jesus' coming can be understood in terms of what he has already done. In this view, Christians are not so much challenged to wait patiently and faithfully for Christ's return, but to live into the reality of a kingdom that is always coming and breaking into our world. We are called to live in such a way that the presence of Christ is realized in the way we live and love and show grace to others, representing Christ in the world.

Either view calls for present readiness. We are surrounded by people who face traumas or trials and are in need of hope for the future. Christ's love is present when we persevere in hope that puts on its boots and does the work. Jesus comes when we work for justice to overcome systemic evils. The kingdom breaks in when we show compassion to those who need it most.

Whatever our eschatological bent, the message of the parable is clear: we are called to live with expectant hope. As we see the world through Jesus' eyes, we can believe that God is still at work in our world, coming into it in ways that bring redemption, grace, and the promise of completion. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 15, 2020

Matthew 25:14-30

The Right Investment

Have you ever entrusted a significant portion of your life savings to a money manager, a professional who supposedly knows best how to invest money for maximum return, but gets paid whether you gain or lose?

It's a risky business, and not for everyone. Sometimes the investments pay off handsomely, and sometimes money goes down the drain.

Our text for the day concerns a man who turned entrusted considerable wealth to three of his servants and expected positive returns. It is the third in a series of four stories that Jesus told regarding the importance of living faithfully and being ready to meet Jesus when judgment time comes. 📌

The story is set in the last days of Jesus' earthly life, when everything Jesus talked about was freighted with eternity and the question of how believers should live.

A serious investment (vv. 14-18)

Can you imagine the story Jesus told? 📌 Before leaving on an extended journey, a prosperous man distributed his wealth among three slaves, "each according to his ability," in a ratio of five to two to one (vv. 14-15).

His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." (Matt. 25:21)

We know what it is like to go on vacation and arrange for someone else to look after our pets or bring in the mail, but would we ever think of putting them in charge of our bank accounts or our retirement funds?

The text says the departing man entrusted five talents to one servant, two talents to the second, and one to the third.

When we hear the word "talent," we think of an innate ability to do something well. Our English word comes straight from the Greek, and it is largely due to the popular understanding of this story that we came to define it as giftedness or ability.

The Greek word *talenton*, however, was a measure of weight used in business, with one talent being about 75 pounds. It came to be used as a monetary measure, probably in silver coins, equivalent to 6,000 denarii. That is probably what is intended here. When v. 18 says the third servant "hid his master's money," the word is *argurion*, which means "silver."

One denarius represented the daily wage for a day laborer, so one talent of silver would be equivalent to about 20 years of wages. At today's minimum wage, that would be nearly half a million dollars.

The precise amount is of little concern: the three men were given varying but extravagant amounts of

money and expected to use it wisely.

And what did they do?

The man with five talents "went off at once and traded with them" (v. 16). The word translated as "traded" literally means "worked." Whether he bought and sold goods, invested in real estate, or started a business, we don't know — but he put his money to work. By the time the master returned, he had managed to double what had been entrusted to him.

"In the same way," Jesus added, "the one who had the two talents made two more talents" (v. 17).

The third man did not believe that fortune favors the brave. Fearing both the master and the possibility of loss, he "went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money" (v. 18).

A serious judgment (vv. 19-30)

The story is not over, of course. "After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them" (v. 19).


The master, obviously, was pleased with the two servants who had taken the risk of putting their talents to work. To the one who began with five talents and made five more, the master said "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 21).

The servant who had doubled his two talents got the same congratulatory response (v. 23).

But now comes the one-talent man, trying to explain himself before returning the talent he'd buried. "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping


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where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours” (vv. 24-25). 

The master rejected his characterization as a hard man, though he did have high expectations. He accused the servant of being wicked and lazy, knowing that the master expected a return and yet failing to seek it. He could have at least earned some interest on the money, but failed even that (vv. 26-27).

So, Jesus said, the master ordered that his one talent be given to the one who had 10, “for to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (vv. 28-29).


As if that were not enough, the third servant was to be thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 30). 

That’s harsh treatment for a man who was cautious, conservative, careful. We generally honor those qualities.

But Jesus didn’t call him cautious and careful, but wicked and lazy. He refused to do what his master clearly wanted. The unhappy judgment he received is not the result of his penchant for doing bad things, but his refusal to do good things.

A serious challenge

This is a hard parable to hear, because most of us would probably identify more with the third servant than the first two. How should we understand it?

The traditional interpretation sees allegorical elements: Jesus as the master, the servants as church members, and the granting of funds as God-given gifts and abilities. The master’s extended absence points to the delay of the Parousia, and the servants’ profitable or unprofitable use of their giftedness determines their outcome at the judgment. 

If that is what Jesus intended, then the clear message is that if we want to fully participate in the kingdom, we had better get busy, using the talents God has given us to further kingdom work.

This view acknowledges that we are not all gifted in the same way, or in the same amount, but we are all gifted. No matter what the amount or type of gift, there is the same expectation: God wants us to demonstrate the same kind of courage in using our gifts as God showed in giving them.

Another way to look at the parable is to consider God’s trademark extravagance.

Stories of God’s relationship to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Gideon, David, and others point to extravagant blessings God promised to those who did what was expected.

The extravagance of God can be seen in parables such as the sower and the seed, where the farmer flung seed into every corner of his land. God is not cheap in showing grace, but his grace is not cheap, either.

Only an incredibly extravagant kind of grace would lead God to risk everything by walking down the road to Jerusalem knowing good and well that a bloody cross stood at the end of it.

In that sense, the parable is not so much about good and bad as it is about trust. It is about the trust that Jesus puts in servants such as us to do his work. It is about the kind of trust we are expected to have in Christ by risking and using the gifts he has given us.

Compared with God’s eternal extravagance toward us, our cautious response may look quite pitiful, and the story challenges us to more courageous living.

Another way of looking at the story recognizes that the focus is not really on the first two men, who serve mainly as a foil for the third, who gets most of the attention — and who may seem most


like us.

What was the third man’s problem? It was fear. He saw the master as a monster who would hurt him if he lost the money, so he took no risks and kept it safe. The master, however, was not so harsh as he expected.

We don’t know how the master would have responded if the first two men had risked big and lost the money. For all we know, he may still have congratulated them for taking a risk and doing the best they could.

Paralyzed by fear, the third man did nothing.

From any of these angles, the message seems to be that God wants us to dream big and stretch far and open our arms wide to a world in dire need of grace and love.

God wants us to get off of our chairs and stop hiding behind the punch bowl, to get out on the floor and dance. 

Jesus calls us to be more footloose with our faith, more generous with our giving, more profligate with our forgiveness, more liberal with our love.

“Cautious Christianity” is an oxymoron. The same Jesus who showed us the limitless love and extravagance of God is the one who serves as our model for living, and for dying.

For some people, getting reckless with their faith means leaving everything behind and going to minister to homeless people in an urban neighborhood. For others, it may be teaching a Sunday school lesson, or risking a tithe, or spending one morning every week in a soup kitchen.

We are all at different places in our lives. Jesus knows and affirms in this parable that we do not all have the same gifts or abilities or opportunities.

But we all have the same calling. We are called to a risking faith, to an extravagant mercy, to an exuberant love that accepts God’s joyous gift, and then multiplies it by giving it away. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 22, 2020

Psalm 100

Good God!

As we approach this Thanksgiving season, many will rejoice, while others find it hard to feel very thankful. This has been a long, difficult, and very different year for a variety of reasons, many of which remain unresolved.

The COVID-19 pandemic is still a serious concern. Economic recovery has a long way to go. Working for social justice and racial equality is an ongoing battle. The national debt grows. Political polarization persists. Some days, it seems that chaos reigns.

Our families may not be able to gather for Thanksgiving.

Can we still be thankful?

Making the effort to turn from trouble to thanksgiving could be a worthwhile exercise, and Psalm 100 is a perfect text for that. The poem makes deep and meaningful claims about who God is, who humans are, and how the two should relate. The song calls us to be thankful that God is, that God has created us, and that God has called us into relationship.

Whether we have weathered the year relatively unscathed, or whether we have been scarred by illness, unemployment, or stressful events, Psalm 100 can speak to us. It was written for people on both ends of

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. (Ps. 100:1)

the spectrum and in between. It was written for every person who believes, and even for those who do not believe. It is a joyful invitation for all people on earth to celebrate God, and to celebrate God's goodness.

The psalm is only five verses long, and it falls naturally into two parts, each containing a call to praise followed by a rationale for worship. The first three verses call us to celebrate the belief that the LORD is God. The last two verses call us to celebrate that the LORD is good. If we can remember no more than that, we understand the main point of the psalm.

Celebrate: the LORD is God! (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 100 begins with an imperative invitation that might have been spoken by a worship leader in the temple courts: "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth!" (v. 1). No word meaning "joyful" is in the text, but it is often inserted to reflect the worshipful context. The Hebrew literally reads: "Shout to Yahweh, all the earth!"

In the context of praise, one would expect such shouts to be joyful. The phrase "all the earth" implies that the call to worship Yahweh is universal.

What type of joyful noise might the poet have had in mind? The psalm as a whole is clearly a hymn of praise, and it appears to be associated with the worshipers' entrance into the temple courts. Thus, as liturgical churches

may play or sing an introit while worship leaders enter the sanctuary (often to the musical shout of an organ), the psalm may have served as a brief call to worship, inviting pilgrims massed outside to come forward into the temple courts.

As a rule, Anglo Baptists in America rarely shout in church, unless it's in an unhappy business meeting. Conversely, many ethnic congregations and churches with Pentecostal leanings anticipate joyful interjections from the congregation. Here as in other areas, culture plays a large role in influencing our style of worship.

Is actual shouting necessary? Does the psalm suggest that churches should seek a hymn-leader like Otis Day from the 1978 movie *Animal House*, singing "Shout! a little bit louder now, Shout! a little bit louder now, Shout! real loud now, Shout! come on now . . ."?

Perhaps not.

But what do we need? When it comes to praising God in church, it's not the volume that counts, but the attitude. Shouting joyfully is just the first of three responses the psalmist calls for: in gathering for worship we are not only to make a joyful noise, but also to "worship the Lord with gladness" and "come into his presence with singing" (v. 2).

"Shout," "worship," and "come" are all imperative verbs. As far as the psalmist was concerned, there was no role for wallflowers at the temple — all were called to worship and to sing.

It would be lovely to know what joyful tunes or harmonies the people of Israel might have sung, but we cannot.

But imagine: if a songwriter were

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to pen something akin to Psalm 100 today, what sort of tune would she use? Take a few moments to think about it. What are some examples of happy, joyous music? Do you have any favorite praise choruses or traditional hymns designed to praise God?

I like the thought of setting Psalm 100 to a joyful, Caribbean beat with kettle drums — something that makes hearers want to join in, and maybe even to move. 📌

Psalm 100 calls us to praise the Lord, and to do so with joy. Now the important question is “Why?” And the first answer is this: because the one we praise is God.

Verse 3 calls worshipers to “know that the LORD is God.” In Hebrew, the word we translate as “know” implies personal, intimate knowledge that comes through experience. That is where worship begins. The psalmist does not challenge us to simply know about God, but to know God. 📌

This is emphasized by the poet’s use of God’s personal name that was revealed to Moses. The name Yahweh may derive from a verb form meaning something such as “the one who is,” or “the one who causes to be.” English translations typically render “Yahweh” as LORD, in all capital letters. 📌

Why do we worship Yahweh? Elementary, the psalmist might say: because Yahweh is God! There really is a God, he insists, and we know God’s name, and we know that Yahweh cares for us in a special way.

There really is a God, to whom we owe our being. “It is he that hath made us,” v. 3 declares, “and we are his” (NRSV). As God’s people, we are like sheep in God’s pasture, a common metaphor in Psalms (23:1, 28:9, 74:1, 77:21, 78:52-53, 80:1, 95:7). This claim tells us something about our basic identity in life. It tells us who we are, from whence we came, and where

we belong. We came from God, who created us, and we belong in God’s fields, where the one who made us also cares for us.

Celebrate: the LORD is good! (vv. 4-5)

Some interpreters see vv. 1-4 as an extended call to praise, with v. 5 furnishing the reason for praise. I prefer to see a two-part structure in which vv. 1-2 serve as an initial call to praise, with a reason for it given in v. 3. This is followed by a second call to praise in v. 4, with a second reason that worship is due in v. 5.

We can envision the worship leader, having opened the service with an initial burst of jubilation, now inviting the people to come forward to the temple’s inner courtyard: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him, and bless his name!” (v. 4). 📌

Here we have three more enthusiastic imperatives: “Enter!” “Give thanks!” “Bless!” The psalmist understood the human need to acknowledge the Creator and to respond with thanksgiving and praise.

Again we ask why we should offer such praise? Because Yahweh is not only God (v. 3), but also good (v. 5): “For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

God’s goodness is shown in a steadfast or faithful love for God’s people. The word translated “steadfast love” (*chesed*) comes from a verbal root meaning to be good or kind. It is commonly translated with words such as “kindness,” “lovingkindness,” or “mercy.” As a divine attribute, it also carries the connotation of loyalty or commitment to covenant promises, leading to its frequent translation as “steadfast love.”

In choosing this term and combining it with “faithfulness,” the psalmist insists that God’s love is not volatile or shallow. It is a deep love, an abiding love, an eternal love. Believing this, those who trust in God need never feel alone: God’s love is dependable and sure.

What are some of the ways we see evidence of God’s creative power and enduring love? Can we recognize it in giant bales of hay that dot the fields, in the smell of the crisp fall air, in the colors of leaves and the songs of birds?

Can we see glimpses of God’s love in the devotion of a spouse, or a child — or parents whose love never stops? Are we fortunate enough to sense it in the support of friends who truly care about our well-being? 📌

Some people may feel more in tune with adversity than with accomplishment. We may have been too often disappointed by those whose love is unsteady and whose promises are empty. We may have borne the brunt of the painful pandemic and its many-tentacled consequences of job losses, social isolation, and the upheaval of schools and workplaces.

For many, the poet’s happy praise may ring hollow. Like Israel in exile, we may wonder how we can sing Yahweh’s praise while in a strange land, yet the poet behind Psalm 137 found the faith and hope to persevere.

Psalm 100, indeed, may speak most clearly to those whose lives are hard, for in dark days the assurance of God’s loyal love is particularly welcome — and that makes it worthy of praise. When life seems fragile and friendships fickle, it is a comfort to be reminded that the Lord we worship is a God who wants to be known.

With the psalmist, we can declare that the Lord we worship is not just truly God, but truly good. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 29, 2020

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Every Good Gift

“Are we there yet?” This classic question, known to all parents who have driven children on a long trip, could also apply in other circumstances.

As would-be followers of Jesus called to grow in Christlikeness as we go through life, are we there yet? Have we become mature believers, firmly grounded in faith and fully committed to lives that reflect Jesus’ call to love and justice?

If we are truthful, most of us would confess that we have not yet become all God wants us to be. Whatever our age, we still have some growing left to do.

The season of Advent marks a time of anticipation and hope as we recall the excitement around Jesus’ birth into our world, and as we consider the prospect of one day entering Jesus’ world on a new level.

We may hold to hope that our lives will become more like Jesus before that day comes. If we find ourselves hopeful but still on the road, we have something in common with members of the church in first-century Corinth.

Our text for the day consists of Paul’s greeting to a church he saw as blessed by God and filled with potential — but not there yet.

God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:9)

A little background

What do we know about Corinth and its people? The city Paul knew was only 100 years old, a Roman metropolis built on the ruins of an ancient Greek city. The population included present and former slaves, wealthy merchants, shrewd traders, government administrators, Roman soldiers and veteran sailors, along with teachers, philosophers, and devotees of various religions. For a variety of reasons, Corinth was an important city.

The Apostle Paul had a long and uneven relationship with the people of Corinth. Along with Timothy and Silas, he first came to the city around 49 or 50 CE, during his second evangelistic expedition. Paul met and was aided by Prisca and Aquila, a Jewish Christian couple who had emigrated from Rome after the emperor Claudius expelled Christians from Italy (Acts 18:2).

Paul may have lodged with Prisca and Aquila, joining them in the leatherwork trade as he remained in Corinth for about 18 months.

After a brief return to Jerusalem, Paul traveled to Antioch before departing on his third missionary effort, during which he stayed in Ephesus for two years. While there, Paul had several contacts with the Corinthian church.

What we call 1 Corinthians was not Paul’s first letter to the church, for in it he speaks of a “previous letter” he had written (1 Cor. 5:9, some schol-

ars think parts of that letter may be retained in 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1).

Individual members of the church contacted Paul (1:11), telling him of problems at Corinth. He also received at least one letter from the church requesting his advice (7:1).

In response, Paul wrote what we now call 1 Corinthians. It appears that the letter was not well received, leading Paul to make what he called a painful visit to the church (2 Cor. 2:1). After returning to Ephesus, he wrote another letter that he described as tearful and difficult (2 Cor. 2:3-9; 7:12), sending it by Titus. Some scholars think this “severe letter” may be partially preserved in 2 Corinthians 10–13, which is sterner in tone than the surrounding chapters.

Later, Titus told Paul the Corinthians had accepted his letter and were reconciled to him (2 Cor. 2:12, 7:5-16). Paul then wrote 2 Corinthians to express his joy and encourage the Corinthians to raise a worthy offering for the poor in Jerusalem.

Later, Paul seems to have made a third visit, probably around 55–56 CE, writing his letter to the Romans while there (Rom. 15:26).

On the road ... (vv. 1-3)

Paul wrote with the knowledge that the church was riddled by factions. Different members preferred the personalities or theological perspectives of different teachers such as Paul, Peter, or Apollos. Each group wanted to control the direction of the church.

Many of us know what that is like. We may have belonged to a church in which fans of a particular pastor or

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a certain theological bent struggled to determine who to call as the next pastor, what priorities should be in the budget, or what kind of people were fully welcome in worship.

The congregation at Corinth would have included people across the social spectrum from slaves to elites, and some members considered themselves superior to others on both spiritual and social grounds.

How does one begin a letter to a troubled church? Paul began with the standard pattern of identifying himself and his audience, followed by a brief greeting. 🇺🇸

Paul identified himself as “called to be an apostle of Jesus by the will of God.” Some members of the Corinthian church had apparently questioned Paul’s authority as an apostle (an issue that later become more explicit; see 2 Cor 10:12-18, 11:5), so he wanted to emphasize from the beginning that his authority lay not in himself, but in his divine calling.

But God’s calling wasn’t limited to Paul, for he described his readers as a church that was “sanctified in Christ Jesus” and “called to be saints” (v. 2a). 🇺🇸 Although the Corinthians were unlikely saints, they were also called by God to a new kind of life.

Saintly or not, Paul called them “sanctified,” using a verb that means “to make holy” in the sense of “to set apart as sacred to God.” Believers are to be set apart for holy living, but the Corinthians showed that church members can be perfectly forgiven but not perfect in behavior, saints and sinners concurrently.

Paul tactfully reminded the Corinthians that they were part of a broader community, called along with “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (v. 2b).

This remains a helpful word. It’s

easy for us to think only of ourselves and our church, but we are part of the much larger body. Denominational and ecumenical activities help us to appreciate the larger Christian family.

Secular letters of the period typically began with the word “greeting” (*chairein*), but Paul altered that to the word for “grace” (*charis*) and added “peace.” It was an important reminder that grace and peace, like our calling to a transformed life, derive “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3).

But not there yet (vv. 4-9)

In his letters, Paul usually followed the greeting with a prayer of thanksgiving for his readers, often subtly raising issues that would reappear in the letter.

In some cases, Paul affirmed his hearers with words of praise, as to the Thessalonians, whom he praised for “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3). Paul also praised the Colossians for their faith, love, and hope in Christ that was bearing fruit among them (Col. 1:3-6).

In writing to the Corinthians, the best Paul could offer sounds like backhanded compliments. He thanked God for the grace that had been given to the Corinthians, enriching them in every way and blessing them with spiritual gifts — but he extended no congratulations for what they had done with the gifts they had received.

In other words, Paul could praise what God had done for the Corinthians, but not what they had done for God. Divine grace had enriched them “in speech and knowledge of every kind” (vv. 4-5), but some of them had used speech against each another. Some believed they had special knowledge that made them superior to others —

issues that Paul would address later.

The witness of Christ had been confirmed among the Corinthians, Paul said (v. 6), bestowing an abundance of spiritual gifts (v. 7). That was positive, but sadly, the use and distribution of spiritual gifts had become a matter of controversy that Paul would address in chapters 11–14.

Spiritual gifts can be misused. A person can be a spiritually gifted shyster as well as a saint — as demonstrated by charismatic evangelists who draw many followers but use their offerings to enrich themselves.

Fortunately, God remains faithful, even among unfaithful people. Paul said God’s faithfulness would grant the Corinthians “strength to the end” so they might be found “blameless” when Christ returned (v. 8). They had been called on the basis of God’s faithfulness, not theirs: they were not only saved by God’s persistent grace, but also sustained by it.

Paul’s prayer tactfully avoided undue praise for the Corinthians, but he did not condemn them, either. Although they were sinners, he still called them saints. In spite of their shortcomings, he acknowledged their giftedness. He held out hope that they would grow in grace and learn to wage peace.

Paul’s letter could have been written to us, for we also are called into fellowship by God’s faithfulness. We also are gifted by God’s Spirit. We also may fail and fall short of God’s best hopes for us, but our faith is grounded in God’s faithfulness, which will remain “to the end.”

If Paul were to write a letter to us, to our Bible study class, or to our church, what might he say? Would he have to settle for backhanded compliments, or could he offer unabashed and grateful praise?

What would we like for him to say? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Dec. 6, 2020

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Patience and Peace

“Promises, promises.” Have you ever felt like that was the story of your life?

The past year of electioneering has brought many promises, some of them clearly far-fetched. Other promises have been couched with more caution.

Some hopes are particularly appealing. We long, for example, for a promised vaccine against COVID-19 that will be safe and effective and help us return to a new normal in our lives on earth.

Promises are also made on a more personal scale. Employers may make promises to workers. Family members make promises to each other. Sometimes the promises are kept, sometimes not so much.

It’s easy to grow skeptical about promises, whether big or small, and that skepticism can bleed into our reading of promises we find in the Bible, too.

The presence of such doubts is at the heart of today’s text. For example, will there really be a day when Christ will return and set all things right? ↓

Be assured
(vv. 1-7)

The unknown author of 2 Peter believed it was a trustworthy promise.

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. (2 Pet. 5:13)

His short letter was probably written early in the second century, long after the apostle Peter had died. It was common in that period for people to write in the name of a more famous predecessor, and the church leader who wrote 2 Peter almost certainly followed that convention. ↓

We refer to the letter as a “General Epistle,” meaning that it was addressed to believers in general, rather than to a specific church. Whether its initial recipients lived in Rome, Asia Minor, or Palestine, they faced an ongoing crisis of identity. Generations had passed since the church was birthed with the expectation that Christ would soon return, but it hadn’t happened.

Secondly, despite its Jewish roots, the church was operating within a pervasive Hellenistic society. Contemporary philosophies were influential, and various attempts to combine the gospel with popular thought led to a confusion of beliefs.

The author had two primary concerns. First, a group of people he called “scoffers” were disputing whether Christ would return or that humankind would face a day of divine judgment. Without the ethical motivation of a coming judgment, they saw little need to worry about present behavior: eschatological skepticism led to moral libertinism. ↓

The gospel writers credited Jesus with predicting a day when cosmic catastrophes would herald the return

of the “Son of Man” and introduce a time of judgment (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). From the time of Jesus’ ascension into heaven, his followers had anticipated his return with either hope or dread. Had not Jesus said “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (Matt. 24:34)?

The word *genea* typically referred to a family generation, suggesting a period of 20 to 40 years between the age of parents and children. It is obvious that the promise had not been fulfilled in that sense, so modern readers must either assume the prediction attributed to Jesus was wrong, or else interpret “generation” metaphorically.

Most scholars prefer the latter. A common proposal is that Jesus spoke of the “age of Israel” as a former generation and the “age of the church” as a new generation of indeterminate length that would culminate with Christ’s return (the “*parousia*”). ↓

Jesus’ contemporaries, however, expected Christ to return sooner rather than later, and possibly in their own lifetimes. Paul echoed the belief, urging readers to be hopeful and faithful as they watched for the *parousia* (1 Thess. 4:13–5:11). The visionary Apocalypse of John has Jesus saying: “I am coming soon!” (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20; cf. 2:16, 3:11).

As decades passed without any evidence of cosmic conflagration, some believers began to doubt that there would be a “Second Coming” or a judgment at all. Possibly influenced by Epicurean philosophy, some argued that if there were no eternal consequences to fear, there was little need for moral restraint or ethical behavior.

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The author of 2 Peter saw their skepticism as evidence of the end times, writing that “in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging in their own lusts and saying ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’” (vv. 3-4).

The apostolic ancestors had predicted a quick return of Christ, but they were all dead, and Christ had not returned. Thus, the “scoffers” argued that a coming judgement seemed unlikely, so why not live it up?


The author presented four arguments against their position. First, he insisted that God’s words are reliable, citing the flood in Noah’s time as evidence. God had not only fashioned the heavens and the earth “by the word of God,” but also had spoken a word of judgment that was fulfilled by the deluge (vv. 5-6, cf. Genesis 6–8). Now, he insisted, “by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire” that would bring judgment to all and destroy the godless (v. 7).

Be alert (vv. 8-10)


The writer’s second argument called for perspective. He quoted Ps. 90:4: “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” In other words, God and humans don’t understand time in the same way (v. 8). One cannot claim that God is slow about keeping promises when time is relative and we know only the human side of it.

The author’s third defense appealed to God’s mercy: he insisted that the delay in Christ’s return was evidence that “God is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (v. 9). Thus, what some saw as an inept prediction

of a judgment that had not occurred, the author saw as evidence of God’s mercy and an opportunity to repent while there was still time.

The writer’s final argument was that the timing of judgment was unpredictable by design. Both Jesus (Matt. 24:43-44) and Paul (1 Thess. 5:2) had taught that Christ’s return would be like a thief in the night, when least expected. That didn’t make it less sure: the author still expected a day when everything between heaven and earth would dissolve in fire, leaving all human works laid bare (v. 10). 

Be at work (vv. 11-15a)

Having argued for the reality of a coming judgment, the author asked the same question that we should be asking: “If judgment is coming, but we don’t know when, what sort of lives should we be living? What kind of godliness and holiness should we be demonstrating?” (the writer’s version has considerably more heat, vv. 11-12). 

If a worker knows when a supervisor typically makes rounds, he or she is likely to be more industrious at that time than at others — but if the timing of the boss’ appearance is uncertain, one could be more motivated to remain engaged at all times.

The author believed that the certainty of judgment, combined with the uncertainty of its timing, should provide adequate motivation for believers to live in holy and godly ways at all times, and not just for their own benefit — they would also be “hastening the coming of the day of God” (v. 12).


Perhaps the writer hoped the positive influence of Christ-like believers would lead to the conversion of so many persons that God would no longer need to wait “for all to come to repentance” (v. 9).

In any case, he was confident that believers’ patience would be rewarded in the promise of “new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (v. 13).

In contrast to the predictions of fire and melting elements that preceded it, this is one of the most beautiful images in the Bible. Our present world often seems dominated by people who are motivated by power and greed, or by the desire to impose their religious or cultural standards on everyone else.

How lovely to imagine living in a place “where righteousness is at home” — but that’s not just a future hope. We are called to live rightly where we are (vv. 14-15a).

Our understanding of future things need not be limited to a literal interpretation of biblical imagery that is rife with metaphor. While we live, while we are waiting for the culmination of all things — whatever or whenever that might be — we should “strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish,” the writer says, unlike the scoffers he had described as “blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation” (2:13). God’s patience is an opportunity for salvation, and people should cherish that chance.

If the author of 2 Peter were to jump ahead nearly two millennia in which the *parousia* still has not occurred, what do you think he might say to our churches, or to us as individuals? Would he find us living godly lives, striving to respond to the world as Jesus would, doing our best to build a land where peace pervades and righteousness is at home? 

Time remains relative, and God’s time is not our time. Whether we expect to meet Christ through an end-times scenario or at the end of our time on earth, we have no way of knowing when that time will be. How should we then live? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 13, 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

A Sanctified Season

How do you feel about the imperative mood? If your high school grammar has grown rusty, the imperative mood is the form of a verb that tells one or more people to do something. It could be as benign as instructions given before a visit to the doctor's office or parents reminding children to brush their teeth. On the other hand, it could be as disconcerting as an ultimatum from an angry boss, or as loud as a sergeant's commands to an inattentive private.

Some people may find comfort in the structure of following orders, but most of us probably don't like someone else telling us what to do. We'd prefer an approach such as "let's consider doing this," or "why don't we try something else?"

We don't get any such niceties from the Apostle Paul: he preferred the clear instruction of bold imperatives, and they reverberate through today's text like someone banging on the front door. He challenges us to develop positive attitudes and an openness to God's Spirit to carry us through difficult days. 🇺🇸

The text is particularly appropriate for the third Sunday of Advent, for it begins with joy.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess. 5:16-18)

Be joyful (v. 16)

"Be joyful always," Paul says. What? Does Paul know anything about what our lives are like? Does he know the troubles we've seen, the hard times we've known?

No, of course not. Paul didn't know our struggles and trials. He never had to deal with COVID-19 or global warming or rush hour traffic, but he faced greater personal obstacles than most of us will ever see. He knew what it was like to be sick and hungry and tired. He knew what it was like to be rejected by the very people who were once the closest to him. He knew what it was like to live beneath a heavy load of guilt for past sins and mistakes. Paul knew what it was like to be arrested for his faith, to be beaten and jailed and left with the rats in the dungeon. And still he said, "Be joyful always." 🇺🇸

When we hear the word "joy," we may think of carefree happiness, or spontaneous smiles, or giggles erupting like Vesuvius. That may happen occasionally, when joy bubbles over, but it is possible to have a deep sense of inner joy even when it is impossible to smile and we wouldn't think of laughing. We can hold joy in our heart even when our faces are lined with tears. Because of the Spirit who lives in us, that joy does not leak out even when our heart is broken.

Perhaps you have known people who have suffered a great tragedy and experienced grief to the fullest. Yet, in the midst of it, they maintained a sense of deep joy. Holding on to the hope we have in Christ, they kept their heads above water and persevered, trusting in God for a good future yet to come.

When you think of hardships in your own life, how have they affected you? Have they eclipsed your sense of joy and confidence in Christ, or have you been able to remain hopeful and keep looking up?

Christian joy has a beginning, but not an end. It comes into our lives when we experience the grace of God through Jesus Christ, and it remains as sure as God's eternal love and care. 🇺🇸

Be prayerful (v. 17)

One way to fulfill Paul's encouragement to be joyful is to take seriously his second imperative: "pray without ceasing." That's a literal translation of the Greek, but is it possible? Some believers have sought to fulfill these words to the letter. They adopt a short prayer, such as "Glory to God" or "Jesus is Lord," and they repeat it over and over — "Glory to God. Glory to God. Glory to God." At every possible moment, they repeat the mantra. When they cannot attend to giving voice to the prayer, they ask God to consider every heartbeat as a repetition of the prayer. 🇺🇸

That is probably not what Paul intended. Perhaps his meaning is not just "pray constantly," but something akin to "don't give up on praying," or even, "pray any time." Some of Paul's early readers may have come from religions

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that called for prayer at fixed times during the day, or in which only certain people were authorized to address the gods. Paul insisted that believers can turn to God at any time, any day, under any circumstances. Other people may turn away, but God never “tunes us out.”

How would you describe your prayer life? Do you pray only in a ritual sense, before a family meal, perhaps, or when the Lord’s Prayer is repeated at church? When we bow our heads as a worship leader is praying, are we praying along, or planning lunch, or taking a short nap?

Sadly, many of us rarely pray unless we find ourselves in trouble, in need, or in grief. Paul reminds us that we can pray any time, not just at bedtime, at church, or in times of crisis. Paul’s imperative suggests that habitual prayer is not only something we can practice, but should. Along with joyfulness and prayerfulness, it is part “of the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (v. 18b).

Be thankful (v. 18)

Here’s a quick math question: Can $16 + 17 = 18$? In this text, it can: believers who put vv. 16 and 17 into practice can also grow into v. 18. If we learn to be always joyful and persistently prayerful, we may also learn to “give thanks in all circumstances.” Verses 16-18 are a small literary unit: Paul described joyfulness, prayerfulness, and thankfulness as “the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Note carefully that this verse does not say all circumstances are God’s will, as a careless reading might lead one to believe. Many things happen that are clearly not God’s will. When we sin, God’s will is not being done. When our sin hurts other people, we can hardly call the pain they experience God’s will. Many evil and tragic things happen in this world, and none

of them are God’s will.

Paul did not call us to be thankful *for* all circumstances, but *in* all circumstances, and he lived by his own advice.

Be attentive (vv. 19-22)

The inner attitudes described in vv. 16-18 grow from fellowship with the Holy Spirit, but we can dampen the Spirit’s work if we fail to trust, if we turn away from God’s message to us, if we turn our hearts toward evil. For this reason, Paul goes on to say: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.” (vv. 19-22). ⬇

The word translated “quench” was normally used for extinguishing a fire. From the time of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been symbolized by the image of a flame. Like a benevolent blaze, the Holy Spirit warms our heart and energizes the attitudes of joyfulness, prayerfulness, and thankfulness.

But, if we turn our minds to selfish greed or impatience, if we ignore the teachings of scripture, if we focus on what is wrong instead of what is right, we douse the flame. Maintaining an attitude of trust and prayerfulness is like fuel interacting with the fresh air of the Spirit. When we turn from God and become self-focused, our connection with the Spirit flickers.

Paul believed that some members had the gift of prophecy, and his instruction to “test everything” applies mainly to his concern that church members give heed to Spirit-inspired prophets among them. That required, however, that they be able to distinguish between those who truly had a word from the Lord and those who spoke their own mind only, or who pretended to prophesy. (For more, see “The Hardest Question” online.)

Be blessed (vv. 23-24)

Paul’s benediction finally turns from imperative to promise. “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this” (vv. 23-24).

The spiritual gifts of salvation and grace and joy, the more tangible gifts of provision and presence, the assurance of a greater life that is beyond this earthly life, all contribute to the sense of peace. Paul prays that the God of such peace will sanctify us completely — working together with God can make us both whole and holy.

God cares about every facet of our lives. God wants us to be whole in spirit and soul and body. God cares about our emotional health, our spiritual health, our physical health. God wants us to be sound and whole. God also wants us to experience the purifying and comforting touch of the Spirit in every aspect of our being, not just in worship, but every day of our lives.

In one sense, the goal is to grow constantly in our experience of God, so that when Christ returns, he will find us faithful and true. In another sense, the goal is to live so that, until we meet Jesus, we will experience the abundant life that God wants us to have. Paul insisted this was not a dream of “pie in the sky.” The God who calls us to such a life is faithful.

We can be whole. We can be holy. And, in the process, we can know joy and peace that will carry us through every day. Even while we are waiting, even while we are hurting — we can be confident that the grace of Christ is at work in us (v. 28) to accomplish God’s purpose and promises in our lives. [NFJ](#)

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 20, 2020

Romans 16:25-27

A Christmas Benediction

Have you ever been asked to “say the benediction”? If so, what did you do?

I was raised in a church whose bulletin listed “Benediction” at the end of each service, but it might as well have said “Closing Prayer,” because it was generally a prayer not unlike any of the other prayers in the service.

Only later did I learn that “benediction” means “blessing,” as I visited other churches in which the benediction really was designed as a blessing to the congregation. 🇺🇸

Most people are familiar with the famous Aaronic benediction from Numbers 6:24-26: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

Many pastors memorize the Aaronic benediction and pronounce it as they walk up the aisle at the end of the service. Or, they may use other popular blessings, such as a traditional Irish blessing, or write their own. 🇺🇸

Paul and other New Testament writers often used benedictions at or near the close of their letters. Second Corinthians, for example, concludes with “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages . . . (Rom. 16:25)

and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14).

The book of Romans includes a beautiful benediction at Rom. 15:13: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Surprisingly, though, the letter doesn’t stop there. It continues with an addendum that many scholars believe was added at a later time, either by Paul or by someone writing in his name.

The letter then concludes with another benediction at Rom. 16:25-27, our text for the day.

Before getting into the text, however, we might ask what a benediction at the end of Romans has to do with the Advent season. Why choose this text for the Sunday before Christmas?

The short answer is that the passage celebrates Christ as the fulfillment of promises that were revealed by God through the prophets and realized in the birth of Christ, making salvation available to all nations. Isn’t that what Christmas is all about?

To God, who strengthens (v. 25a)

Our text has been a subject of much scholarly debate. It appears in different places in several ancient manuscripts: after 14:23 in some, after 15:33 in

another, and at both places in a few. It is found both after 14:23 and in its present position in some. Most manuscripts, though, locate the text only at 16:25-27 (for more, see “The Hardest Question” online). Whether Paul or one of his followers wrote the words, however, is immaterial. What matters is the message.

The passage is a benediction offered to God, in praise of who God is and what God has done.

It begins “Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ . . .” (v. 25a).

Paul wrote to people who were facing hard days, at times feeling oppressed by the authorities and isolated from the surrounding culture.

Does any of that sound familiar? We have also experienced troublesome days, especially in this past year. We’ve been oppressed by a disease that has taken a staggering number of lives, forced us into varying levels of isolation, upended our customary systems of school and work, and tanked much of the economy.

We’ve been rocked by racial unrest following a series of police-related killings. Many people labor in a system of financial inequity gone wild. We’ve faced rising political tensions and a period of increasing authoritarianism in government.

On top of everything, Christmas is coming with the typical strain of the holidays being exacerbated by travel restrictions that may wreck our cherished holiday traditions.

It’s no surprise that reports indicate rising levels of emotional strain, a sharp increase in sales of anti-depressant medications, and record numbers of calls to suicide hot lines.

Additional information at
goodfaithmedia.org



A recent Bizarro cartoon pictured a woman lying on the floor, saying “Help. I’ve fallen and I can’t think of a reason to get up.”

Can you resonate with that?

We need a reservoir of spiritual and emotional strength to endure trying times, especially those that seem to go on and on.

Paul believed God could provide what is needed: “Now to God who is able to strengthen you . . .” Such strength, Paul said, could come through “my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ.”

Paul did not own the gospel or claim that he had the only truth. “His” gospel was the faithful preaching of Jesus Christ, who dared to enter our world and identify with humankind in all of our suffering.

As we look to the example of Jesus, we may also find strength to persevere. This does not come by blaming God for our struggles with sayings such as “God never puts on us more than we can endure,” but by recognizing that whatever obstacles the world throws before us, God is in it with us, and God “is able to strengthen” us.

This is no promise that God will intervene and solve all of our problems, but Paul believed we can trust that God hears our prayers, understands our pain, and offers grace. Sometimes that is enough: to know that we are not alone, to know that we are somehow known to the core and yet loved, forgiven. The advent of Jesus reminds us of God’s benevolent care.

God not only loves us, but also wants to work through us to bring about a better world. Looking to God reminds us that we have a purpose in life. As hard as it might be, that is sufficient reason for us to get up from the floor of our doldrums. Just as physical exercise builds stronger bodies, putting the love of Christ to work in our lives can lead to increasing strength.

To God, who reigns (v. 25b-26)

Paul also found strength in believing that the advent of Christ was the fulfillment of a long-promised but mysterious divine plan for the saving benefit of all peoples. Christ came, he said, “according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed” (v. 25b).

Prophets through the years had foreseen that God would intervene in history to bring deliverance, not just to the Jews, but to all nations. Paul saw this as the work of the eternal God who reigns over all, affirming that the gospel of Christ “through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith” (v. 26).

The gospel, for all its mystery, is rooted in history. Prophetic hopes stretching over centuries led to Jesus’ birth into the physical world at a very real moment in time. ↓

God’s entry into our world calls for a response: “the obedience of faith.” Such obedience is seen in the way we live, not by checking off a list of rules or living in fear of rejection, but as redeemed people demonstrating gratitude for the empowering hope that comes through Christ.

It is grace that motivates us to live with Jesus as our guide and to worship with joy in our hearts. The words of the prophets and a baby in a manger remind us that redeeming grace is available to all who set their hope in Christ.

To God be the glory (v. 27)

It is for these reasons that Christians can bless God for the blessings they have received: a benediction in response to a benediction! Paul offers this prayer “to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the

glory forever!” (v. 27).

The Greek word translated as “glory” is *doxa*, the root of our word “doxology,” which suggests words of glory or praise offered to God. The familiar doxology sung in some churches every Sunday offers praise to God “from whom all blessings flow.”

The word *doxa* can have various shades of meanings, but they all generally point to something ineffable, something beyond mortal experience and the limits of human language. Ancient kings liked to speak of their “glorious splendor,” and we may speak of a victor in sports or war as “basking in glory,” but true glory belongs only to God.

It’s not surprising that Paul concludes with a reference to God’s glory, as it is a common theme in the letter. Paul frequently emphasized the importance of appreciating God’s glory, giving God the glory, and holding to the hope of one day sharing in glory. ↓

That God’s glory should come to be fully revealed in Jesus — and that humans could share in God’s glory through Christ’s work — has always been part of God’s plan, Paul believed: “the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed.”

Is there any wonder that some of our favorite Christmas hymns speak of God’s glory? We sing of “Angels from the Realms of Glory.” The chorus of “Angels We Have Heard on High” concludes with the twice-sung “Gloria in excelsis Deo.” That’s Latin for “glory to God in the highest,” which also concludes the first verse of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” ↓

This past year has brought troubles galore, but it has also brought us to Christmas, and to the hope of a glorious future with God.

And that’s worth singing about, at Christmas or any other time of year. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 27, 2020

Galatians 4:4-7

Children of the Child

It's finally here, the close of the year too tough to tame. As much as we might have wanted to press the reset button on 2020, it stubbornly resisted — but it's almost done.

The COVID-19 pandemic and political polarities and economic woes will not magically go away, but a new year can bring the sense of a new start and the hope of better things to come.

Our text for the day is a reminder that we don't face either good years or bad years alone. We have a God who cares deeply about us, a God commonly portrayed in the New Testament as a heavenly father.

Many writers now avoid male-centric language for God, acknowledging that the great God of the universe is far beyond any human conception of gender. In the biblical texts, however, there is no getting around the common depiction of God as a father figure.

This derives from the limitations of human language and the realities of ancient culture. The authors of the Bible lived in a largely patriarchal world in which men tended to hold greater power, so it was only natural for them to describe God with masculine pronouns. God is occasionally described in maternal terms, but the

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Gal. 4:4-5)

feminine imagery is clearly secondary.

The Gospels indicate that Jesus spoke of God in paternal terms. If we had been born into a first-century Jewish home in Palestine, we would most likely have learned to call our fathers “Abba.” The Hebrew term for “my father” is “*abî*,” but most people spoke Aramaic, where it would be “Abba.” Like our word “Daddy,” either children or adults could use the term with a variety of connotations.

Jesus as God's child

To connect effectively with others, Jesus chose to use the common vocabulary of his culture, though in challenging ways. Thus, although Jesus compared himself to a mother hen when expressing sorrow over Jerusalem's rejection (see Matt. 23:37 or Luke 13:34), he also commonly spoke of God as father.

With the single exception of the cry of desolation on the cross (Mark 15:34, “Eloi Eloi,” or “My God, my God . . .”) — a prayer quoted from Ps. 22:1 — every recorded prayer of Jesus has him referring to God as “father” or as “Abba.”¹ The Gospels tell us very little about the young Jesus' relationship with Joseph, his adoptive earthly

father. They insist, however, that Jesus thought of God as father, even as a child. In the familiar story of his tarrying in the Jerusalem temple at age 12, Jesus responded to his parents' scolding by saying “Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” (Luke 2:49).

As an adult, Jesus' teaching was replete with paternal terminology for God. Matthew quotes him as saying “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (7:21). In Mark, Jesus instructs his followers to forgive others when they pray, “so that your Father in heaven may also forgive your trespasses” (11:25). To illustrate the grace of God, Luke recorded Jesus' story about a prodigal son and a forgiving, searching, joyful father (15:11-32). John quotes Jesus as saying “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places” (14:2).

Jesus taught his disciples to pray “Our Father in heaven . . .” (Matt. 6:9, cp. Luke 11:2). When the gospel record describes Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, it recalls him praying “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36, cp. Matt. 26:39, 42; Luke 22:42).

According to Luke's account, as Jesus hung on the cross, he offered grace to his executioners with the prayer “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34). Even in the moment of his physical death, Jesus prayed “Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit” (v. 46).²

Additional information at
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Believers as adopted children (vv. 4-5)

The Apostle Paul also spoke of God as father, believing that Jesus wanted to bring all people into relationship with God as their ultimate parent. In 2 Cor. 6:18, he freely paraphrased 2 Sam. 7:14 (originally spoken to David) as a promise that “I will be your Father, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” In today’s text, Paul speaks to the Galatians about this potential relationship.

The text is rich with meaning. It follows a line of argument in which Paul insisted that the Jews did not have an exclusive claim on God: they were not the only heirs of the promise, for Christ’s work had eliminated distinctions between male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free (3:28). Paul argued that all who belong to Christ have become “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:29).


Just before today’s text, Paul continued his pursuit of the idea, arguing that even heirs, so long as they remained minors, were bound by the law and could not inherit (vv. 1-3). Only when the time was right, such as when they reached a certain age, did a parent’s bequest become theirs.

The right time to inherit the kingdom arrived with the incarnation of Christ, Paul argued. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law . . .” (v. 4). 

When the time was right, God came into our world through the person of Jesus, who was born as other people are born, born to a particular woman in a particular place and within the particular culture of first-century Judaism. As a fully human child, Jesus would have been taught what it means to live in a family relationship with earthly parents and in a spiritual relationship with a


heavenly father.

As he grew, Jesus devoted his earthly life to helping others discover that same kind of relationship with God. Thus Paul says “God sent his son in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (v. 5).


As Paul saw it, the law could only condemn because no one could keep it entirely. The process that began with Christ’s incarnation set in motion the redeeming work of bringing us fully into the family of God. The Greek word translated “adoption as children” was a technical term used to mean “adoption as sons, with full rights of inheritance.” 

Even though first-century women had only limited inheritance rights, we are not amiss in removing the gender component and translating the term as “adoption as children,” according to the NRSV. Most other translations (KJV, NIV, NIV11, NAS95, HCSB, NET) retain the word “sons” or “sonship,” but Paul did not intend for the term to suggest male exclusivity. Just a few verses before, he had argued that in Christ gender distinctions become moot (3:28).

Christ came to bring all people into a potential relationship with God, and that includes everyone — Jew and Gentile, sons and daughters, slave and free.

Many children in our world are unwanted and in need of someone to redeem them from their legal limbo and adopt them into their families. All children are bound to face the experience of becoming spiritually lost, and they need someone to adopt them into an eternal family that extends beyond this world. The good news is that Jesus Christ has cut all the red tape and swung wide the door into the family of God. The only thing lacking is our acceptance of the offer. 

Adoption as heirs (vv. 6-7)

Those who trust in Christ’s redemption can experience a totally new kind of relationship with God, Paul said. The proof of our adoption is the presence of the Spirit: “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (vv. 6-7).  [DD]

Paul insists that our relationship with God can go far beyond the unappealing image of a heavenly master served by earthly slaves. We do not serve God out of fear, but out of love. We don’t have to be motivated by concern for what God will do to us, but by gratitude for what God has already done for us. We need not think of God as a demanding taskmaster, but as a loving, caring, forgiving father. Empowered by the Holy Spirit within us, we have courage to live faithfully and the confidence to pray from the perspective of a child who is loved, one who can cry “Abba, Father.”

Paul would want us to know that our privileged standing as children of God does not apply to our time on earth alone. As the children of God, we are also the heirs of God. We stand to inherit the hopeful future prepared for God’s adopted children. We possess the promise of an eternal home — not only with our heavenly father, but also with all of our sisters and brothers who have become God’s children through the work of Jesus.

The good news of Christ’s coming through the season of Advent culminates in a miracle that extends beyond Christmas and a hope that need never go dry: the child born in the manger of Bethlehem has become the means through which countless other children are adopted into God’s family and called to see the world as Jesus does — with love and with hope. **NFJ**

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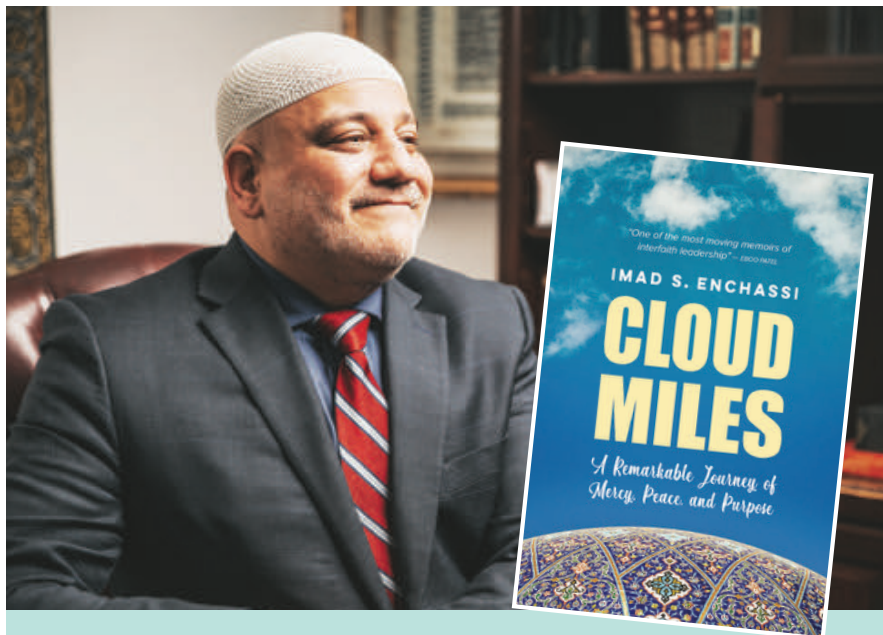
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Reconsidering expectations: ministers or managers?

BY CHRISTOPHER ADAMS

“Priesthood of all believers” emphasizes that every member of a church shares the responsibility for doing ministry in Christ-like ways. It is a popular notion among Baptists.

Upon affirming someone’s sense of calling and giftedness, a church may choose to ordain that person into ministry. Ordination doesn’t set someone apart from the community but places them alongside all others in servant leadership.

For many ordained ministers, formal theological education is part of that journey. Seminaries or divinity schools provide time and space for the minister to be formed spiritually, intellectually and emotionally, while discerning direction for fulfilling one’s calling.

In a fast-changing culture that impacts churches, other institutions and individuals, it is important to identify and clarify expectations.

What do churches expect in the seminary formation of their ministers? What might seminaries expect from congregations in providing opportunities for students?

How are churches equipping laypersons to serve in positive ways alongside ordained leaders? A golden thread running through these questions is: What do we expect?

Like many churches, seminaries wrestle with a crisis of institutional health. Lower enrollment, higher costs, more student debt, greater competition and difficult job markets have forced seminaries to work hard at providing quality education.

My point is not to question the value of the seminary experience, but to ask what expectations are combined to form that

education. Can the relationship between congregations and seminary communities be strengthened in ways that better equip next-generation leaders to flourish within and beyond congregational life?

One way to frame these questions of expectation is to ask: Are we seeking and training *ministers* or *managers*?

I entered Duke Divinity School right after finishing my undergraduate degree at the University of Georgia. I had few expectations other than taking classes from world-class scholars and wanting to grow within that community.

I wanted to explore my faith and the faith of others with those from various Christian traditions along with Jewish and Muslim scholars. I am thankful for that experience. Yet often the highly competitive academic spirit felt more like competition than community.

Practically, was this experience preparing me to be a manager of good information or a good ministerial steward?

A manager’s job is to provide supervision and ensure day-to-day tasks are completed. The pursuit of profit and efficiency drives managers to keep costs low, and see that sales of goods and services grow or remain steady. What distinguishes most professional managerial roles is the power held as the decision maker.

Professional managers are not what Christians are called to be, however. We don’t lead by power and profit. Rather we are called by the resurrected Christ to be leaders driven by love, working with others, and in service to our neighbors in the pursuit of justice and peace.

How might we better equip a new generation of church leaders to be *ministers* of Christ rather than *managers* for Christ?



Two of my more formative experiences at Duke were within congregational life. I worked alongside First Baptist Church in Henderson, N.C., for an entire school year, and spent a summer at Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas. While the classroom experience was vital in formation, equally impacting was my time of learning, growing and building relationships in churches.

It would be easy to hold the mountains of information one learns at a seminary over churches as the “expert” in the room, or to always enter with a sense of certainty about what needs to happen. That way of being in community, however, is not sustainable.

I learned to be a gracious receiver as these church families poured into me as I poured into them. This was essential to my seminary season — learning to work toward the joy, flourishing and sustainability in ministry, while holding the necessary tension that comes with being part of a Christian community.

It would be an arrogant mistake to assume one possesses special knowledge from seminary to be handed down to churches. Yet that doesn’t mean one is to be shy or lack confidence in the ability to think, imagine and lead.

Rather it means to avoid controlling congregational life in the way a manager controls a business. Micro-managing Christ is not resurrection work or participating in the relational work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

With all the changes brought about by COVID-19, it is a good time for churches and seminaries to talk about expectations and to seek new, collaborative ways to shape ministers and lay leaders for an uncertain future. [NFJ](#)

—Christopher Adams of Athens, Ga.,
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intern with Good Faith Media.



A MIX OR A MESS?

Words of caution about
the relationship between
faith and politics



BY J. BRENT WALKER

Foy Valentine, a Baptist ethicist of a generation ago, had a good response to the old bromide that religion and politics don't mix.

"It is true if it means the gears of the church ought not to engage the cogs of the state, and vice versa," he said. "It is grievously wrong if it means that the spheres of religion and politics...may never properly come into contact with one another."

The institutional separation of church and state — indispensable as it is — does not require a segregation of religion from politics or strip the public square of religious discourse. The metaphorical wall of separation does not block metaphysical assumptions from influencing public life.

To do so, Valentine wrote in his 1975 book, *Citizenship for Christians*, would produce "a pitifully irrelevant church and a grossly irreverent state."

People of faith have the right — and I believe a sacred duty — to be involved in public life, trying to transform the commonweal into a better place for all citizens. But, danger always lurks when we try to combine religion and politics. That maneuver requires great care.

First, it's certainly proper to judge a

candidate by taking into account his or her conduct, character and convictions. However, Article VI of the U.S. Constitution forbids religious tests for public office.

Although this ban only applies to formal disabilities for qualifying for office, we should honor the spirit as well as the letter of Article VI. Religion may be part of the mix, but we should never impose a religious litmus test in deciding for whom to vote.

This means a discussion of a candidate's religion is permissible, but never mandatory; candidates may but should not be made to talk about their religious beliefs. Atheists, agnostics and religiously unaffiliated candidates should not be prejudiced in the political arena.

A candidate's religion should never be impugned in debate and election advertising. President Trump's remark, for example, that a lifelong, committed Catholic, Joe Biden, will "hurt God" is way out of bounds.

Second, if religion is discussed, it is essential to ask how the candidate's religious views will affect policy positions or address leadership competence. Always ask the "so what?" question: What difference will one's religion make in the candidate's performance of his or her duties?

If there is not a tight fit, then talking

about religion smacks of theological voyeurism or religious bias and violates the spirit of the test ban clause. However, there has been a curious flip here.

Many conservative Protestants refused to support John F. Kennedy because of his Catholicism and, more recently, declined to vote for Mitt Romney, a Mormon. Some have even lied about a candidate's religion, claiming Barack Obama is a Muslim.

Yet, more than 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for a treble-married, scantily observant, theologically illiterate candidate for president. Now, some on the left have gotten in the electoral religion game by criticizing the president — who apparently rarely worships, had to borrow a Bible as a prop for a photo op and doesn't know how to pronounce "1 Corinthians" — for lack of proper churchmanship. This is wrong, too.

A robust debate is important to a vital democracy and opponents' moral and ethical shortcomings and lack of character are fair game, but *not* their religion or lack thereof.

In addition to the "no religious test" principle and the importance of asking the "so what?" follow-up question, I offer three words of caution, or caveats, to the general proposition that religion can be helpful and should be a part of our public discourse.

The first is theological. Any foray into politics with focused religious motivation should be tempered with a dose of humility. We need to understand that, however sure we think we are of our position, the other person has something to say and in the final analysis might be right.

My predecessor at the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, James Dunn, used to say of the bombastic broadsides heard mainly from the religious right in recent years, “What they say is not totally false; it is falsely total.”

It lacks a note of self-evaluation, of tentativeness, of nuance, of humility that one needs to bring to bear on a public policy proposal based squarely on one’s religious conviction. This goes for extremism on the religious left, too.

Rep. Barbara Jordan, a Baptist sister, had it right 35 years ago at a BJC meeting when she was asked how to properly articulate Christian values in government. Her response went something like this:

“You would do well to pursue your cause with vigor, while remembering you are a servant of God, not a spokesperson for God, and remembering that God may choose to bless an opposing point of view for reasons that have not been revealed to you.”

The theological principle of humility must temper our religious exuberance.

The second caveat is ethical. It has to do with the abuse of “civil religion” — that blending of a generic Judeo-Christian piety with American nationalism so that one cannot tell them apart.

Amanda Tyler, my successor at BJC, and her staff have led an effort to oppose “Christian Nationalism,” in its various forms. Their trenchant statement, “Christians Against Christian Nationalism,” has garnered more than 16,000 endorsers from across the religious spectrum.

The false notion that the United States is a “Christian nation” fuels the engines of Christian Nationalism. (If our founders wanted to set up a “Christian nation,” why would they ban religious tests for office? They would have required one.)

Yes, benign acknowledgements of our religious heritage — in our mottos, slogans

and public rituals — have been upheld by the courts. But I bristle when civil religion, certainly Christian Nationalism, is used to promote a political agenda.

We must apply some prudential brakes here, some self-restraint, on the notion that public religion is or can be beneficial.

The third caution is legal and constitutional. We have issues dealing with electioneering activities by churches and other nonprofits exempt from taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the tax code.

In exchange for this most favorable tax status (the entity is tax-exempt and donations are deductible), these nonprofits are not allowed to endorse or oppose candidates for office. We do not finance political campaigns with before-tax dollars.

Under this provision, houses of worship, of course, may engage freely in issue advocacy. They may speak out on the great moral issues of the day from the pulpit, through publications, and in other ways.

Similarly, they may engage in some “lobbying” activities — attempting to influence legislation in Congress and state legislatures. However, electioneering — supporting or opposing candidates for office — is completely banned.

The watchwords are: Issues, yes! Candidates, no!

The president’s threat to “totally destroy” this provision has not come to pass. And the IRS has not been willing to enforce the electioneering ban with great assiduity. However, responsible citizenship dictates that we obey the law, and if a 501(c)(3) organization wants to support or oppose candidates, it should give up that favored tax-exempt status.

There are constitutional issues surrounding the governing phase of public life. Religiously motivated policy initiatives should always have a secular purpose and the primary effect that does not advance religion.

That’s what Rep. David Price means

when he talks about “a coincidence of the religious precept with broader public values,” advancing the common good, not just a narrow sectarian agenda.

Think of it this way: Religion plays an important, but limited, role. Religion may motivate policy, but it should not dominate it.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jon Meacham has said that religion is a thread in the tapestry of American life, not the whole tapestry, and that religion should shape policy but not strangle it.

Moreover, if the only rationale for a policy position is an *a priori* religious assertion, it is hard for it to be debated and tested in the marketplace of ideas. There should be a broader, non-religious rationale articulated for public policy that is based on faith convictions.

Otherwise, it runs the risk of violating the First Amendment’s ban on the establishment of religion.

In the upcoming election, there is much people of faith can do. The easiest and perhaps most important way is to VOTE! That is the least any American can do, and certainly people of faith as well.

Much has been said about absentee voting and other species of voting by mail — mostly, that it encourages fraud. There is no evidence to show that voting by mail spawns widespread fraud. Error? Yes, maybe, but that’s the case with in-person voting too, as we saw in the 2000 presidential election.

The lingering pandemic makes voting by mail even more important with many voters not wanting to venture out into a crowded polling site.

My former colleague at BJC, Melissa Rogers, has rightly said, “Faith is visible, vocal and vital in the United States.” That’s the way it should be.

Let’s exercise our faith, expressing love for neighbor and respect for the process crafted by our founders, the Constitution and the best of our political culture. The late Foy Valentine would be proud! **NFJ**

—J. Brent Walker is executive director emeritus of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.



PATROL & CONTROL

Storytelling has long shaped the practice of policing

Editor's note: This article is excerpted and adapted from the book, *Police on a Pedestal: Responsible Policing in a Culture of Worship* (2019, Praeger) by Terrell Carter. This is the first in a series of his articles exploring racial justice.

BY TERRELL CARTER

When was the last time you experienced the euphoria of a person telling a good story? Storytelling can be a beneficial part of life and can serve multiple functions.

Through stories we share information, relate to one another, preserve personal and communal history, encourage people to take specific actions related to a common goal, entertain others and ourselves, and potentially influence the opinions of others.

At its best, storytelling can help people become allies around a common cause or, at its worst, create enemies where there had previously been none.

While I was a cadet in the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Academy, I learned that, at its core, policing is primarily about storytelling.

'MAGIC PEN'

One of my academy instructors told us that when we finally began to patrol the mean streets of St. Louis, we had to remember that we all possessed the "magic pen." Because we were the officers, and the people we would encounter on the streets were criminals, whatever we wrote in our police reports would be believed by the public, prosecuting attorneys and judges.

It was up to us to tell the stories of what happened in our encounters with criminals in such a way that criminals ultimately got what they deserved. After graduating from

the academy, I quickly learned that this instructor was not the only person who held to that philosophy.

It was embedded in how police work was conducted daily. During my time patrolling the streets and working in a plain-clothes narcotics detail, I saw other officers tell stories that would make most creative writing majors envious.

I witnessed officers tell stories that sent innocent, and not so innocent, people to prison while simultaneously turning the officer into a hero to be admired. Ultimately, I learned that if I wanted to survive as an officer and thrive within the system of policing, I would have to sharpen my storytelling skills.

If unwilling to do that, I would not be able to move up in the system and would likely not be trusted by other officers.

ARRESTS & ACCOLADES

I learned that storytelling by officers served multiple purposes. By telling good stories, an officer could often be assured that a circuit attorney or judge would believe their explanation for why a person should have been stopped and needed to be imprisoned.

Thus, good storytelling helps improve an officer's arrest and conviction rates. More arrests and higher conviction rates lead to more accolades and awards from superior officers, which is what lays the foundation for future promotions or transfers to more desirable work assignments.

So, good storytelling is the beginning of a good career. I watched officers harvest the fruits born of good stories.

They improved their arrest statistics. They were given more freedom and favored

attention by their supervisors. They received awards. They were given opportunities to work overtime or on special task forces. And they were promoted within the department.

They also ignored the stories that families tried to share about how their actions were ruining the lives of multiple people and destroying the trust needed between citizens and officers... storytelling at its worst.

NOTHING NEW

The connection between storytelling and policing is not a new phenomenon. Storytelling played an integral part in influencing how policing was shaped and integrated into our identity as a burgeoning nation.

The history of policing in the U.S. partially begins with the story that certain people needed to be protected against other people. Victor E. Kappeler, in *A Brief History of Slavery and the Origins of American Policing* (2014), writes:

The birth and development of the American police can be traced to a multitude of historical, legal and political-economic conditions. The institution of slavery and the control of minorities, however, were two of the more formidable historic features of American society shaping early policing. Slave patrols and Night Watches, which later became modern police departments, were both designed to control the behaviors of minorities.

As whites sought to explore and inhabit the new world of North America, they believed they needed protection from savage Native Americans in the Midwest who could not, or would not, recognize God's desire for whites to overtake this new land.

After these natives were sufficiently under control, African Americans, whether



enslaved or freed, were marked for police control. This ever-growing need to control minority cultures was one of the contributing factors that led to the expansion of police and their powers as our nation continued to grow.

Over time, the purpose of policing in America transformed from protecting settlers against Native Americans and protecting slaveowners' rights to continue to invest in the acquisition of human capital (including the ever-growing process of convict leasing), to eventually mediating disputes between the "haves" and the "have nots" — the elites and working classes within society.

PROTECTED INTERESTS

Edward J. Escobar, in his 1999 book, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press), writes:

"[T]hroughout the 19th century and much of the 20th century, the police functioned as 'the army of the status quo'...

Police departments were cultivated by urban elites and purposed to 'control the burgeoning working class in industrializing northeastern cities'...Through the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, the police continued to focus on 'maintaining order [within] working class sections of urban America.'"

Not surprisingly, since business owners were able to pay for police protection, police protected the interests of business owners and managers over the rights of the workers, in effect becoming something akin to a private security force for those who could afford to secure their services.

The services the elite requested from police were the kind that ensured the better sensibilities of the elite would not be frustrated by people from the lower classes.

"Police patrolled city streets picking up drunks, jailing vagrants, and, if not suppressing vice, at least making it invisible to ensure that the refuse of industrialized society did not disrupt the lives of the more genteel classes," writes Escobar. "On a more sinister level, police acted as the willing

pawns of factory owners and chambers of commerce in suppressing labor unions, radical political organizations, and other expressions of working-class sentiment."

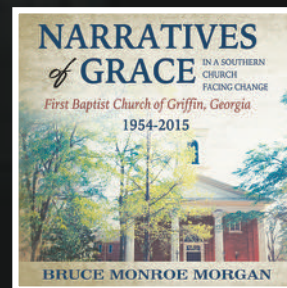
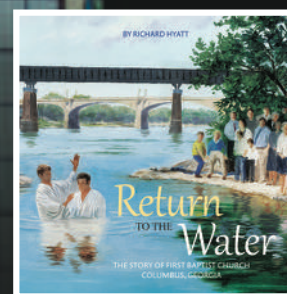
Although the history of policing in the U.S. partially began from the desire of certain people to be protected from other people, police and the elite have not been the only willing participants in the overall process of storytelling that is policing.

Multiple groups involved in the process of policing (white citizens, political officials, media, and the justice system) have a vested interest in shaping and reinforcing the stories that are told. Understanding what kind of story each group is telling, and why they are telling it, can help us gain a better grasp on the overall system of policing in the 21st century. [NFJ](#)

—Terrell Carter, with a background as a police officer and a pastor, now serves as vice president and chief diversity officer for Greenville University, in Greenville, Ill. He is a member of the Good Faith Media Strategic Advisory Board.

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COMMON GOOD

The Bible teaches us to live communally, not selfishly

BY A. ROY MEDLEY

The nightmarish destruction that swept across the Midwest of our country as a violent derecho plowed through much of Iowa in August — killing people, toppling grain bins and silos, destroying crops, and razing homes and buildings — has presented yet another challenge to us.

How do we respond to these increasingly outsized disasters, let alone the novel coronavirus pandemic, and the daily struggles of many of our fellow citizens to feed, shelter and clothe their families and meet medical needs?

Warnings of “big government” strike a resonant cord within the American psyche. Our national character is bound up with images of independence, self-reliance, and bold self-autonomy.

The cowboy riding solo on the open plains has long been the poster image of “American.” We guard our liberties jealously; we pride ourselves on being a “bootstrap” people; we cherish the image of the New England town hall meeting; and we embrace a heady dose of populism and distrust of authority, power and institutions.

Polls constantly remind us that many people do not trust government. This impulse carried to the extreme has resulted in the frightening rise of militias.

However, the innate suspicion of anything beyond “me” is not only directed at “big government.” It is also aimed toward “big business,” “big medicine” and “globalization” — as evidenced in grass-roots rebellions from Occupy Wall Street to anti-vaxer protests to, “You can’t force me to wear a mask.”

In the past several decades, beginning with the Newt Gingrich era and then the

Tea Party, we have seen a steady, strident demand to reduce government, especially the federal government, and the scope of its reach. A quick Internet search will produce scores of articles, blogs and books from think tanks advocating reduction.

These demands are countless multiplied by posts on Facebook and Twitter. Mirroring and feeding this sentiment, the current administration’s federal budget proposals have sought to defund and shrink federal agencies to the applause of many.

But the derecho that struck Iowa, bringing many already stressed farmers to the point of economic collapse, the wildfires that are devastating communities in the West, the increase of hurricanes affecting Puerto Rico, the South and the East Coast, let alone the current pandemic — all challenge the notion of singular self-sufficiency and the evil of government.

The truth is that large disasters and society-wide challenges such as a pandemic, recessions and depressions cannot be met by self-effort alone, nor by the efforts, as important as they are, of churches and non-profit organizations. They have neither the resources nor the scope sufficient to meet these outsized needs.

Circumstances such as these dramatically point to the need for a vision of our life together that not only prizes independence and autonomy but also honors our belonging to one another by God’s design and the ethical call of our faith to care for one another.

The long-standing cultural metaphor of the lone cowboy is insufficient. It is deficient, and we cannot thrive as a nation with that as our keystone social and political narrative.



How does scripture inform and correct this narrative? How does it guide our thinking about life beyond “me” in an era when we have embraced “I-this” and “I-that” as a primary marketing meme, and where we are more commonly referred to as consumers rather than citizens?

The “good life” as self-aggrandizement, self-improvement and self-actualization is the cultural norm whether expressed in this manner or as “America First.” The common good, community, the world family, or as our Constitution embodies it, the common welfare, are seldom incorporated into policy discourse or put forth as an essential element of the good life.

The biblical narrative challenges such a truncated and anemic conception of life together. To confess the biblical truth that we are created in the image of God, who we believe exists as three in one and one in three, is to confess that we are created within and for community.

The life of God as triune is instructive for our lives. It is the core of this richer and deeper biblical imagination of humanity: autonomous yet one; one yet autonomous.

The confession of the early church as it wrestled with the revelation of God as trinity is richly suggestive for us in understanding the relationship of the individual to community. The Athanasian Creed expresses it this way:

“We worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being. For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Spirit is still another. But the deity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory, coeternal in majesty.”

Each person within the Trinity is distinct, but the being and life of God is one. We are each created by God as beloved, distinct beings whose distinctiveness is treasured.

We are each created by God as beloved communal beings whose lives, though

distinct, are never separate. Like the Godhead, we live within the richness of community and relationships.

From Genesis through Revelation, the Bible speaks of the individual within community and rebukes the notion that we live and thrive alone as completely independent, autonomous beings.

Eve is created because Adam could not find fulfillment in solitary existence. “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone...’” (Gen 2:18 NRSV)

Even as Cain cries out to God with the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” he is rebuked and punished for the murder of his brother, an act rooted in jealousy, which is an idolatry of the self.

The prophets judge the kings of Israel not by how the few thrive but how the nation, and especially the poor, the widows, the orphans and the strangers fare under their rule. Within the New Testament, Jesus’ teaching and that of the writers of the epistles expands and heightens the ethical demands upon the individual for the good of the other.

Whether it be Jesus’ teaching of the Golden Rule, his enlarging the idea of the neighbor for whom we are responsible in the parable of the Good Samaritan, or his declaring “Truly, even as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:40 NRSV)

Or whether it be Paul admonishing the early church, “Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of

one another” (Eph. 4:25 NRSV), or James encouraging believers: “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Jas. 2:8 NRSV), our moral calculus can never omit the other.

Our faith compels opposition to any narrative that suggests the idea of the self apart from community and that shrinks the circle of belonging to the “me” alone. The message of scripture and our faith is that we belong to God and we belong to each other.

Each of these belongings creates a network of blessing and responsibility. Each of these belongings explodes the lie of “going it alone,” or of the autonomous self-made person.

Each of these belongings informs the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* wrote: “All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.”

Much has been written in recent years about the euphemism of right-sizing corporations, boards and governance. No democratic government is right-sized when it is stripped of the capacity for the community of the governed to respond together to the needs of the neighbor.

No democratic government is right-sized when it cannot muster the vision,

the will and the capacity of the citizenry to fulfill the royal law. No democratic government is right-sized when it cannot fulfill the duties of justice and mercy toward all its citizens.

No democratic government is right-sized when the poor languish, the stranger is unprotected, and the widow is left destitute while the rich and powerful “join house to house ... add field to field, until there is room for no one but [them] to live alone in the midst of the land!” (Isa. 5:8 NRSV).

President Dwight D. Eisenhower reminded us: “To blend, without coercion, the individual good and the common good is the essence of citizenship in a free country.”

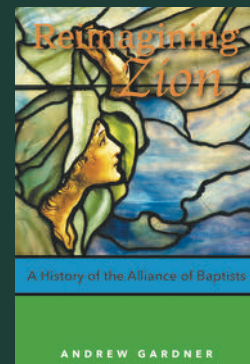
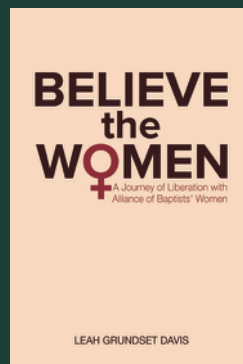
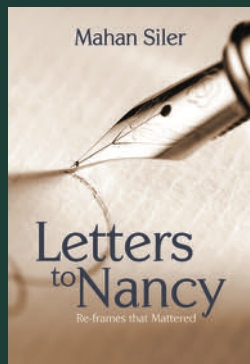
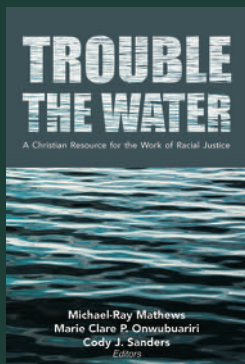
The novel coronavirus global pandemic, the derecho in Iowa, and the current economic crisis expose the critical flaw in shrinking government to the point that it is incapable of expressing our moral duty toward the neighbor in need.

Government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” must have the strength and capacity to mobilize our solidarity in suffering, our resolve to do justice and love mercy, and our commitment to form a more perfect union in concrete actions.

Government as the expression of our common will, our common wealth, our common good requires the ability to act on our behalf for the good of one another. **NFJ**

—A. Roy Medley is general secretary emeritus for American Baptist Churches, USA.

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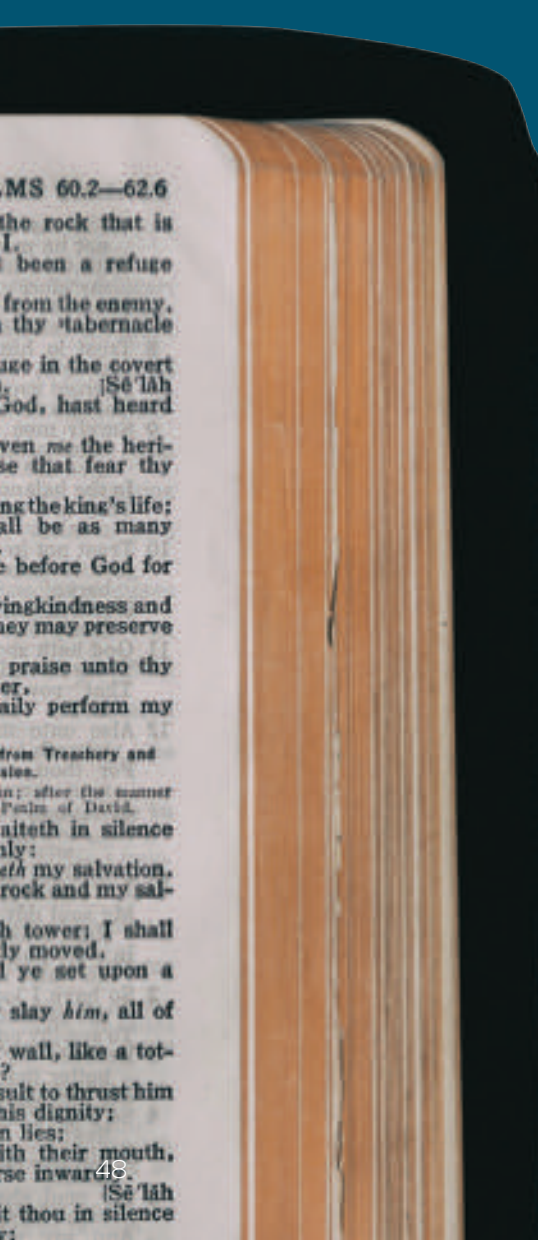
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Season after Christmas

Jan. 3, 2021
Ephesians 1:3-14
Where Hope Belongs

Season of Epiphany

Who Is Jesus?

Jan. 10, 2021
Mark 1:4-11
Jesus, the Beloved

Jan. 17, 2021
John 1:43-51
Jesus, the Convincer

Jan. 24, 2021
Mark 1:14-20
Jesus, the Summoner

Jan. 31, 2021
Mark 1:21-28
Jesus, the Healer

Feb. 7, 2021
Mark 1:29-39
Jesus, the Traveler

Transfiguration Sunday

Feb. 14, 2021
Mark 9:2-9
Jesus, the Dazzler

Season of Lent

Feb. 21, 2021
Mark 1:9-15
Jesus, the Preacher

Feb. 28, 2021
Mark 8:31-38
Jesus, the Challenger

March 7, 2021
John 2:13-22
Jesus, the Activist

March 14, 2021
John 3:14-21
Jesus, the Savior

March 21, 2021
John 12:20-33
Jesus, the Lover

March 28, 2021
Mark 15:1-47
Jesus, the Sufferer

Season of Easter

April 4, 2021
(Easter Sunday)
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Jesus, the Victor

*Following Jesus:
What Does It mean?*

April 11, 2021
1 John 1:1-2:2
To Follow Jesus,
Walk in the Light

April 18, 2021
1 John 3:1-7
To Follow Jesus,
Do What Is Right

April 25, 2021
1 John 3:16-24
To Follow Jesus,
Love One Another

May 2, 2021
1 John 4:7-21
To Follow Jesus,
'Abide in Christ'

May 9, 2021
1 John 5:1-6
To Follow Jesus,
Work with Faith

May 16, 2021
1 John 5:7-13
To Follow Jesus,
Believe in Life

May 23, 2021
(Day of Pentecost)
Psalm 104:24-34
To Follow Jesus,
Receive the Spirit

Season after Pentacost

A Long Look Back

May 30, 2021
Isaiah 6:1-13
A Strange Call

June 6, 2021
1 Samuel 8:1-22
An Uncertain Demand

June 13, 2021
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
An Unexpected King

June 20, 2021
1 Samuel 17:1-58
A Bold Beating

June 27, 2021
2 Samuel 1:1-27
A Strategic Lament

July 4, 2021
2 Samuel 5:1-10
A Rising Star

July 11, 2021
2 Samuel 6:1-19
A Tense Celebration

July 18, 2021
2 Samuel 7:1-17
An Eternal Promise

July 25, 2021
2 Samuel 11:1-25
A Tragic Error

Aug. 1, 2021
2 Samuel 11:26-12:23
A Painful Lesson

Aug. 8, 2021
2 Samuel 18:1-33
A Mournful Monarch

Aug. 15, 2021
1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14
A Wise Request

Aug. 22, 2021
1 Kings 8:1-43
A Solemn Dedication

Troublesome Teachings

Aug. 29, 2021
Mark 7:1-23
Something Rotten

Sept. 5, 2021
Mark 7:24-37
Something Surprising

Sept. 12, 2021
Mark 8:27-38
Something Confusing

Sept. 19, 2021
Mark 9:30-37
Something Different

Sept. 26, 2021
Mark 9:38-50
Something Serious

From Suffering to Praise

Oct. 3, 2021
Job 1:1-2:10
When Trouble Comes

Oct. 10, 2021
Job 23:1-17
When God Hides

Oct. 17, 2021
Job 38:1-7, 34-41
When God Roars

Oct. 24, 2021
Job 42:1-7
When God Judges

Oct. 31, 2021
Psalm 146
When God Liberates

Getting Real

Nov. 7, 2021
Mark 12:38-44
True Generosity

Nov. 14, 2021
Mark 13:1-8
Wise Waiting

Nov. 21, 2021
John 18:33-37
True Kingship

Advent

New Things Coming

Nov. 28, 2021
Jeremiah 33:14-16
A New Hope

Dec. 5, 2021
Luke 3:1-6
A New Voice

Dec. 12, 2021
Luke 3:7-18
A New Perspective

Dec. 19, 2021
Luke 1:39-55
A New Dawn

Season after Christmas

Dec. 26, 2021
Luke 2:41-52
A New Teacher

Jimmy Carter (1977–1981): Part Two

By Bruce Gourley

One year after few political observers believed he had a chance at winning the White House, on Jan. 3, 1977 Southern Baptist and President-elect Jimmy Carter was named *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year."

"He is complex and sometimes contradictory," the article said of America's first evangelical president. "His creed combines traditionally antithetical elements of help-the-deprived populism and deny-thyself fiscal conservatism."

Like all presidential candidates, Carter had made many promises on the campaign trail. Marginalized Black Americans in particular were hopeful of the president's promises for racial equity.

Conservative white evangelicals, however, were of a mixed mind. Many believed Carter would restore morality to the White House.

Others remained enamored of Richard Nixon's earlier attempts to repeal Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs designed to help disadvantaged Black Americans. Many liked Carter's fiscal conservatism.

The editors of the popular conservative magazine *Christianity Today* hoped Carter would "restructure the vast federal bureaucracy so as to lower costs and improve performance."

BORN AGAIN

Across the white evangelical landscape from progressive to conservative it helped that the new president spoke their "born again" Christian vocabulary and read the Bible regularly, a religious connection that had led many to vote for him.

Before Carter's inauguration they

reached out. Progressives enthused over the prospect of greater human rights. Conservatives wanted to preserve white dominance.

Conservative Pat Robertson of the popular *Christian 700 Club* television program made it clear that his camp wanted power in high places: "The evangelicals of America will stand behind you," he promised, if Carter would appoint evangelicals to prominent positions within his administration.

America, Black and white, of all faiths and no faith, placed divided hopes on a candidate who had barely won the presidency. On Jan. 20, 1977, following a pre-inaugural service at the First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, the man upon whose shoulders now fell much weight addressed a nation teetering on edge.

Barely into his inaugural address the Sunday School teacher from Plains, Ga., read the biblical passage of Micah 6:8: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

He spoke not of personal piety, but of America as a nation of both "spirituality and human liberty" with a "special obligation" to "moral duties" that included "equality of opportunity."

"Our commitment to human rights must be absolute, our laws fair, our national beauty preserved; the powerful must not persecute the weak, and human dignity must be enhanced," he declared.

LOFTY GOALS

Speaking more specifically, the newly elected president called for "a spirit of individual

sacrifice" for the common good. Rather than waging military warfare, he pledged to work toward the elimination of all nuclear weapons and to wage "wars against poverty, ignorance and injustice," and for human rights and "a just and peaceful world that is truly humane."

Surrounded by throngs of people President Carter and First Lady Rosalynn and their 9-year-old daughter, Amy, walked a mile-and-a-half down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House, a first for an American president.

In so doing, Carter's intention was to "make the president available for all citizens and to breathe new life into the presidency," a reference to the damage former president Nixon had brought upon the White House.

Religion historian Randall Balmer later wrote that "Carter represented a clean break with the recent past, an opportunity to redeem the nation."

Launching his presidency with lofty goals of human rights and world peace, Carter began his time in office with high approval ratings.

With Nixon in the rear-view mirror, Democratic majorities in Congress, and lingering economic and energy challenges, the nation looked to a seemingly unified Washington for better times.

Democratic legislators, however, remained wary. For most of the past eight years they had struggled to work with an imperial and ineffective Republican White House. Now, Carter, although one of their own, brought to Washington a meager résumé and open aversion to increased budgets, pork-barrel spending and backroom deal-making — all fixtures in the nation's capital.

This is the 39th article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for Nurturing Faith Journal, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.



Rosalynn Carter, Jimmy Carter and Admiral Hyman Rickover (far right) aboard the submarine *USS Los Angeles* shortly after its commissioning. Wikipedia.

Amid political nervousness and high public expectations Carter addressed the nation on Feb. 2, two weeks into his term. But in “A Report to the American People on Energy,” Carter spoke not in a hopeful tone, but rather in words somber and nuanced.

“I have spent a lot of time deciding how I can be a good president,” he told his audience. Voicing pragmatic caution, he explained his “balanced plan” for economic recovery that included tax deductions for families but required “some sacrifice” from Americans in energy conservation on the road to “solar energy and other renewable energy resources.”

He asked Americans to put aside differences and unite “together to solve our problems, and because we are ready to trust one another.”

CHALLENGES

This challenge in some respects would define Carter’s presidency. Far from inspirational or bold, it prescribed a multi-pronged, complicated and tentative federal response to structural challenges, while assuming that a politically, racially and ideologically divided nation would put aside differences to unite for the betterment of everyone.

An inherent workaholic and a man of principle but often aloof to Congress, Carter’s early and determined focus on environmental policy at home, foreign

affairs afar and human rights at large strained relations in D.C. and with the public alike.

Weeks into his presidency Carter rescinded numerous congressional-favored water resource projects — dams, lakes and reservoirs scheduled for construction, many in the West — due to their adverse impacts on the environment and massive costs.

At the time he acknowledged his decision amounted to a “touchy legislative fight.” He was correct. Carter’s efforts to exert protective federal control over environmentally sensitive western lands ignited the Sagebrush Rebellion, an anti-government western U.S. movement seeking to overturn federal oversight of regional lands.

Later looking back following his presidency, Carter noted that his environmentally driven water resources agenda evolved into his “most long-lasting and bitter dispute” with Congress. Also looking back, historian Rick Perlstein assessed Carter as equally “engineer and preacher” — harboring “passionate certitude, beyond compromise.”

Carter’s mentor, Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, did not need the perspective of additional time to foresee his former student’s presidential trajectory. In April 1977, a mere three months into Carter’s presidency, Rickover offered prophetic words.

Complimenting the president for

adhering to his principles of environmentalism and human rights, in Carter’s words Rickover nonetheless “commented that I may not win reelection.”

HUMAN RIGHTS

Carter governed with resoluteness and determination. To conservatives’ disdain his human rights agenda included uplifting minority and impoverished Americans — African Americans, Native Americans, women and homosexuals.

Carter’s human rights focus also provided a moral framework for his extensive engagement in foreign affairs. Daily the president worked on “international goals.” His early priorities — as noted in his White House diary entry of April 29, 1977 — were:

The transfer of the Panama Canal to Panama and “peace for Israel and its neighbors, normal relations with China, nuclear arms control with the Soviets, the end of racial supremacy in Rhodesia and South Africa, better relations with less-developed countries, a strengthened NATO, reform of intelligence agencies, reduction in U.S. arms sales, and nuclear non-proliferation.”

It was an impossible agenda. But in time Carter achieved several notable foreign policy successes, including nuclear non-proliferation advances, the Panama Canal Treaty and the Camp David Accords.

The latter, a year-and-a-half excruciating process marshaled with great care and tact by the president, resulted in a September 1978 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Carter considered it his greatest achievement as president.

In the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab nation, Israel returned to Egypt land conquered during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War — a war in which a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria attacked the Israeli-occupied Sinai and Golan Heights but were soon routed by the Israelis. In return Israel received long-coveted full diplomatic relations with Egypt.

For putting aside their enmity, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Carter, in turn, established a new, effective model of negotiating peace between bitter enemies.

STRUGGLES

However, the president's increasingly complex, extensive and time-consuming foreign policy priorities took his attention away from home-front struggles of ordinary Americans. Nowhere were the struggles more evident than in rural America.

In the summer of 1977 the farmer from Plains watched as a drought devastated many crops from coast to coast, even as many corn and wheat farmers paradoxically reaped record crop yields. Whether crippled by drought or victimized by plunging commodity prices due to abundant harvests, a trifecta of loss of income, high debt and high interest rates produced mounting anger and a national farm strike.

During the winter of 1977–78 farmers “wandered the halls of Congress,” in the words of a *New York Times* article, examining the farm crisis. Seeking federal subsidies, they “demanded to see their representatives.”

In Washington and in Plains, tractors clogged the streets. In D.C. farmers “set herds of goats loose on the Capitol grounds” and occupied the office of the Secretary of Agriculture, hanging the secretary in effigy.

Although a farmer himself, Carter, fiscally conservative and knowing the ups and downs of farm life, paid but little personal attention to the crisis, declining to show favoritism to the sector. Instead, in his White House diary he wrote primarily of foreign affairs.

On one occasion, at a news conference, he noted that reporters were “surprisingly interested in domestic affairs.”

The president's commitment to fiscal conservatism also constrained some of his own priorities. Entering office with the goal of reforming welfare to provide more support and jobs for African Americans but without increasing the federal budget, he ultimately gave up when realizing meaningful reform would be impossible without larger expenditures, for which neither he nor Congress had an appetite.

REALITIES

Analytical, diligent and studious in policy matters he deemed important, Carter surrounded himself with highly capable

administrators and political appointees — including his Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Bergland, often besieged by irate farmers — charged with and trusted to work and speak on his behalf.

While efforts to uplift impoverished minorities through federal programs fell by the wayside due to political realities, Carter remained committed to upholding civil rights laws unpopular with many white Americans.

“There will never be any attempt while I am president to weaken the great civil rights acts that have passed in the years gone by,” he insisted.

Beyond merely holding the line on civil rights, Carter appointed many persons historically underrepresented in government offices. His minority and women appointees to the federal judiciary totaled more than all previous presidents combined.

Andrew Young, formerly a leading civil rights activist and U.S. congressman from Georgia, served as Carter's U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations from 1977–1979. In 1981 Carter awarded Young the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Young served as mayor of Atlanta from 1981–1990.

Women, too, made great strides forward in federal service. In 1979 alone Carter appointed 23 women to lifelong tenured federal judgeships, more than double the total number of female federal judges previously appointed over the past two centuries. The following year Carter's appointees included Ruth Bader Ginsburg, future Supreme Court justice, to the U.S. Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia.

Increasingly Carter as president spent much of his own time apart from the public view. In the White House intently engaged on solving a multitude of problems, he displayed less personal charisma than he had on the campaign trail.

His immediate predecessors — Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford — had also lacked personal charisma. But in a time of economic difficulty Americans, many remembering John F. Kennedy, now sought inspiration from their president.

Kennedy had communicated effectively with imagery and metaphor. Carter, an engineer by profession, delivered his addresses

and statements in impersonal conceptual language with little visible emotion. On the other hand, Carter's personal religious faith resonated with many Americans.

FAITH

As had many previous presidents, Carter found a church home in Washington, D.C. But whereas his predecessors typically attended church irregularly if at all — and often for political expediency — the Carters became a regular presence at the city's First Baptist Church. Frequently the president taught Sunday School.

In the White House, Carter daily read the Bible and prayed for God's guidance. But the president, wary of church-state entanglement, declined to hold religious services in the White House, as Nixon had done to his political advantage.

Early in his presidency Carter invited moderate Southern Baptist leaders to the White House for a conversation, convincing them to start a new and effective missions strategy. But denominational journalist Jack Harwell, then editor of the *Georgia Baptist Christian Index* (and later editor of this journal), subsequently warned Carter not to risk breaching church-state separation by favoring the Southern Baptist Convention.

Carter agreed, thereafter careful not to use federal facilities to promote religion of any kind.

Carter's faith and political ideology also connected with many progressive white Christians to the left of Southern Baptists. In time, however, some progressives would come to criticize Carter's human rights agenda as insufficient.

Many Catholics, on the other hand, disapproved of the president's support of *Roe v. Wade* and his opposition to federal support for religious schools. More uniformly appreciative, the African American community — predominantly Baptist by faith — largely embraced the president.

Carter pleased his Black constituents by signing an executive order creating a federal program to strengthen historically Black colleges and universities; establishing initiatives to expand minority-owned businesses; and supporting affirmative action.

On the other hand, Carter's religious convictions of human equality, his insistence on not favoring any one religion — including Christianity — over another, alongside his refusal to appoint conservative white evangelicals in his administration, put him on a collision course.

While the Sunday School teacher in the White House spoke evangelical “born again” language, his heavenly vocabulary had never really been enough for conservative evangelicals. Transforming America into a Christian nation was what mattered. And the first step in their earthly goal was protecting increasingly fragile white dominance.

RACE

Many white Southern Christians had long resisted the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court desegregation ruling. Defiantly citing God's will that Black and white persons not intermingle, the more violent in their midst had resorted to murders, executions, bombings, beatings and police brutality against Blacks.

Covered by reporters and captured in television footage, white terrorism scandalized America enough that the federal government enforced desegregation in the South in the late 1960s and into the 1970s.

In response, white parents frequently removed their children from public schools. In some counties officials shuttered their schools for several years, rather than integrate classrooms. In others, such as Holmes County, Miss., parents pulled all white children out of the public school system and enrolled many in whites-only private, charitable academies.

Black families in Holmes County fought back. Winning a district court victory, they prevailed in forcing President Nixon to instruct the Internal Revenue Service to uphold federal law by denying tax-exempt status to “segregation academies,” many explicitly Christian in nature.

Leading conservative white evangelicals, still insisting racial segregation was mandated in the Bible, began their own court battle, arguing that their religious freedom had been violated.

The most visible court battle over white Christians' religious freedom argument



President Jimmy Carter with King Hussein of Jordan, the Shah of Iran, and Shahbanou Farah Pahlavi of Iran. Wikipedia.

began in 1970 at segregated Bob Jones University in Greenville, S.C. For years the legal skirmish played out, with the school begrudgingly allowing some Black students on campus but blatantly discriminating against them.

Finally in January 1976 the IRS revoked Bob Jones' tax-exempt status, igniting further anger and defiance against the federal government on the part of conservative white evangelicals. Upon obtaining the White House, Carter angered many white evangelicals by supporting the IRS ruling.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Political activist Paul Weyrich, founder of the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank, later recounted what happened next. For several years he had been trying to corral white conservative Christians, scattered in their loyalties since Nixon's fall from grace, into a firm political alliance with the Republican Party.

“I had been trying to get these people interested in” political opposition to abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment, said Weyrich, “and I had utterly failed.” But what “changed their mind was Carter's intervention against the Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called defacto segregation.”

This time Weyrich succeeded. In defense of segregated Christian schools, some of the nation's leading conservative Christians — including televangelists Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Pat Robertson and Jim Bakker — formed what became the modern Christian Right.

They had found their foil: the racially inclusive presidential administration of

evangelical Sunday School teacher Jimmy Carter.

A perfect storm was brewing: Western conservatives chafed at Carter's environmental policies; farmers across the nation protested over financial woes magnified by debt, drought and low commodity prices; and other Americans grew increasingly frustrated with persistently high inflation and unemployment inherited from the Nixon administration. And, now, racist white evangelicals arrayed themselves against Carter and his socially progressive agenda.

BAD DAYS

On Monday, Sept. 12, 1977, before evangelicals soured on him, Carter wrote approvingly of his 66 percent approval rating. The same day Carter noted the support of the president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for his human rights advances and his nuanced abortion policy: upholding *Roe v. Wade* while seeking to minimize abortions through sex education among teenagers, laws encouraging adoptions, and the expansion of the WIC (Women and Infant Children) program to financially support women and children in poor families.

Nine days later Carter lamented “one of the worst days I've ever spent” as Bert Lance, his longtime friend and director of the Office of Management and Budget, resigned over a personal financial scandal. As a presidential scandal, it was but minor. In retrospect, however, it signaled the beginning of a retreat from public view except for periodic visits to Plains.

A month later Carter in his diary vented frustration over unfair press reporting and resolved to narrow his “public involvement” to a few key issues while “working behind the scenes on a wide range of programs and foreign policy matters.”

With the honeymoon period of his presidency over and juggling a growing roster of crises, from late 1977 onward Carter struggled to achieve significant domestic victories. Securing a raise in the minimum wage did little to ease economic hardships for poor Americans. A shortage of natural gas led Carter to approve the Alaskan-Canadian natural gas pipeline, a long-term project that never materialized.

While pragmatically seeking ways to increase domestic energy production, Carter the conservationist worked on solutions to conserve energy and protect sensitive lands. His achievements included:

- the creation of 17 national monuments totaling 56 million acres in Alaska
- regulations on strip mining (the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act)
- implementation of a tax on chemical and petroleum companies to finance cleanup of substances hazardous to the environment (the Superfund law)
- advances in renewable energy
- the American Endangered Wilderness Act that created more than a million new acres of protected wilderness in western states.

Victories aside, the methodical and analytical Carter offered a frank assessment of his presidency and the country during a staff and Cabinet retreat in April 1978.

Success in international human rights and nonproliferation he noted. Domestic affairs, on the other hand, troubled him.

“The country has shifted to a more conservative attitude; everything we do is contrary to people’s inclinations,” the president presciently observed. “Sometimes we are too slow making decisions. We have a lack of Washington experience. Some staff are too loyal to me, while others have inadequate communication.”

In short, Carter sensed “a deterioration of our esteem in the public eye.”

BACKLASH

With few major political victories thus far, Carter watched as Republicans gained seats in both the Senate and the House in the 1978 mid-term elections. He responded by curtailing some of his more progressive instincts.

Carter’s new tilt rightward, however, led to discontent on the left. He championed but ultimately failed to marshal through the Equal Rights Amendment. Needing passage by three-fourths of the states, the proposed amendment fell victim to a growing conservative backlash led by white evangelicals. On the left, some women’s rights leaders accused Carter of not trying hard enough to secure the amendment.

Neither conservative nor progressive enough to suit partisans in a rapidly fracturing nation, national discontent with the president registered in plunging poll numbers. Meanwhile, policy victories in the first half of 1979 — the ratification of the Panama Canal Treaty and the signing of the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) with the USSR — were major accomplishments but had little effect on what mattered most politically: Americans’ everyday lives.

Then from afar an international event did impact Americans’ lives, but not to the president’s advantage. A popular uprising against Iran’s government led to the January 1979 overthrow of nearly 60 years of monarchical rule — in recent years oppressive — and the creation of an Islamic republic.

In an era of increasing globalization the revolution created a problem for the U.S.: the loss of oil imports from one of the world’s leading oil-producing nations.

The fallout was swift. The U.S., the world’s biggest consumer of oil and a major OPEC importer, experienced a gasoline shortage. Compounding the problem, the regulation of domestic oil — put in place by Nixon — hampered domestic production.

Making matters worse, in March a partial meltdown of a nuclear reactor at the Three Mile Island nuclear power facility near Harrisburg, Penn., frightened Americans. Although the damage was contained, the incident further heightened fears about the nation’s energy policies.

In April, Carter responded by initiating the deregulation of oil price controls in order to increase domestic output. But with slowly increasing supplies came a free market-driven steep rise in gas prices at the pump. Long lines of cars formed at gas stations to purchase expensive gasoline. In some cities protests erupted.

Two months later and attending the international G7 meeting in Japan, on June 29, 1979, Carter in his White House diary observed: “All the news from home was bad,” including “long gas lines.” He expressed fear that rising inflation, led by gasoline prices, would lead to the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

ASSESSMENT

Back in America at secluded Camp David on July 4 — typically a day of celebration and national goodwill — marked by long gas lines, Carter second-guessed himself. He was scheduled to address the nation the following day on the subject of the energy crisis. Now he hesitated.

The nation’s problems were “much broader and deeper” than a mere energy crisis. “Our trust among the American people is low,” he confided to his diary, “and the number of people who listen to my voice is minimal.”

Choosing to cancel his July 5 speech without public explanation, Carter remained at Camp David for an additional week. As his absence from the public eye generated negative news headlines, the president sought “answers to some basic issues affecting America.”

He arranged listening sessions with governors, “political wise men and women,” state and local leaders, and leading progressive religious leaders. At Camp David the president heard both affirmation and criticism, the latter difficult to digest.

“[I]t’s not easy for me to accept criticism, and to reassess my ways of doing things, to admit my mistakes,” Carter journaled. He noted that some of the negative feedback was “severe, including the basic question: Can I govern the country?”

Assessing national problems and his own political struggles, Carter on July 15, 1979 addressed some 100 million Americans in a television broadcast. From his Camp David listening sessions and with frank honesty he quoted some criticisms leveled at his administration:

He did not “see the people enough anymore”; he did not communicate “an understanding of our common good”; and some young Americans were tired from “suffer[ing] from recession all our lives.”

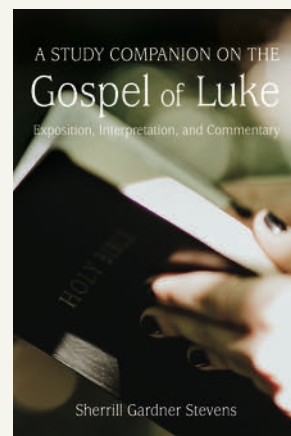
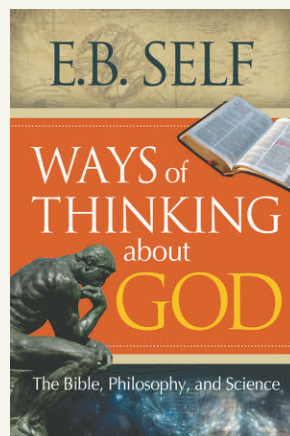
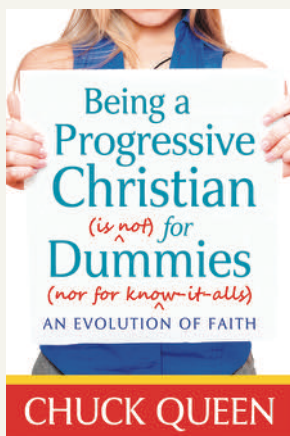
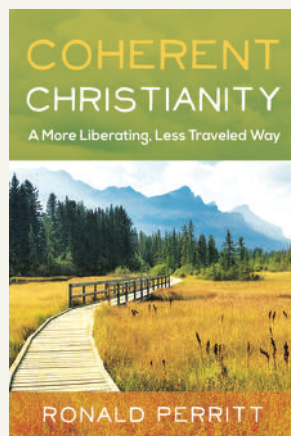
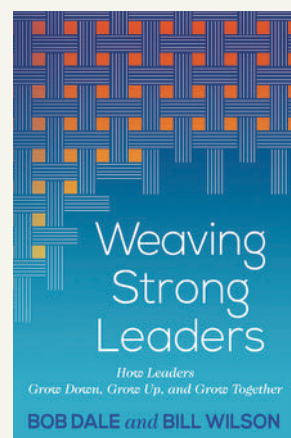
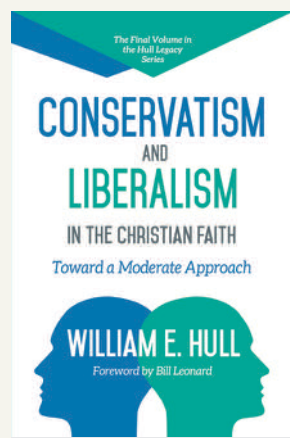
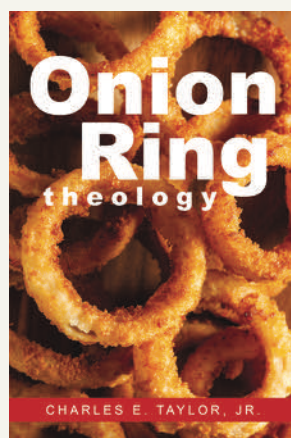
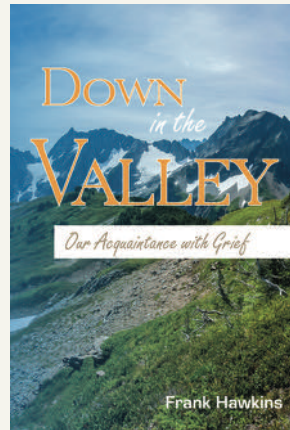
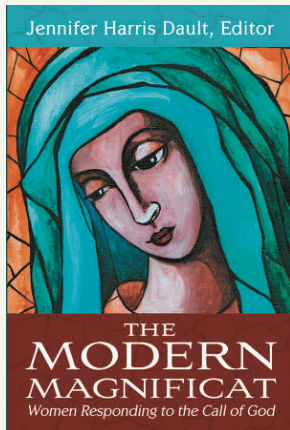
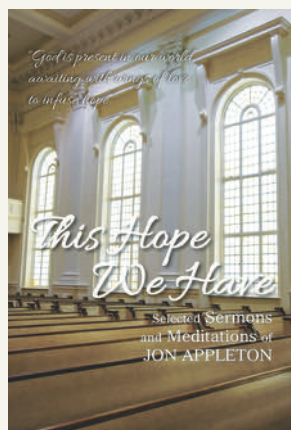
One statement, according to Carter, summarized much of the feedback he received: “Mr. President, we are confronted with a moral and a spiritual crisis.” **NFJ**

[EDITOR’S NOTE: Part three will appear in the next issue.]

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PEACE ON EARTH

Composer brings soothing music videos to new audience

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — In an often noisy and unsettled world, music composer and photographer Dave Combs is freely sharing his calming and reassuring gifts. And his audience is very grateful.

“It is my goal to provide activities directors at assisted living and nursing home facilities with zero-cost, soothing, relaxing music videos which I have created and produced,” said Combs.

With the pandemic bringing additional health threats and isolation to those older residents, Combs’ offer is being well received.

IT’S PERSONAL

“These activities directors are so appreciative when I call and tell them I know from personal experience just how important and difficult their jobs are,” he said. “My 97-year-old mother passed away three years ago at Arbor Acres here in Winston-Salem.”

And he noticed something else during his daily visits over those three years: “I saw firsthand how important music was to her and the other residents.

“As a photographer, and a composer and producer of instrumental music for over 30 years, I have been truly blessed and decided this is a way of giving back,” he said.

“My music videos have always been described as soothing and relaxing, and the current stressful environment of isolation at retirement facilities made me realize that my music can play a constructive role in reducing stress and anxiety.”

So he decided to make his music videos available for free via YouTube. And he has already contacted more than 200 activities directors statewide as well as long-term care associations in all 50 states.



MUSICAL ROOTS

Combs grew up in a musical family in East Tennessee — with an emphasis on church music. Both of his parents played piano.

“My Grandmother Combs played the autoharp and pump organ, and would sing a solo during almost every Sunday night service at the small church down the dirt road from her house in southwest Virginia,” he said. “So I guess you could say music is in my genes.”

Dave took piano lessons for a couple of years but mainly taught himself during the summer of 1963, prior to his junior year in high school. He lived with his father in Bradenton, Fla., for that time.

“I practiced at least four hours every day that summer, playing every hymn in the hymnal,” he recalled.

Most Sundays Dave and his father would drive to Tampa Bay with an old portable pump organ in tow. His father worked for Tropicana Products, whose owner at the time, Anthony Rossi, was a devout Christian.

Along with Rossi’s son-in-law, Russell Riegler, the Combses would board one of the Tropicana Orange ships from Honduras to lead services for the crews.

COMPOSITION

However, it was not until 1981 that Dave wrote his first composition titled, “Rachel’s Son.” In a *Guideposts Magazine* article in 1994, he described how music went from a hobby to a career.

His wife, Linda, came home from work one day humming a tune. She noted that he plays it on the piano all the time, but she didn’t know the name of the song.

“It doesn’t have a name,” he replied.

Dave would come home from his job with AT&T and “unwind at our old Knabe baby grand — just messin’ around at the piano, as my mother used to put it.”

Usually he would play from sheet music or something he’d heard on the radio.

“Sometimes I just made something up,” he said. “But it never occurred to me that I had actually written a song.”

At his wife’s urging, he wrote out the melody and chords. Then, several months later, he played it at the christening of a friend’s daughter, Rachel.

“It didn’t have words, just a tune,” said Combs. “From that day on we called it ‘Rachel’s Song,’ for our goddaughter.”

Much of Combs’ time and attention

were given to his work — traveling nationally to consult with plant managers about how to make factories more efficient using computer technology. His wife suggested that, during one of his visits to Nashville, he should record his song and give a copy to Rachel.

NASHVILLE

After completing his work one day, Combs drove around Music Square in Nashville where recording studios dot the map. Evening had arrived and most businesses were shut down, except for one — The Music Mill.

That initial contact led to Dave returning on a future visit to rent a studio and record a demo tape of “Rachel’s Song.” Back in Winston-Salem the song was featured on an easy-listening radio show and received requests from listeners to hear it more often.

“I sold copies for the cost of a blank tape,” said Combs, “and before long I’d received wheelbarrows full of mail.”

One woman, whose daughter named Rachel had died from a brain tumor, wrote to say the soothing melody brought back wonderful memories.

“Another note arrived with a picture of a beaming autistic girl hugging the tape to her chest,” recalled Dave. “Your music reached her,” the note read.”

Doctors and nurses said the song calmed their patients — and some brides chose it for their weddings.

“One letter even described how my music had turned sitting in a traffic jam into a delightful experience,” he said.

So Dave wrote more songs and returned to Nashville a couple of years later to record an entire album.

BIG STEP

Large record stores and distributors were uninterested, but Dave found a niche selling his music in gift shops. Visitors would hear the songs being played in the store and ask about their availability.

“Before long the notion of working on music fulltime took over my thoughts,” said Dave. “But it seemed foolhardy.”

Linda had just left her fulltime job to care for aging parents. And Dave was still a

few years shy of retirement.

“One night I prayed for guidance before going to sleep,” he said. “The next morning I woke up to the strains of ‘Rachel’s Song’ floating from the clock radio.”

While driving he heard the radio host say, “And now here’s my favorite, ‘Rachel’s Song.’” Dave said he nearly drove off the road.

Combs doubted his ability to create enough music each year that would appeal to listeners. But his wife urged him to trust in God and his gifts.

“After agonizing over my decision for months, I was sitting in church one Sunday morning, remembering the mail we’d received that week from people all over the world,” he recalled. “They didn’t know about the decision weighing on my mind, yet they addressed my concerns.”

TALENTS

One of the more than 10,000 letters Dave received read: “Your music is what God put you on this planet to do.”

“That got me to thinking about how the Bible talks about using your talents wisely,” said Combs, who prayed: “Would I serve you better by writing and producing music?”

He resigned his position with AT&T and hasn’t looked back.

“Sometimes when the Lord inspires me with a new song, the melody is simple,” he said. “It’s at those moments I understand more fully that God’s plan for our lives needn’t be complicated either.”

Combs continues to seek divine direction for how best to use his talents. His Sunday school class at Winston-Salem’s First Baptist Church on Fifth — meeting

via Zoom during the pandemic — uses the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies inside this journal with additional online resources.

On Pentecost Sunday, Bible study writer and video host Tony Cartledge encouraged putting the lesson into practice — by doing something to show the presence of Christ to others in unexpected ways.

“Your words struck me in a very meaningful and encouraging way,” said Dave in a message to Tony.

He told of how God was calling him to share his music with “a particular segment of our population that is really struggling right now — the residents and staff of assisted living and nursing home facilities.”

MUSIC VIDEOS

“My thinking was that these [music videos] might be helpful to individuals looking for something relaxing and soothing to play in the background while they work or exercise or do something creative,” he said. “I even created four music videos that play non-stop for hours.”

Combs said he was amazed by the size of this potential audience nationally: 1.3 million persons in nursing homes; 800,000 in nearly 30,000 assisted living facilities; 75,000 in intermediate care facilities; with three million workers in skilled nursing and residential care facilities.

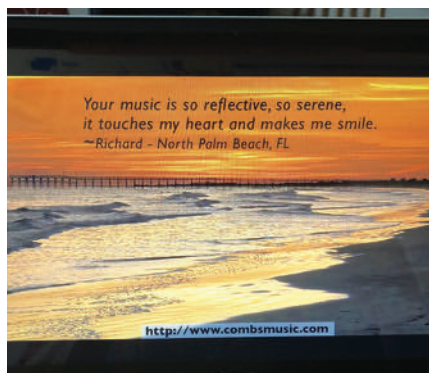
Responses from activities directors have been very affirming.

“Your music has been a blessing to many of our residents,” wrote one. “It is amazing how you took your passion to help so many people.”

“I want to thank you for sharing these most beautiful videos and soothing relaxation music and photos,” said another. “During these COVID times, this is most enjoyable for our residents.”

Dave commends his wife of 50 years, Linda, who works with him in this ever-growing musical venture. “I am so blessed,” he added.

The YouTube channel for Dave’s music is simply “combsmusic,” and his web site is combsmusic.com. Piano music books may be purchased by calling (800) 932-6627. He welcomes email communications at dave@combsmusic.com. **NFJ**



Lipscomb University salvages buried archaeology program

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Paige Patterson's ill-fated tenure as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas had one good feature for archaeology nerds like me. He strongly supported the school's archaeology program, known as the Tandy Institute.

Not so the new president, Adam W. Greenway, for whom the seminary's sole focus is the "training of pastors and other ministers of the gospel for the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Citing financial hardship, Greenway used the COVID-19 pandemic as a convenient cover for eliminating the entire archaeology program and firing its director, Steven Ortiz, along with the other faculty. The move also left 25 graduate students in limbo.

Ortiz, a respected archaeologist and director of the Tel Gezer Excavation Project, was a tenured professor. That normally offers some job security, but a



An inscribed stone marks the boundaries of ancient Gezer, where Steven Ortiz has been leading a multi-year excavation project. Photo by Gil Maestro / Wikipedia.com

loophole in the school's charter allowed Greenway to dismiss even tenured faculty if their entire department is eliminated.

The announcement sent shock waves through the world of archaeology. It was bad enough that social restrictions due to the pandemic had canceled virtually the entire 2020 dig season; now an important player in the field had been sent not just to the bench, but also out of the stadium.

Fortunately, the game isn't over and there's a happy ending in sight. Philanthro-

pist Mark Lanier, a longtime supporter of American Schools of Oriental Research, has come to the rescue.

Having both the desire and the wherewithal to do something about it, Lanier contacted his alma mater, Lipscomb University. The Nashville liberal arts school is affiliated with the Church of Christ.

With financial support from Lanier and his wife, Becky, Lipscomb not only hired Ortiz and classical archaeologist Tom Davis, but also gained rights to the Tandy Institute's research, some of its archives and study collections, and other aspects of the Master of Arts and doctorate programs.

The new program, to be known as the Lanier Archaeology Center, plans to begin offering degrees in January 2021 and has signed on to be engaged in four field research projects.

Recognizing the value of archaeology as a scientific enterprise that makes invaluable contributions to biblical studies is no small matter. The Tandy Institute's work will not be buried beneath the accumulating layers of fundamentalist teachings at Southwestern but will live on to shed more light on the biblical world.

"The world needs the deep thinking and the perspective that archaeology provides, and it broadens who we are as an institution of higher learning across an array of academic disciplines," said Lipscomb President L. Randolph Lowery, in a university press release.

"And, for those in the Christian faith, it is archaeology that puts that faith into perspective," he added, "and that gives us the context and background for what we read and study in scripture."

Amen to that, and many thanks to those who are making it possible. **NFJ**



A much-enlarged outdoor replica of the palm-sized Gezer Calendar on display at Tel Gezer, Israel. Wikipedia.

GETTING WET

A Baptist preacher ruminates on the holy water of baptism

BY LAMAR WADSWORTH

This old Baptist preacher refuses to own a pair of waders. I love being waist deep in Baptist holy water with new believers, and getting wet with them.

Most of my baptisms have, conveniently, been in indoor church baptistries. However, the act that confirms one's commitment to live as a follower of Jesus might need to be a little less convenient.

When I was pastor of Hill City Baptist Church in northwest Georgia, we baptized in a spring-fed creek in Redwine Cove. My predecessor, Rembert Moore, coached me on the fine points of creek baptism.

"All you have to do is put them under, son," he said. "You don't have to worry about bringing them back up. Straightway they come up out of the water."

That creek is the second-coldest Baptist holy water I've been in. The coldest was the Christiana River, which runs beside the historic Welsh Tract Baptist Church at Newark, Del., where one of my Baptist preacher ancestors, Philip James, was baptized.

The church building dates to the 1730s, but the congregation was organized in Wales in 1701 and has been at its current location since 1703. Those Welsh Baptists were meticulous record keepers. Their baptizing place still looks like Morgan Edwards' description of it 300 years ago.

Philip James was baptized there in 1714 — February 1714. When living in Baltimore, the place was only a little more than an hour north of us. One bitterly cold February day in 1991, I waded in to see for myself.

With this year's pandemic, worship and other church functions moved online. I don't know how to do immersion baptism with social distancing, but there is an easy solution.



On my last Sunday as pastor at Woolford Memorial Baptist Church in Baltimore, we had two siblings, around 10 or 12 years old, to be baptized. I could have baptized them but I gave their grandmother, Deacon Marie Chaney, that privilege.

There is no act of Christian ministry that is scripturally restricted to the holder of a particular office in the church. In Acts 8, the only authority Philip had for baptizing the Ethiopian man was what he received through his own baptism. Marie's authority to baptize her grandchildren was rooted in her baptism, not her ordination as a deacon.

There's no worry about masks and social distancing with members of our immediate families. So I would love to see the children of believing parents baptized by those who brought them into this world and led them to faith in Jesus.

Use the church baptistry, a swimming pool or the creek. Video it, and show it to the church.

Most all pastors remember a ministry incident they wish they had done differently. For me, the most prominent one happened about 35 years ago.

We had observed communion in the morning service. A single mother, with two

children, who had been attending regularly, waited until everyone had cleared out to speak to me. She was fighting back tears.

"Preacher, I hope I didn't do anything wrong, but you did say 'all who love the Lord Jesus Christ, who look to him for the forgiveness of sins, and desire to follow him are welcome at the Lord's table,'" she said. "So when the trays were passed with the bread and the grape juice, I took it."

I told her she had done the right thing. Her next words gushed like a dam break: "I do love the Lord; he has forgiven my sins. I do want to follow him."

A smile came across her tear-streaked face, followed by the most beautiful holy laughter I ever heard as she added, "I guess that means I need to be baptized." I replied, "I guess it does."

That afternoon I filled the baptistry with Baptist holy water. That evening, Judy came down the steps into the water — followed by her 11-year-old daughter.

Judy didn't know that she didn't know how to do evangelism. Her daughter came not only to support her mom but to make the same commitment. I baptized both of them.

After years of reflection, I realize that being thoroughly drenched in Baptist holy water made Judy as qualified as this preacher ever hopes to be to baptize her daughter.

Judy didn't get to immerse her daughter as she should have, but she did at least sprinkle her. After I baptized her daughter, mother and daughter embraced tightly while standing in the water. Judy sprinkled her daughter with her tears and the Baptist holy water that dripped from her hair onto her daughter's head. **NFJ**

—Lamar Wadsworth is a retired adoptions case manager and minister living in Rockmart, Ga. He is the author of the novel, Remembering Miss Addie from Nurturing Faith.

Embracing, advancing good faith in face of a bad year

By R. Mitch Randall

As 2020 began, optimism and anticipation filled the air. The new year brought hopeful possibilities and renewed resolutions.

We were going to be more positive and productive. We committed ourselves to love more, hate less. The new year held incredible potential until a multilayered darkness descended.

News outlets began reporting on a virus spreading across China. Still an ocean away, Americans continued with their hopeful optimism. They moved forward unworried about their futures.

Then, on January 20, doctors diagnosed a patient in Washington State with what the world would come to know as COVID-19. The American coasts were hit the hardest at first, but the remainder of the country soon followed.

Seemingly overnight, wearing a mask in public and social distancing became the new norm. The global pandemic of coronavirus changed the way we interact, communicate and live.

Now, at this writing, the world faces more than 25 million cases of COVID-19, with nearly one million of those leading to death.

As the country suffered under the strain of the pandemic, another virus emerged from the shadows of American history to remind Americans it had not disappeared. On May 25, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man died in the custody of Minneapolis police. Video surveillance showed an officer kneeling on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds.

The situation sparked protests across the country, as Black Lives Matter marchers demanded justice and reform. The marches and protests were primarily peaceful, but some erupted into violence. Opposition

protests emerged, as supporters from both sides demonstrated how fractured the country remains on the issue of race and justice.

To add insult to injury, hurricane season ushered twin storms into the Gulf of Mexico, wreaking havoc in Louisiana and Texas. Meteorologists and climatologists reminded Americans that, if we continue to ignore climate change, storms will increasingly grow stronger and more dangerous.

In the midst of these dark skies, a glimmer of light broke through the clouds. Good Faith Media launched in July, bringing the resources of EthcisDaily and Nurturing Faith together. Our storied organizations shared a dream of coming together to make a larger impact for the gospel of love, freedom and justice.

Centered on the person of Jesus Christ, Good Faith Media seeks to offer freedom, inclusion and justice for all people. We take Jesus extremely seriously, not as a tyrant but as a liberator bringing love and hope to the world.

Our mission is simple: Good Faith Media provides reflection and resources at the intersection of faith and culture through an inclusive Christian lens.

GFM's four service offerings include News and Opinion, Publishing, Videos and Podcasts, and Experiences. The staff is the best in the business, working as a team providing relative daily columns, a spectacular journal, insightful curriculum, inspiring books, stunning videos, thought-provoking podcasts, and life-changing experiences.

The reason we are able to offer so

many ministry opportunities is because of the generous support of our investors and donors. Good Faith Media investors are committed to the mission of freedom for all, inclusion for all, and justice for all.

Together, the staff, board of directors, columnists, contributors and supporters work tirelessly to present an alternative voice to damage-causing religious fundamentalism.

For too long, fundamentalists controlled the public narrative in response to critical issues facing the world. A sensible, reliable, and trustworthy voice can combat the rigidity and hatefulness of fundamentalism. Good Faith Media wants to be that voice!

During November and December, you have two opportunities to invest in Good Faith Media.

The #GivingTuesday campaign is an opportunity to contribute to our work in a practical and energizing way. The Tuesday following Thanksgiving, December 1, will be the day you can give at our website (goodfaithmedia.org) or write a check, mailing it to P.O. Box 721972, Norman, OK, 73070.

Another opportunity is to include Good Faith Media in your year-end giving. This campaign focuses on the past year's work, which has been extraordinary. From our Good Faith Weekly podcast to the many Nurturing Faith books published in 2020, this year has been remarkable.

For as much darkness remains in our world, Good Faith Media is attempting to shine the light of Jesus through those cracks in the clouds. By investing in this good work, you will help us to spread the love and hope of the gospel to the world. **NFJ**

—R. Mitch Randall is CEO of
Good Faith Media.

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Questions Christians ask scientists

Does science change the way you read the Bible?

BY PAUL WALLACE

The cosmos of the ancient Israelites was centered on a flat earth resting on pillars, covered by a hard dome-shaped firmament, and surrounded on all sides — including above and below — by water. We may conclude that if the Bible were intended to be a science book, we'd have thrown it out centuries ago.

But this makes it hard to see why science matters at all when we read the Bible, and in a narrow sense, it *doesn't* matter.

No matter what theory scientists come up with, if God ever loved us, God will love us still; if Jesus ever mattered, he will matter still; and if justice and reconciliation were ever our calling, they will be our calling still.

It seems that the shape of the universe has nothing to do with our daily human experience of God and one another.

But we live in a scientific age. We do not read our Bibles on a flat earth under a transparent dome but on a spherical planet orbiting a star revolving about the center of a vast galactic pinwheel, turning among black holes and quasars.

These are the things God has made.

We cannot set aside what we know and what we love when we sit down with scripture, nor are we asked to. Jesus commands us to love God with all our *mind* as well as with our heart, soul and strength.

There is such a thing as the scientific love of God. Those who wish to take both faith and science seriously must hold the Bible in one hand and *Scientific American* in the other.

When I read the Bible I do not turn off my understanding of science. And science brings to my readings what you might call *extras*.

They are secondary, supplemental thoughts, new and fun ideas neither

demanding nor contradicted by my basic view of scripture as a human record of Israel's encounter with a real and loving God.

Why even mention these extras, then, if they are secondary? I see three reasons:

(1) Science *does* describe the creation of Israel's real and loving God. (2) I think of these extras every time I read the Bible, and can't stop thinking of them. (3) Our approach to the Bible should be as free, creative and imaginative as the God who inspired it.

Consider an example from Genesis 1: "And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature. . . And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind" (vv. 20–21, 24–25).

Notice that *the waters* and *the earth* bring forth living creatures. These verses suggest that God creates indirectly, using what was previously made. God's creation creates!

This passage invites us to imagine evolution in all its weirdness and beauty. We are free to visualize life being brought forth deep in the waters, perhaps micro-organisms thriving on hydrothermal vents on the ocean floor four billion years ago.

We may envision eutherocaroids, distant ancestors of centipedes who left the sea 530 million years ago, beating even plants in life's slow landward creep.

The Middle Cambrian oddball *Opabinia* provides a colorful side note. This five-eyed, backward-mouthed, limbless, long-nosed, sea-dwelling arthropod was one of the first and strangest animals to ever live.

The authors of Genesis, whoever they were, knew nothing of evolution or hydrothermal vents or eutherocaroids or *Opabinia*. God did not whisper these verses into their ears, knowing we would eventually figure out evolution and discover the secret truth of scripture.

Instead, they observed nature, saw that God had given it the capacity to generate new things, and wove this insight into their creation story.

A second example: When I read the prophet Isaiah, I think of Elon Musk, the inventor and innovator. He dreams of populating Mars and eventually colonizing the entire Solar System.

It won't come easily. Mars alone presents stiff challenges. Gravity on the Red Planet is much feebler than here at home. So, after we spend some time on Mars, our bones and muscles will grow weak (and this process may not be reversible).

The average temperature on Mars runs near -67°F , so we couldn't play baseball, sunbathe, or do walkathons. We can't breathe the thin Martian atmosphere, which allows lots of ultraviolet light to reach the surface, so cancer, cognitive disease and reproductive problems will multiply.

The planet lacks a magnetic field, so it's constantly bombarded with fast-moving electrons and protons from the sun — even more cancer.

Mars orbits farther from the sun than Earth, so even bright days would seem dim. This fact, combined with the lack of surface water and organics in the soil, makes it impossible to grow food — or anything else, for that matter.

Also, no germs live on Mars, so our immune systems will lose their ability to fight any diseases that may arrive on spacecrafts from Earth.

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

This makes our home planet seem so much more, well, homey. Surely we belong among the rivers and trees of Earth. Isaiah makes this plain:

I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, so that all may see and know, all may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it (41:18–20).

For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!). (45:18)

What a contrast to the lifeless, desolate, radiation-saturated, frozen, dry, alien world of Mars. But scientifically speaking, our fit with Earth is no more surprising than a puddle's fit with a sidewalk.

We belong on Earth because we were drawn out of it and have evolved along with it. Evolution's great stream carries us and the rest of the planet along together.

But if we were ever to leap the high hurdles I mentioned (and more) and successfully colonize Mars, the same would one day be said of us and that planet. We would eventually evolve to fit there as snugly as we do here. The Mars-dwellers, after many generations, would eventually come to feel very much at home there.

So, when I read these passages from Isaiah, this thought comes to me as a bonus: God has not made us specially to fit into a static, preexisting world as a piece fits into a jigsaw puzzle. Instead, God has created and is still creating us along with a universe in which we might ever find a home here, on Mars, and maybe one day across the solar system.

You may disagree with what I am doing here. You may think that it's wrong-headed to drag evolution into a discussion of Genesis because that book is really about relationships between God, humanity and creation.

Knowledgeable critics will point out that Isaiah's poetry is not meant to show how nicely we fit into the biosphere, but to contrast Israel's good green future with the lifeless desolation of the Babylonian exile.

But I do not intend to replace standard understandings of scripture with scientific ones. These examples show how science deepens, sharpens or expands traditional meanings.

Christians who love science are free to imagine new things when they come to scripture, to create a kind of scientific commentary on the Bible. These examples show how scripture might be enlarged, and not reduced or replaced, by science. **NFJ**

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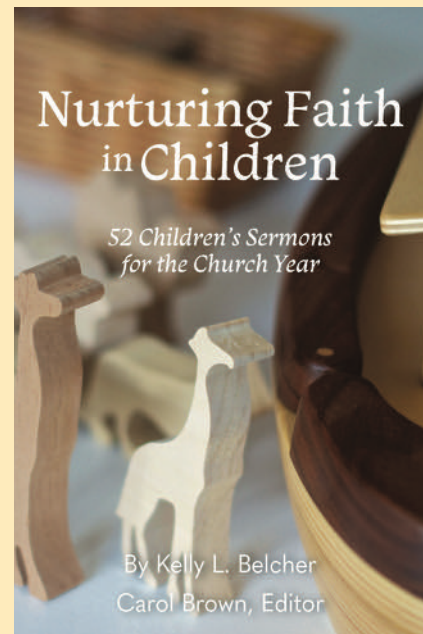
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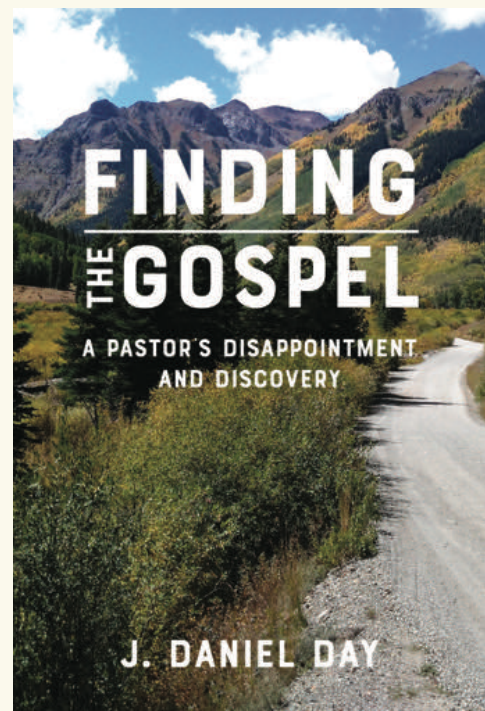
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