

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2021

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deep roots,
toxic results

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DIGGING DEEPER

Tony Cartledge on
writing his 500th
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A TIME TO LAUGH?

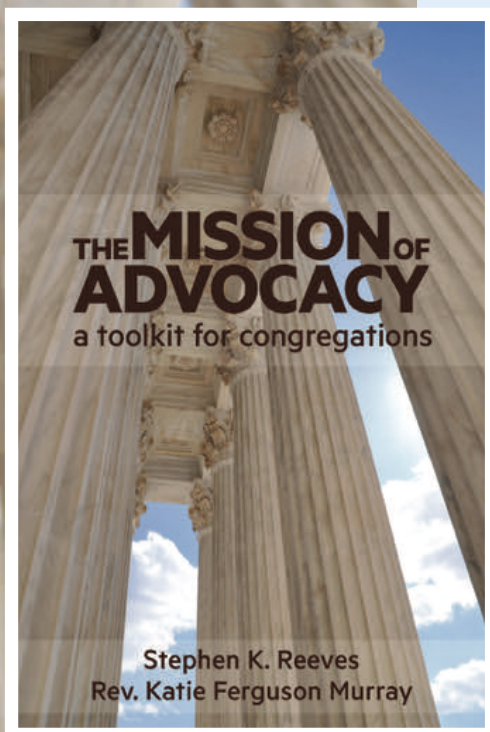
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See page 21 for more information.

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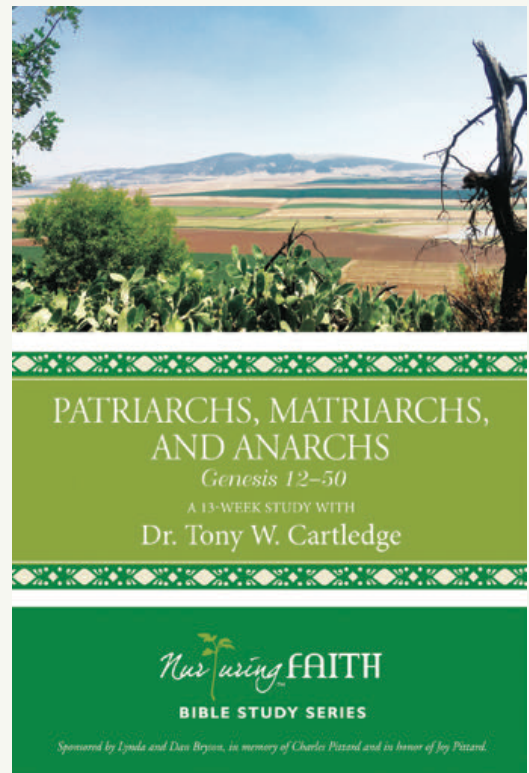
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Nurturing Faith Journal provides relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

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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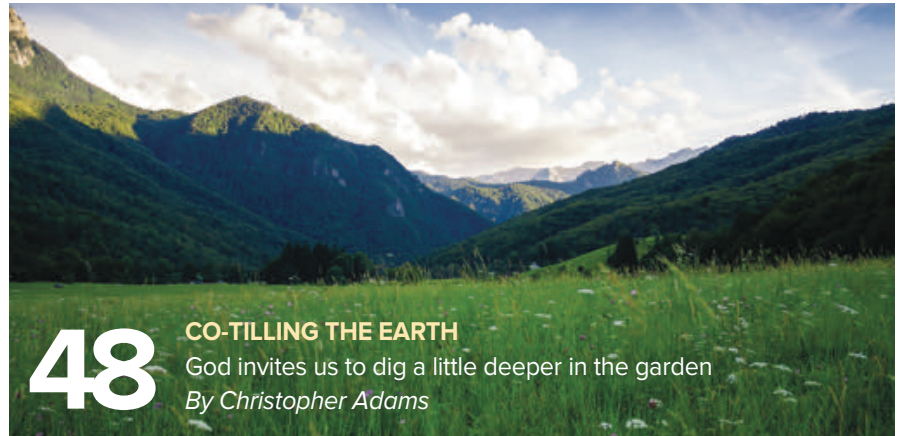
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Photo by John D. Pierce. Winter is a great time to plan a spring or summer getaway.

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“My goal is to bring academically informed insights to a lay audience in an accessible way.”

DIGGING DEEPER

Tony Cartledge reflects on writing more than 500 weekly Bible Studies

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

A milestone for Nurturing Faith Bible Studies is being marked within this issue of the journal. The lesson and resources dated Sunday, Jan. 24, represent the 500th consecutive week that Tony Cartledge has provided these insightful lessons — along with the online video overviews and other teaching resources.

His disciplined and scholarly work is commendable and appreciated by many. Tony's unique and thoughtful approach to understanding and applying biblical truth has brought knowledge and inspiration to many faithful teachers and learners for nearly a decade.

So we are taking this good opportunity to talk with Tony about his approach to ongoing Bible study — and what might be ahead.

NFJ: First, thanks, and congratulations on this milestone. Many people depend on you each week for this helpful information and needed inspiration. Do you feel that appreciation?

TC: Thank you for having confidence in me to do this, and those through the years who have supported the project. I do feel appreciation from readers when I get an occasional email question, or when I have an opportunity to visit a church or a class that uses the curriculum.

Physically visiting churches has been difficult during pandemic isolation, but I've

had some opportunity to guest-teach classes that use the NFBS curriculum through Zoom or by recording full-length video lessons. That has been rewarding.

And I'm grateful some churches have regularly supplied links to our weekly video as a fallback for members who don't have the option of a virtual or in-person class.

NFJ: What is your philosophy and mission for Nurturing Faith Bible Studies?

TC: My basic philosophy is that everyone should have the opportunity to learn more about the Bible than they gain through typical devotional and curriculum materials.

Most people do not have the option of attending divinity school or doing advanced training in biblical studies. Yet many are eager to dig deeper than is possible with study materials that remain near the surface or pay little attention to the text itself.

This is why I focus primarily on the text rather than treating it peripherally. My goal is to bring academically informed insights to a lay audience in an accessible way. That means including ideas that may stretch readers' current understanding of scripture. Whether they accept new concepts or not, they can grow in awareness of other views.

I want readers to understand better the lengthy and complex development of scripture along with the competing and complementary agendas of its authors. I want them to appreciate the different physical, cultural, social and political worlds in

which the scriptures were written.

I want them to see why it is inappropriate to impose modern approaches to history writing and science on ancient authors who wrote from different perspectives.

I want them to engage with literary and rhetorical issues related to the biblical writers' use of metaphor and hyperbole, rather than assuming that everything should be taken literally.

That's a lot, and sometimes it may feel threatening, but I think it's important to make such insights available, rather than sugarcoating or glossing over critical issues. I believe our readers deserve that, and for me, integrity demands it.

NFJ: It takes a lot of discipline to write these lessons and prepare the videos and other resources. Have you developed a routine for your research, writings, video-taping, etc.?

TC: I do have a general routine. Each August I work through the lectionary texts for the next calendar year and devise a "scope and sequence" plan. This provides a basis for getting started during the rest of the year: I don't have to waste time wondering what I should write about in a given month.

I learned the importance of this as a young pastor when I would spend hours trying to decide what I should preach on the following Sunday — and back then there were always morning and evening services.

I learned the importance of working out a preaching plan for six months to a year in advance. That not only gave me a headstart each week, but was helpful to the volunteer or minister in charge of worship music.

But I digress. Due to our production schedule, I'm typically writing lessons four months in advance. By the first of February, for example, my goal is to have the May lessons completed.

I begin each month by copying that month's lesson texts and titles from the scope and sequence plan into a new document. I then dig into my files. If I have written a previous study, commentary or sermon on any of the texts, I'll copy and paste that material at the appropriate place for later review.

Then I read the text several times and decide if I want to stick closely to the lectionary text, or if I think it best to add some introductory verses or include verses omitted by the lectionary. I look for ways to organize the text into sections, and decide on a heading for each section. This gets me organized.

I use a powerful Bible software program called Accordance to compare multiple translations and make it easy to look for any notable vocabulary or grammatical constructions in the Hebrew or Greek text.

Once I'm familiar with the text and have my initial impressions of its significance, I widen the net by reading several good commentaries, including those with a critical as well as hermeneutical bent.

In writing, I begin with an introductory thought or question that will hopefully engage the reader, then dig into a literary walk through the text, highlighting contextual, cultural or vocabulary issues that could impact its meaning.

Sometimes I include questions or thoughts related to application within the discussion, while at other times I work straight through the text and save the "So what?" questions for the end.

Whether from the Old or New Testament, I keep in mind how someone with a "Jesus worldview" could put such learning from the text into practice.

Photo by Susan Cartledge



For our print format, my target length is 9,000 characters, including spaces, for each lesson. So a lot of editing goes on after the initial writing.

Sometimes I put items in "Digging Deeper" or "The Hardest Question" as I'm writing, and at other times I cut material from the first draft of the lesson and move it to one of those places.

The benefit of having these resources online is that there is no word limit: I can include as much additional commentary as I think is helpful, along with pictures of biblical sites or artifacts.

The process of writing always includes several additional passes of proofreading and wordsmithing for readability.

From a practical perspective, the

writing gets done whenever time is available, mostly on days when I don't teach classes at Campbell, and often on weekends.

Recording the videos is another matter. Setting up the various lights and camera needed to transform our dining room into a recording studio takes over the room. It's the same room I use as a home office and remote teaching station, so I don't leave recording equipment up all the time.

I typically record two months' worth of videos over two or three days. These require me to re-familiarize myself with each lesson before launching into the lesson. With each video I change shirts, start the process over, and hope none of my neighbors starts mowing the lawn or power-washing their driveways.

NFJ: How does basing the lessons on the Revised Common Lectionary impact your choice of texts and writings?

The primary impact is obvious: the RCL has a set three-year cycle of texts. With a few exceptions, each Sunday's texts include one from the Psalms, one from elsewhere in the Old Testament, one from the Gospels, and one from the remainder of the New Testament.

Sometimes the texts are related in hopes that liturgical readings during worship will build on the theme. At other times, the texts have no particular relation.

The upside of following the lectionary is that the designated texts provide a ready starting point for planning. The downside is that we're limited to those texts, which give inordinate attention to the Psalms and short shrift to the remainder of the Old Testament.

As I choose texts for each year, I look for ways to bring some thematic unity to the lessons. I may follow the gospel texts during Lent, for example, or Old Testament texts during Advent (or vice versa). I look for opportunities to focus on a book like Exodus or James when the RCL offers texts in sequence.

And, of course, I avoid repeating a text that we've recently studied. I maintain a master list of all the texts we've used and the dates they appeared, and I try not to return to a text within five years of the last time we studied it. Since the cycle repeats every three years and some texts appear on multiple Sundays, however, some repetition is inevitable.

NFJ: What do you hear from those who study and/or teach these lessons?

TC: The folks who give me feedback on the lessons most commonly express appreciation for the depth and academic insight brought to the lessons, though they acknowledge it can be a stretch for some of their class members.

I've been pleasantly surprised at how many people say they find the videos to be helpful. Some classes use the videos as a teaching component and then have someone facilitate discussion.

"One of the amazing aspects of scripture is the way in which the same text may speak to us in different ways at different stages of life, or under different circumstances."

I generally close each video with a thought for the week — a challenge to carry the lesson forward in a practical way — and some have told me they find that to be helpful.

NFJ: You have visited many churches, pre-pandemic, to teach your lessons and/or preach. What have those experiences been like, and do you welcome such opportunities?

TC: I always welcome opportunities to visit in churches, whether to preach, to teach a class or to do a presentation for teachers explaining how our curriculum works. I intentionally avoid taking long-term interim opportunities because I want to be available to visit as many other congregations as possible.

I've really missed that during the pandemic. I've had a few opportunities to provide video sermons, but I miss meeting the people and hearing their feedback. Most people are very gracious in their comments.

NFJ: Another way you've gotten to know Bible study teachers and learners, personally, is to spend time exploring Israel and the West Bank. What is unique about those experiences, and what is on the horizon?

TC: This is one of my favorite things to do. International travel is complicated and takes a lot of effort, but it is well worth it. I love introducing people to the very land where biblical kings ruled, prophets preached, and Jesus lived and taught.

What is distinct about our trips is that we do far more than most tours, and we focus more on the land and the archaeological sites rather than on medieval churches built over "traditional" sites.

We do visit some significant churches, but my goal is for people to get a feel for the

land: to watch the Mediterranean Sea wash over the ruins of Herod's palace at Caesarea Maritima, to stand on the high place at Dan where Jeroboam built a temple, to overlook the Jezreel Valley from Megiddo, to walk through Capernaum and take a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee.

That's a small fraction of the places we go and the experiences we have, including participation in an ongoing archaeological excavation where everyone has a chance to unearth pottery, bones or other materials that have not seen the light in thousands of years.

In addition to typical things like visiting Masada, floating in the Dead Sea, and walking the streets of Jerusalem's Old City, our groups have an unusual opportunity to meet with Palestinian Christians at Bethlehem Bible College and learn from them what it is like to live under Israeli occupation.

If all goes well and travel is possible, *Nurturing Faith* readers will have an opportunity to join students and friends of Campbell University Divinity School in a study tour of Israel and the West Bank May 19-29, 2021. I also anticipate planning another trip solely as a Good Faith Experience as soon as it is possible.

NFJ: Some of your lessons have been published as small, affordable *Nurturing Faith Bible Series* volumes. What do those short-term studies include, and how might they be used?

TC: Many classes prefer to use a variety of study materials, including books, rather than an ongoing curriculum. I believe these *Nurturing Faith Bible Series* volumes would be ideal for them, whether they usually focus on Bible studies or use more popular books, but would like to include occasional Bible studies.

Thus far, we have repackaged some of our previous Bible studies, including extra studies written just for the books, into six accessible volumes.

Patriarchs, Matriarchs, and Anarchs includes 13 lessons from the fascinating stories in Genesis 12–50. Also we have two volumes from Psalms, one focusing on psalms of praise and another on psalms of

lament — an appropriate topic for these strange days.

Five Scrolls for All Times contains lessons from the Hebrew *Megillot*, the books of Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther.

From the New Testament, we have eight-week studies from both Ephesians and Revelation. John's Apocalypse is so highly metaphorical and so widely misunderstood that I believe this book could be especially helpful to readers.

NFJ: You have been through the cycle a few times and have many more good studies in hand. What do you hope to do with them?

TC: At some point, hopefully during a sabbatical semester from Campbell University Divinity School, I want to begin editing and organizing as many of these as possible into a set of resources for teachers and preachers who follow the lectionary.

Like the earlier volumes, these would include what are now online resources in the print version. I first thought of this as a three-volume set that would require more than 100

studies per volume, even if limited to two of the four text options for each Sunday.

From a practical standpoint, it's more likely these would need to be published as a set of at least 12, four for each of the three lectionary years, with 25–30 studies per volume. It would be an ideal candidate for digital formatting, as well.

It will be a monumental task, but I believe this resource could be quite helpful as commentary for teachers as well as pastors in any congregation that follows the lectionary.

NFJ: Finally, why is Bible study important? And, after all these lessons, is there still more truth to be mined?

TC: Bible study is important because the Bible is our primary testimony to human experience with God as understood by Jews and Christians.

Careful study of the Bible helps us to understand that the scriptures are not monolithic. Rather, they reflect a variety of different experiences and opinions and theological approaches to understanding God.

Good Bible study helps us to recognize how the Bible can still speak even though it was written in multiple ancient contexts that are largely alien to us.

Similarly, thoughtful study allows us to acknowledge that we all read the Bible from our own context. We all are influenced by our gender, our ethnicity, our economic status and our relative place in society.

We have both the privilege and the responsibility to read and study scripture for ourselves and in community, seeking with the Spirit's help to hear what God might be saying to us. I am grateful that we can be a part of that.

There is *always* more truth to be mined, more texts to explore, and more contexts from which to explore them. One of the amazing aspects of scripture is the way in which the same text may speak to us in different ways at different stages of life, or under different circumstances.

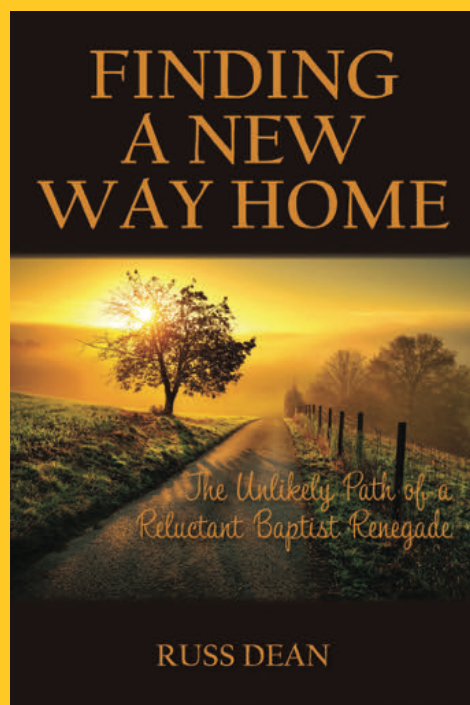
None of us can claim to comprehend all biblical truth, but we can always be seeking to understand what we can and let that inform our efforts to live as Jesus would have us to do. **NFJ**

NEW *from* Nurturing Faith Books

Finding a New Way Home is a memoir of Russ Dean's faith journey filled with doubts, questions and rejections and buoyed by God's faithfulness through it all. From his pastoral experiences Dean's insights speak to struggles common to clergy and laypersons alike, offering encouragement for all.

"Dean's journey of spiritual formation becomes an insightful guide for all of us."

—Bill J. Leonard
Professor of Baptist Studies Emeritus
Wake Forest University



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Worth Repeating

“Salvation through belief in Christ has been preached and taught for so long, so often, and so loudly that we have forgotten the gospel that Jesus came to teach and share, and expected his disciples to follow.”

Charlie Stuart, author of *Reclaiming the Forgotten Gospel of Jesus*

“Authoritarianism in the church was always high in testosterone.”

Stephen Shoemaker, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Statesville, N.C. (BNG)

“Stop worshipping centrism... Jesus took sides. We should too.”

Carlos A. Rodriguez, founder of The Happy NPO, referencing Luke 4:18 (Twitter)

“Our demand for justice is biblical — it only appears secular to those whose convictions are shaped by culture wars instead of scripture.”

Philosophy professor Scott Coley of Mount St. Mary's University (Twitter)

“The Bible doesn't teach. Teachers teach. The Bible records early Christian teaching. The Bible is the church's book, and the church is still teaching.”

Pastor George Mason of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas (Twitter)

“Right now QAnon is still on the fringes of evangelicalism, but we have a pretty big fringe.”

Ed Stetzer of Wheaton College, on debunked conspiracy theories still gaining traction among religious conservatives (CNN)

“The search for authenticity is like the judicial standard of originalism. Both limit consideration of contextual realities and the openness to change. Rather, what truths do we see in our digital lives, and the digital lives of others?”

Kate Hanch, associate pastor at First St. Charles United Methodist Church in Missouri, on the personal use of social media (BNG)

“Being de-centered is not the same as being persecuted.”

Cheryl Bridges Johns, chair of spiritual renewal at Pentecostal Theological Seminary (Twitter)

“A world of truth is a world of trust, and vice versa.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Morality*, as quoted by David Brooks in *The Atlantic*

“Empathy isn't listed in scripture as a fruit of the Spirit, and the exact word doesn't appear in other lists of virtues, but the concept of empathy permeates biblical teaching nonetheless.”

Mark Wingfield, executive director of Baptist News Global

“Christians inevitably are message-bearers, and that message is full of beauty, peace, goodness and salvation.”

Priscilla Pope-Levison, author of *Models of Evangelism* (Baker Publishing)

“Jesus' gospel says that as important as heaven is, it's just as important that God's will be done here 'on earth as in heaven.'”

Dan Day, author of *Finding the Gospel: A Pastor's Disappointment and Discovery* (BNG)

“We know the Bible profoundly speaks to the issue of justice and it profoundly speaks to the issue of reconciliation. And so we see them as inhaling and exhaling. We believe that they're a part of what it means to be gospel-centric.”

Ed Litton, a white Southern Baptist pastor in Mobile, Ala., on collaborative efforts to confront racial oppression (RNS)

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NEWS • ANALYSIS • BOOKS • RESOURCES • EXPERIENCES • PODCASTS



Messin' up the social order

By John D. Pierce

Much of the behavior called for in my upbringing — which included a large dose of church along with home, school, Boy Scouts and 4-H — was about being positive contributors to and protectors of community life; that is, following the rules and staying out of trouble.

The “bad guys” were those who acted against societal norms. In fact, we weren’t even encouraged to question “the way things are.”

So I never wondered — much less asked — why the African-American kids who lived, and went to school and church, in an isolated part of Boynton Ridge were unknown to me for the first several years of my local school education.

In church we memorized Bible verses in large doses. But no one ever noted that Jesus never said, “Therefore, protect the status quo.” Ours was a play-it-safe Jesus.

Embedded in this communal emphasis on behavioral norms was the false assumption that our created culture had no needs for disruption. Even questioning inequalities or injustices was deemed rebellious and disrespectful. “Respect your elders” was the same as “Don’t ask questions.”

So it came as a big surprise later to discover in the Gospels that Jesus was subversive. He not only turned over tables, but also cultural norms. His disciples broke established laws along with the heads of grain on the Sabbath.

There is a proper — even preferred — place for disruption, if we are indeed followers of Jesus. The absence of righting societal wrongs — largely enshrined and protected by the dominant population — in

most versions of Americanized Christianity was an effort to protect a comfortable way of life for those in power.

An overemphasis on “eternal security” made Jesus’ example less relevant to our way of Christian living. However, had Jesus come to earth just to save humanity for eternity, it would have been a quick turnaround.

Instead, he hung around to reveal the nature of God and to show us how to live sacrificially yet abundantly in the here and now. An integral part of that revelation is that Jesus came to mess up the social order — and we are called to do the same.



He even included that charge in his model prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” By example, Jesus extended love, grace and inclusion in ways that were socially uncomfortable — even threatening to authorities.

The always-gentle Jesus who appeared on flannel graph boards and in children’s books, cuddling a lamb and telling heartwarming tales, would not have been a threat. Those who mess with the social, religious and political order end up on a cross.

Years ago I heard someone note that societies not only eliminate those who live below accepted community standards, but also those who live above those standards. Jesus lived and loved above what the religious and political establishments found acceptable.

As Craig Greenfield, author of *Subversive Jesus* (2016, Zondervan), notes: “Jesus challenged the authorities who had been given legal rule by Romans” and “went out of his way to challenge cultural attitudes and hang out with outcasts.”

That’s how he got in trouble. As Greenfield puts it: “If Jesus was simply a nice guy — a Jewish Joel Osteen — teaching people to love each other, it’s hard to see why he was such a threat to the establishment.”

Our “safe Jesus” is easy to create and love when we are not the ones who suffer the inequities and injustices of society. It takes engagement with and empathy for those beyond our own privileged experiences to understand the ways in which following Jesus call for needed disruptions.

There is a sense of security for many Americans in protecting the social order that is familiar to them, especially when it favors them. American life — past and present — gets romanticized as if it’s all apple pie, neighborly deeds and well-mowed lawns.

So God is recruited to bring a special blessing on “our way of life” — to the point we claim being exceptional. More often this blessing is embraced as privilege rather than responsibility.

Those beyond our borders, as well as those within our borders who don’t look like us, are regarded as less blessed and, therefore, less deserving of life’s fullest offerings.

America’s social structures have long failed to live up to the ideals in our founding documents as well as biblical calls for justice. In light of such inequities and injustices, messing up our social order is a noble and needed calling.

Yet there is a challenge: How can we be kind, gentle, and compassionate without being complicit in societal evils — whether obvious or obscured — that create harm for others?

The answer seems to have been given when God sent Jesus to earth — and left him here for a while. There’s a reason Jesus said, “Follow me” rather than, “Watch out for yourself” or “Do your own thing.” **NFJ**

Check out these titles

from **Nurturing Faith** —

the publishing arm of Good Faith Media

Abba Father: Viewing Atonement Through the Jesus Lens

Retired pastor Leroy Spinks offers a fresh and powerful argument that Jesus' death on the cross is a story of humanity reconciled to the family of God, rather than a story of punishment for the sins of humanity. Spinks portrays humanity as prodigal children pursued by an ever-loving God, the story climaxing on a cross of belonging and transformation.

Namaste Newbie

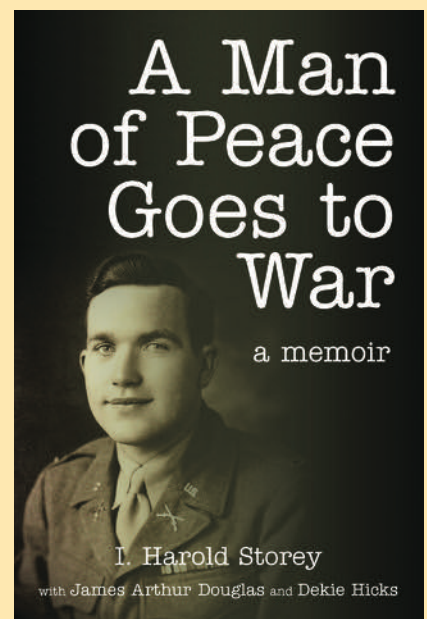
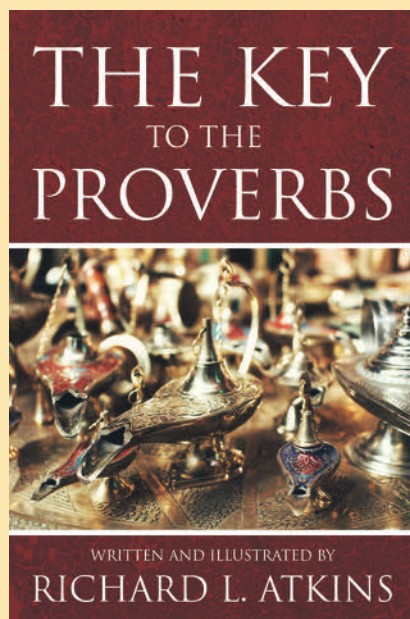
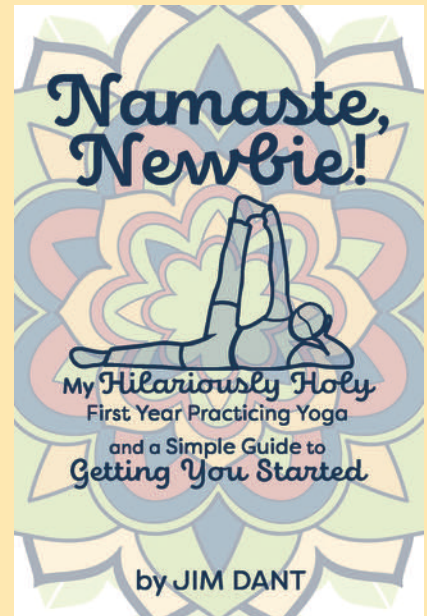
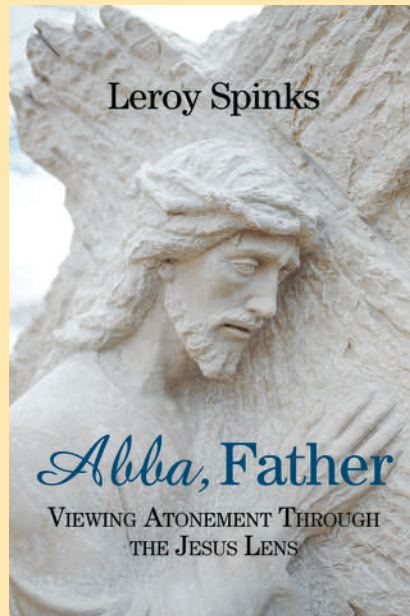
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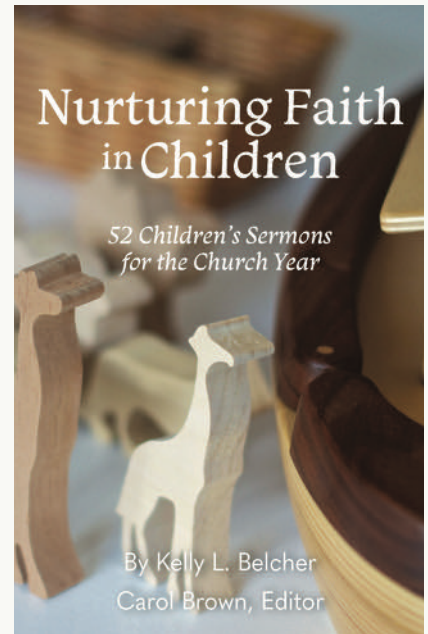


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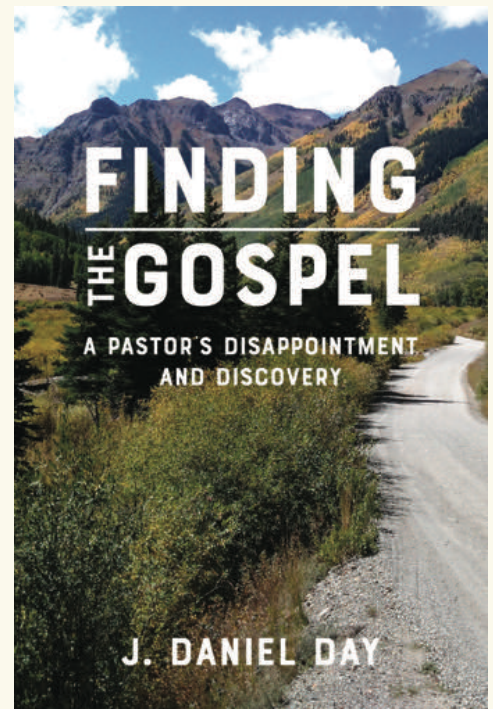
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A small price to pay

BY LARRY HOVIS

Like many kids, I rode a bicycle around my neighborhood as a child. But when receiving my drivers' license, I traded the bike for a car. Nearing age 50, a foot injury curtailed my walking for exercise, so I decided to try cycling again.

Fortunately, a friend who was an avid road cyclist provided encouragement and support. On my 50th birthday, my wife gave me my first road bike and I haven't looked back.

As a way of combining this hobby/exercise with my work, I decided to do a multi-day ride across North Carolina — “from the mountains to the capital” — to raise awareness and funds for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina's “Welcome Home Community Network.” Based on Matt. 25:35 (“I was a stranger and you welcomed me”), this network is led by CBF field personnel Marc and Kim Wyatt.

It is loosely modeled after “Matthew House,” a similar ministry the Wyatts helped found in Canada in partnership with Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec. Welcome House works with churches and partner ministries to provide transitional housing for refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers and other vulnerable people.

I was joined on the Oct. 9-12, 2020 ride by Dr. Steve Bisette, my regular riding partner, friend and physician. My wife Kim stayed close by with a support vehicle. We tried to plan every detail, including stops along the way at partner churches.

The one thing we couldn't control was the weather. Hurricane Delta brought torrential rains to North Carolina that weekend. Here is a recap of the ride:

Day 1 – Blue Ridge Parkway to First Baptist Church, Elkin

This was to have been our longest day, 68 miles. Unfortunately, we suffered a mechanical issue we couldn't repair on the road and had to be driven an hour away for the repair. We returned to the Parkway having only skipped eight miles and arrived at Elkin about 90 minutes later than we planned. Thankfully, it was a beautiful day. We would not say that again.

Day 2 – Elkin to College Park Baptist Church, Winston-Salem

This was a shorter day, only 45 miles. But Delta's rains started soon after our departure and we rode in heavy rain the remainder of the day. We arrived safely, drenched and feeling good about our accomplishment.

Day 3 – First Baptist Church, Jamestown to Hope Valley Baptist Church, Durham

It was a miserable day, chilly and rainy from the start. Hypothermia caused us to abandon the middle portion of the route. We rode the last leg from Chapel Hill to Durham where we were greeted by enthusiastic supporters, but our daily mileage total was only about half of what we had planned.

Day 4 – Durham to Crabtree Valley Baptist Church, Raleigh

The final leg was supposed to be easy: 45 miles on greenways with the addition of a third rider, pastor Chris Aho of Oxford Baptist Church. Unfortunately, the greenways were not all paved and the surfaces were wet. While riding on a boardwalk over a marsh, my rear tire slid out from under me and I went down hard on my left hip. Steve checked me out, and there appeared to be

no broken bones (which was confirmed by X-ray later). But I had a severe hematoma (deep bruise) and, in spite of my efforts to continue riding, was unable to finish the day. It was anticlimactic but encouraging to limp over the finish line on foot to the cheers of Welcome Home Community Network supporters at Crabtree Valley.

In spite of the challenges, we accomplished our goal of raising awareness and funds for the “Welcome Home” ministry. Reflecting on the difficulties of the ride, I tried to imagine what it would be like to live in Syria, displaced by war, or in Honduras, living in fear of crime and violence by drug cartels.

I tried to imagine what it must be like to make the difficult, arduous journey to the U.S. in search of safety and shelter for my family, hoping to secure employment and a better way of life for my children.

Assuming I actually could make it to America, like so many immigrants before me, what would it mean to have Christians welcome me with open arms and provide material, emotional, social and spiritual support to my family in the name of Jesus?

Were I a Christian, it would strengthen my faith. If not a Christian, I might be compelled to consider becoming a disciple of Jesus. Such a process might result in me becoming a citizen of two kingdoms, the new land I now called home, and the kingdom of God where I would dwell forever.

The discomfort endured for four days during the Welcome Ride was nothing compared to the suffering that refugees and immigrants endure every day of their lives. And if my brief time of suffering, while doing an activity I love, might help Christians offer the welcome of Jesus to folks who desperately need it, well, it's a small price to pay. *NFJ*

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

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Finding stamina for an unending race

BY STEVE N. SCOGGIN

Unlike a natural disaster, with its pre-warning, impact and recovery phases, a pandemic is different. This indefinite uncertainty stretches our “surge capacities” — those mental and physical mechanisms that mobilize us for short-term acute stress.

It is harder to “run the race set before us” when there is no clear finish line. This cortisol baptism is like no other stress immersion we have experienced.

Cortisol, the stress hormone in our brains, mobilizes us to fight, freeze or flee an adverse event. The challenge is how this event keeps on giving with no clear end in sight. The result is a heightened sense of stress that diminishes our physical, emotional, cognitive and social sensibilities.

Fatigue, difficulty concentrating, feeling overwhelmed and anxious, increased frustration, impatience, withdrawal and sleep interruption are just a few of the normal responses to sustained stress. The sprint we thought we were going to run last March has been replaced by a marathon with no finish line.

Our brains are conditioned to recalibrate around short-term acute disasters, but there is no playbook for a pandemic. When indefinite uncertainty is normalized, the questions of adjusting and adapting become paramount.

The devastation of this pandemic — beyond untold illness and death — is that so many systems aren’t working as they normally do. If you are feeling down and anxious, you are in good company.

One-third of Americans reported symptoms of anxiety or depression or both as early as last May, according to a Census Bureau study.

Research on disaster and trauma focuses primarily on what’s helpful for people during the recovery period, which we are not close to yet. We are grieving multiple losses, real and imagined, while managing or being managed by the ongoing impact of trauma and uncertainty.

Our denial, anger, bargaining, depression and eventual acceptance are all major components of facing loss. We are asking ourselves how to live into and beyond COVID-19.

A fly fisherman on a sun-drenched trout stream wearing regular prescription glasses will see beautiful running water with the sun reflecting off of it. With polarized lenses the fisherman sees not only the stream but also the trout below the surface.

Changing lenses makes the difference in what you see. So, what are some lenses we can clip onto our COVID glasses to expand what we are seeing in these extraordinary days?

First, we must embrace that it is okay not to be okay right now. Disillusionment is normal, and trying to be strong can be counter-productive. The more we resist our feelings about what is happening in us, the more it will persist.

Second, we are invited to radically accept that life is different right now. You might be thinking, “Of course it is!” But I am suggesting an acceptance that recognizes a new normal rather than living as if things will return to pre-COVID times.

A third lens is to lower our expectations.

Expecting to function as before COVID is to deny neurologically the impact of stress hormones in our brains over a long period.

Fourth, with divisive politics, racial injustices, managing work and school changes, in addition to COVID-19, it is good to decrease our media calories and fast as needed. Ingesting too much media adds unneeded cortisol to our systems.

Fifth, we can increase resilience through good sleep hygiene, healthy eating, exercise, meditation, limited alcohol use, self-compassion, deep diaphragmatic breathing, gratitude, and lower expectations.

Many rituals that hold us together — such as religious service attendance, weddings, funerals, graduations, socializing with friends and family, and vacations — have been disrupted. Stay in the moment and be grounded in what is rather than what is not. This grateful approach is good for our immune system and our cognitive and emotional fitness.

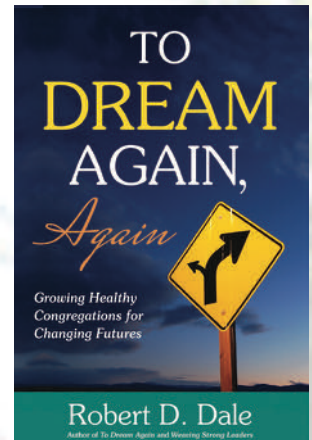
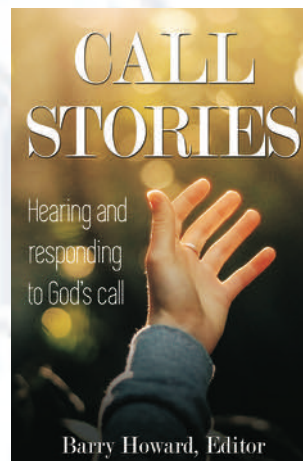
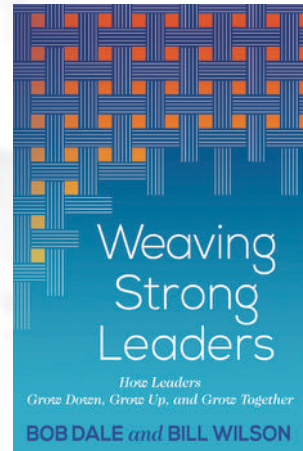
We are all a little worn out these days. What I have suggested are some evidence-based practices that, when added to the daily routine, can increase stamina and provide new perspective to a tired brain that has been on high alert for several months. There will be a post-COVID time, but in the meantime we can adapt and find the light that shines in the darkness. **NFJ**

—*Steve N. Scoggin is associate vice president of behavioral health for Wake Forest Baptist Health. His column draws on Tara Haelle’s “Your Surge Capacity Is Depleted — It’s Why You Feel Awful” in Elemental (Aug. 17, 2020).*



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New Year, New Beginnings

By R. Mitch Randall

The year 2020 will go down in the history books as an unprecedented era. From a global pandemic to a social revolution regarding race, the year left a mark that will be felt for generations to come.

As the calendar turns to a new year, there is a stark realization that the effects of last year will remain with us. However, vast opportunities for renewal and restoration also await.

The poet T.S. Elliot quipped, “For last year’s words belong to last year’s language. And next year’s words await another voice.”

With the memories of 2020 locked away in our minds, we now cast our gaze toward the future. As we do, let’s recall the words of the Apostle Paul: “If anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17).



There is so much to unpack, but we would be amiss if we failed to recognize that the process of becoming a new creature begins with the insertion of Christ into our lives. For those professing Christ as Lord, everything we believe, and do, should begin and end with Jesus.

For too long now, the theology and practices of Jesus were ignored by hyper-conservative Christians. Instead, Christian fundamentalists replaced Jesus with a misleading interpretation of the Old Testament combined with a Pauline rigidity that perverted the apostle’s writings.

For example, they created the “King David Theory,” where anointed kings did not have to act morally as long as they led



with strength and turned Paul into a patriarchal theologian propagating the submission of women. Neither was accurate according to sound biblical scholarship and interpretation.

While using the Passion of Jesus to argue persecution, the fundamentalists left out the part where Jesus willingly and humbly strolled into Jerusalem seeking justice through love for *all* of God’s people.

Therefore, as Jesus people, we should make him and his teaching the center of our faith and practice. Only then can we truly become a new creation.

Following Jesus into a new year means walking humbly, sharing grace and mercy along the way. One of Jesus’ greatest teachings cemented this truth: “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matt. 23:12).

With a new year before us, let’s allow humility to be our guide as we advocate for justice and the common good. Let our words be filled with gentleness and kindness, even as we speak prophetically. A bold word spoken with gentleness is more productive than a declaration laced with venom.

Another step in following Jesus means letting love saturate our word and actions.

As we let old things pass away after becoming a new creation, we need to let the deep divisions of 2020 slide away too. Besides the pandemic and social revolution, the country experienced one of the most contentious elections of the modern era.

Let’s get real for a moment. The deep political divide across our country forced families to stop speaking and friendships to sever during this past year. The question before us now starts, for we have a decision to continue living within this divide or beginning to work toward repairing the breach.

If we allow old things to pass away, we can provide room for something new to emerge. There is no doubt that the wounds of the 2020 election run deep, but can we find it in ourselves to let love soothe those wounds as we search for healing and restoration?

We must force ourselves to ask difficult questions as this new year begins. What is most important to us? More pointedly, who are the most important to us? Even with the pandemic and racial injustices still alive, can we find a path forward that accentuates shared values while mending wounds?

Can we find words during this new year that inspire and motivate? Can we extend branches of peace to those we disagree with? Can we discover commonalities leading to a productive future? Can we create a new reality where love and justice reign supreme?

As T.S. Elliot reminds us, we must find new words for the future and new voices to articulate them. We need Jesus more now than ever before, letting loose of our past in order to embrace a hopeful future as a new creation. **NFJ**

—R. Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.

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Beginning Again

By John R. Franke

For many of us, the start of a new year is an opportunity to take stock of our lives and make changes. It is not that we start over as much as it is that we begin again.

We reevaluate the past and the present in light of changing circumstances that are often surprising and unexpected. We commit ourselves to new routines and ideas in the hopes of being the people we want to be instead remaining those that we are.

In other words, we keep growing, seeking to know God better and to be more faithful to God's purposes in the world.

For people of faith, this idea of beginning again is not simply connected to the changing of the calendar or the making of New Year's resolutions. Rather, it is a basic aspect of our spiritual formation and relationship with God.

It is also true about our theology. The basis for this assertion is rooted in the Christian conviction that God is living and active.

This means that we cannot know God apart from God's actions in the world, in our lives, and in the lives of others. Put another way, our relationship with God is not something that can be possessed and predetermined once and forever. Instead, it is dynamic and interactive.

This also means it can change as we grow in our knowledge and understanding of God and God's ways in the world. Since the ultimate source for theology is this living God who is always in "motion," so our theology must always be open to reconsideration and revision in keeping with the dynamic nature of God.

The Reformed theologian Karl Barth has helpfully reflected on this aspect of theology as attempting to trace the movement of God. He says that one of the most basic callings of the church is to follow attentively the movement of God.

In this following, it is important to remember that it is always "an instant" in a broader movement. As such it is comparable to the "momentary view of a bird in flight."

While Christians bear witness to God by trying to describe the movement of God, they must also take pains to remind those who listen that what they describe is not the same as its reality. There is a great difference between our *talk* about God and *the reality* of God.

Barth puts the situation succinctly: "As Christians we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both *our obligation and our inability* and by that very recognition give God the glory."

Since there is no aspect of theology that does not find its ultimate basis in the activity and grace of God, it is also true that theology escapes our comprehension and control. This is not simply because finite humans are prone to error and misperception (though this is true), but primarily because of the nature of the One who is the focal point of our theology.

In light of this, all theological assertions and conclusions are open to criticism and critique in order to demonstrate their temporary and incomplete nature. In Barth's words, "There are no comprehensive views, no final conclusions and results."



There is only continual exploration of the wonder and beauty of the divine life that "strictly speaking, must continually begin again at the beginning in every point. The best and most significant thing that is done in this matter is that again and again we are directed to look back to the center and foundation of it all."

This is a reminder that even our best and most careful articulations of theology will always fail to do adequate justice to the reality of its subject matter, the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Hence, we must never grow satisfied and complacent with our findings and conclusions.

We must resist the temptations of certainty and absolutism that lead us to self-satisfaction and resistance to change. Even worse, they lead us to disregard the voices of others who do not share our intuitions and convictions and thus their exclusion from our communities.

As Marilynne Robinson puts it: "A narrow understanding of faith very readily turns to bitterness and coerciveness. There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian."

As we enter the New Year, let us consider turning away from the self-confident (and often self-righteous) certainty that is increasingly shaping both our national and ecclesial discourse, and dividing us from each other in the process.

Instead, in constant relationship and dependence on God, let us cultivate the habit of open-ended theology, always prepared to begin again for the sake of the gospel and the sake of the world. **NFJ**

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

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

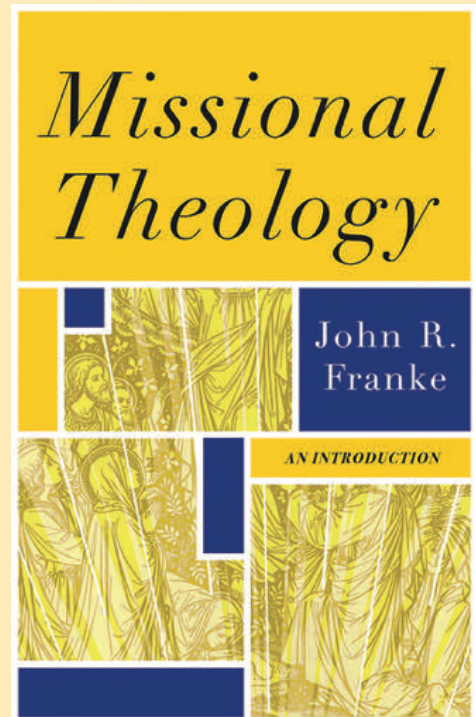
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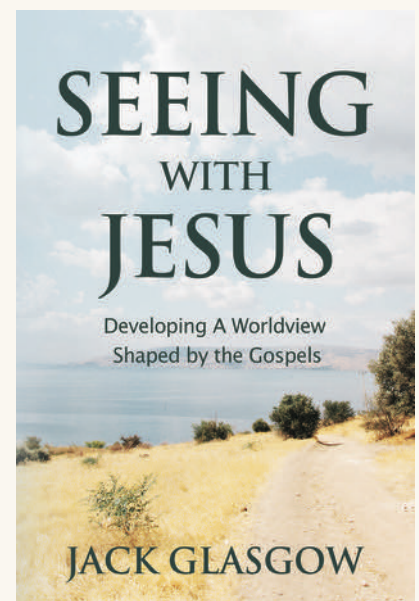
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My application to join the Avengers

By Brett Younger

Dear Avengers:

I am writing to apply for the position of Chaplain to the Avengers. I understand that there is no such position right now, but there should be. As a group you have focused on the mental and physical with great results, but you have not paid nearly enough attention to your own spiritual and emotional well-being. I can help. Let's imagine together what I could do as your chaplain.

You need a counselor, because you are dealing with stress that is off the charts. You need an ethical vocabulary to cope with the nature of your work. Killing bad people and other sentient beings for a living is traumatic. Where are you finding the comfort you need? You could call me at any time. I deal with delicate personal situations with utmost confidentiality.

Hulk could use assistance with anger management. When Bruce Banner said, "That's my secret. I'm always angry" I heard a cry for help. We all need to come to terms with our dark green side.

Black Widow has never made peace with her past as a KGB assassin: "Regimes fall every day. I tend not to weep over that. I'm Russian . . . or was." Natasha needs to talk with someone about forgiveness and redemption.

At first Captain America seems to have it together, but being frozen for decades takes a toll: "When I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say we won. They didn't say what we lost." As a pastor, I am around a lot of people who want to go back to 1945. I am trained to help Steve deal with his longing for a simpler time.

You need to address potential conflicts. Thor and Hulk are from different worlds. Iron Man and Captain America came from



different decades. You could use a couples' counselor.

You need better funerals. Iron Man's entire memorial service was less than two minutes long. Floating flowers on a lake looks good in a movie, but no one said a word. Really? Hawkeye could have read Psalm 23. (Clint does not have much to do.) Scarlet Witch would have led an interesting prayer. Think of how touching it would have been if Captain America offered a eulogy that began with "Tony Stark had a big heart."

You need to build community. Most of you do not have a strong family life, so your organization is your family. You have to be able to bring your whole self to your family. Nick Fury is a strong leader, but your meetings seldom acknowledge feelings. You need a calming ministerial presence. My experience in deacons' meetings has taught me how to handle big egos.

You need to understand your wide range of religious backgrounds. Hulk is a lapsed Catholic. Spiderman is a Protestant. You are about to add Ms. Marvel, a Muslim. We could have great conversations about interfaith, intergalactic coalitions.

You need to sort out the confusing aspects of theology. Thor is the Norse god

of thunder and lightning, but he acts more like an alien than a deity. He has some magical powers, like the hammer Mjolnir, which is extremely cool, but he also has human characteristics. It is no secret that after he failed to kill Thanos, Thor started eating and drinking too much. The fat, depressed, alcoholic Thor needed to talk with a minister about what it means to be human/divine. Captain America could be a helpful friend. He sounds level-headed: "There's only one God, ma'am, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that."

You need to utilize your other gifts. You are good at fighting and saving the universe, but have you thought about working to end world hunger? What could you do in the area of racial justice? How much do you think about climate change?

My salary should not be an issue, because this position will pay for itself. Chaplains create lower turnover rates, increase levels of focus, and reduce stress-related injuries. (You have a lot of work-related accidents.)

I am ready to go to work. The Avengers' compound is in upstate New York, and I live in Brooklyn. We could start with a weekend retreat. We could talk about the feelings you had when Thanos disintegrated half of all life in the universe. Pepper Potts could lead a yoga session. We could light candles and play the awesome mixtape from *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

I know there is a lot you can learn from me, but I am sure there are also things I can learn from you. Tell me how I can be of help. I will be waiting for your call. I look forward to building a caring relationship with each one of you. **NFJ**

Sincerely,
Rev. Dr. Brett Younger



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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*Following Jesus:
What Does It Mean?*

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To Follow Jesus, Love One Another

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 3, 2021

Ephesians 1:3-14

Where Hope Belongs

Hope. Thank God for hope. After a year most of us would like to forget, we hope by God that 2021 will be a better year than the last.

Do you feel that way? I suspect many of us do. The past year was filled with challenges from beginning to end. We endured, though we didn't like it. We persevered, but few of us got ahead.

Mostly we sat in semi-isolation or worked from makeshift home offices. We went cold turkey from a lack of sports to watch and put on masks so we could go out and remain socially distanced from everyone else.

It has been necessary, but frustrating. With vaccines on the way, hope swells in our chests and pushes us into a new year that may become something closer to "normal."

Today's text is the introduction of a letter Paul wrote to a church that faced trials of its own. Yet, Paul reminded them that with their hope fixed on Jesus, they still could fill their lives with days of praise. 🙏🙏🙏

In Christ we are blessed (vv. 3-6)

Ephesians 1:3-14 is written as one incredibly complex sentence—a grammatically challenging but breathless

... so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:12)

call for Christian people to give thanks for all that God has done. 🙏 Fortunately, English translations tend to break the sentence into more digestible bits.

Paul begins with multiple reminders of divine beneficence, blessings that come through Jesus Christ. Throughout the text, "in him" and "in Christ" are key words. The work that has changed our lives and can change others through us has come through the one we call Jesus, the Christ.

Paul rejoices that God has blessed us in Christ with "every spiritual blessing" (v. 3), and the first of these is that God chose to adopt us as children through the work of Christ (vv. 4-6). Theological traditions that believe in predestination depend heavily on this text, interpreting it to suggest that God has chosen certain persons to be saved and others lost, even before the foundation of the world. 🙏

A strong view of divine predestination is highly problematic. Among other things it robs humankind of any kind of meaningful freedom while also undermining the missionary imperative of the gospel. That mission mandate is taught far more clearly than the few ambiguous references used to support a belief that God predetermines our destiny before birth.

If God has already chosen every person who will be saved, there is little point in spreading the gospel, because God would need no help from us. In

the early part of the mid-19th century, Baptists engaged in a heated conflict between "Particular Baptists," who believed that Christ died only for those particular "elect" persons, and "General Baptists," who believed that Christ died for all. The missionary vs. anti-missionary controversy split many churches, sometimes resulting in side-by-side "Missionary" and "Primitive" (anti-missionary) Baptist churches. 🙏

Some non-predestinarians deal with the troublesome text by appealing to divine omniscience, asserting that God knows who will choose to trust Christ, but there is a better way to read the text. The point is not that God has foreordained Charles and Chantrese to be saved and adopted as God's children, while rejecting Maggie and Marvin. Paul is writing to *the church*—to a group of people who have chosen of their own free will to follow Christ. God has in fact foreordained that every person who trusts in Christ can be saved, can become a part of the church, can experience all the blessings that God wants his children to have.

God saves us not only as individuals, but also as a community of faith. Paul is not teaching that God's eternal plan has a roster of predestined believers, but that God's eternal providence has a place for every person who chooses to accept the gift of divine grace. Those who believe this cannot help but give praise to God.

In Christ we have redemption (vv. 7-10)

Following his introduction of the theme in vv. 3-6, Paul begins three of

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the remaining sections of this lengthy 12-verse sentence with the words “in him.” Some translations substitute the word “Christ” for “him” as a means for clarifying that the pronoun always refers back to Christ.

In vv. 7-10, Paul affirms that in Christ we have redemption. We have forgiveness. We have access to an amazing grace that is beyond our comprehension. We are all guilty of sin, guilty of rebellion against God’s way, guilty of living for self with little thought for others. At some point, most of us have been guilty of lying, cheating, lusting, and worse.

And yet Paul says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us” (vv. 7-8a). We could never make up for our wrongdoings on our own, but Christ has declared us forgiven. In some marvelous way far beyond our comprehension, we can experience redemption through his blood – the forgiveness of our sins.

The word Paul uses for “forgiveness” (*aphesis*) is the technical Greek term that refers to a legal pardon. It is a mystery to us that God would love us so and take pleasure in redeeming us – and no wonder that Paul would celebrate it.

In Christ we have an inheritance (vv. 11-12)

Paul goes on to make the remarkable claim that God not only loves us enough to save us and adopt us as children, but also has set aside a surprising inheritance for those who set their hope in Christ: that we “might live for the praise of his glory” (vv. 11-12).

Paul was born into a Jewish family. He would have grown up hearing or reading about the inheritance of the land that God had promised to Israel, but through Christ

he had learned of a greater inheritance, an eternal one, offered to those who trust in God. This inheritance doesn’t come when someone else dies, in the normal order of events. The inheritance belongs to us even now, and we experience it in full when *we* die. 🇺

Paul makes a point of saying that this is one reason God has planned such a glorious future for us – that we might be motivated to live in praise to God: “so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory” (v. 12).

Paul believed the first generation of Christian believers had a notable privilege and a special responsibility. They were the first to set their hopes on Christ, and their lives of praise would set a pattern for others to follow as they called them to lives of faith. Many generations of believers later, we share the same hope and the same calling to bear witness through our own grateful living.

If you’ve ever helped to put shingles on a house, you learned that every row of shingles is a guide for those that come after. The man who first instructed me in the art of roofing first cut a piece of scrap shingle to the proper length so I could check that each succeeding row was just the right distance above the one below: he called the handy guide a “preacher.”

In a similar fashion, every generation of Christians provides a pattern for the next to follow, and sometimes we need a good “preacher” to keep us straight. If we would lead those who come after us rightly, then we will lead them to offer praise to God, not just with their words, but with their actions.

We don’t praise God through Sunday worship alone, but when we show love to a child on Monday, when we feed the hungry on Tuesday, when we listen to a hurting friend

on Wednesday. We praise God with our lives when we visit the sick on Thursday, when we repair a toilet on Friday, even when we enjoy wholesome family recreation on Saturday. Because Jesus Christ has filled our hearts with amazing grace, we fill our lives with days of praise. 🇺

In Christ we know the Holy Spirit (vv. 13-14)

All of this sounds good, but we know that there are days when we don’t feel so full of praise. Some days, we may question how real this eternal inheritance might be. Paul’s response was to insist that God offers a taste of heaven on earth as we open our hearts and lives to the presence of the Holy Spirit that marks us like an indelible seal.

The Spirit is the “pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people,” Paul said, “to the praise of his glory” (vv. 13-14).

Jesus no longer walks with us as he walked with Mary and Martha and Peter and John. Even in Paul’s day, Jesus was no longer present in that physical way. But Paul believed Christ’s promise to be present through the Spirit. Paul had experienced the touch of God’s Spirit, and he believed that the Spirit’s touch today is the guarantee of God’s embrace tomorrow.

The Spirit of Christ in our lives works not only as an internal guide to direct our living, but also as a reminder of our hope that God can continue to sustain us even in difficult days.

In Jesus Christ we have redemption from our sins. We have an inheritance in eternity. We have a present comforter and guide, and we have *hope* that no matter what comes, we can trust that the God who loves us has good things in store, an inheritance beyond our imagining. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 10, 2021

Mark 1:1-11

Jesus, the Beloved

Have you ever run across someone whose very presence made you uncomfortable? If any of us were approached by someone resembling John “the baptizer,” we’d probably call the police. ↓

My favorite image of John is found in a tiny Episcopal church known as St. Mary’s, just outside the North Carolina mountain town of West Jefferson. During the mid-1970s, the otherwise nondescript church was on the verge of dissolving before a new rector, Faulton Hodge, collaborated with noted fresco artist Benjamin R. Long IV to install three exceptional frescoes in the small sanctuary.

Behind the modest altar, the back wall is covered by a large central fresco that depicts Christ on the cross as his spirit departs. To the left, a smaller image on a plaster panel portrays Mary great with child. The fresco to the right is a portrait of John the Baptist. John is dressed in a short camel’s hair garment. His hair is unkempt. He has a wild look in his eyes and a big stick in his hand. There is nothing gentle about the picture, because there was nothing gentle about John. When the baptizer came preaching, he meant business. ↓

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11)

Today’s lesson focuses on the theme of repentance, which was at the heart of the preaching of both John and Jesus. They knew that it is God’s desire to forgive all persons of their sins. They also knew that the gateway to divine forgiveness is human repentance. ↓

The beginning of the gospel (vv. 1-3)

Though the lectionary text begins at v. 4, it is important to set the context, as Mark begins his work with “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (v. 1, NRSV). Most other translations (e.g., KJV, NIV, NASB, NET) use the word “gospel” to translate *euangelion*, which literally means “good news,” and is the root of our word “evangelism.” ↓ ↓

Mark’s gospel does not include any sort of birth narrative for Jesus, as Matthew and Luke do. Mark begins Jesus’ story with the onset of his active ministry as an adult. The first chapter describes, in rapid-fire order, Jesus’ baptism, his temptation, and his initial preaching ministry.

Still, Jesus did not just show up one day and start drawing attention to himself: Mark insists that John introduced him. Mark preferred to call John “the Baptizer” rather than “the Baptist” (using a participle rather than the noun form preferred by Matthew and Luke).

Mark likewise tells us nothing of John’s birth, as does Luke, who portrays him as a miracle child born

to aged Zechariah and Elizabeth, relatives of Jesus’ mother Mary (Luke 1:1-25).

In Mark, John appears fully formed as a raw and rustic desert preacher declaring that the kingdom of God was at hand and God’s promised deliverance was about to come true.

John’s appearance and his diet certainly attracted attention, even though he preached in largely unpopulated areas. ↓ His primitive clothing, ascetic habits, and fiery sermons reminded people of stories they had heard about Elijah the prophet. Such stories were kept alive because there was a common belief that Elijah would reappear to presage the Messiah’s coming. ↓

Mark loosely quotes two texts to support his belief that John was fulfilling past prophesies. Verses 2-3 are drawn from both Malachi 3:1a (“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me”) and Isaiah 40:3 (“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’”).

Mark mistakenly attributed both texts to Isaiah. He may have had little access to the prophetic texts, but may have been familiar with a collection of Messianic prophesies identified mainly with Isaiah that could have been preserved separately.

The prophet Malachi, whose preaching closes out the Hebrew scriptures, had pointedly predicted Elijah’s return: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to

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their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-6).

The oracle’s insistence that Elijah would “turn the hearts” of parents and children implies a coming call for repentance, precisely what John was doing when he took to his desert stage and started preaching.

The message of John (vv. 4-8)

According to Mark, John’s message was two-fold. First, he challenged his hearers to repent of their sins and to symbolize their penitence through “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4). John’s preaching was so effective and eschatological expectations so high that Mark spoke in hyperbole: “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” came out to hear John preach. When the altar (or river) call was given, they came forward in droves “and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (v. 5).

John’s baptism was both old and new. It was common for Gentile proselytes to Judaism to undergo immersion as a ritual purification marking entry to the community, and observant Jews practiced frequent lustrations to keep themselves ritually pure. John’s baptism differed, however, in that it was a once-for-all testimony rather than a repeated practice of purification, and it came at the hands of John, not by self-immersion. ⚓

For John, the only prerequisite for baptism was the confession of one’s sins, for confession is the beginning of repentance. John preached in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, who commonly called for repentance with the word *shub*, which means literally “to turn around” or “return.” To confess one’s sins is to admit that

one’s life has been going in the wrong direction. Only then can a person turn around in true repentance. ⚓

The second purpose of John’s teaching was to focus his new followers’ attention on Jesus, and he hinted at this even before Jesus physically appeared on the scene. “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me,” John predicted, “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (vv. 7-8). ⚓

As John’s baptism differed from Jewish baptisms, so Jesus’ baptism would differ from John’s. John baptized with water as a symbol of repentance and forgiveness, a metaphor of cleansing. Jesus’ baptism would be no symbol alone, but an exercise of power, involving the Holy Spirit. Together, John’s and Jesus’ baptisms would become a metaphor of death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:1-4), of new and eternal life, of the presence of God in the heart of the believer. ⚓

The Messiah of God (vv. 9-11)

We don’t know how long John’s work continued, but it was long enough for him to develop quite a reputation and to collect a band of disciples. At some point, Jesus appeared and presented himself for baptism. Mark does not say, as Matthew does, that John initially objected, though he had earlier insisted that he was unworthy to untie the coming one’s sandals.

John submitted to Jesus’ wish, even as Jesus submitted to the baptismal waters. Later believers thought that Jesus was sinless and had no need of repentance. Still, Jesus chose to be baptized, likely as a means of signaling his solidarity with humankind

Even as Christ proclaimed his

humanity, God the Father declared Jesus’ divinity. Mark recounts the event from Jesus’ perspective, telling us what Jesus saw and heard. In contrast, Matthew and Luke describe the divine annunciation from the standpoint of an observer.

As Mark tells the story, just as Jesus came up from the water, he saw the heavens opened and God’s spirit descending in the form of a dove. Modern Baptists sometimes use this text to support the mode of baptism by immersion, since Jesus “came up out of the water.” The phrase could also mean that Jesus was walking from the water to the shore, but the most natural sense is that of immersion.

Why did the Spirit appear as a dove? Doves were used in the Old Testament as sacrificial offerings, and a dove assisted Noah in finding dry land, but neither seems to relate here. A rabbinic tradition held that when God “brooded over the waters” (Gen. 1:2), it was in the form of a dove, and another likened the voice of God to the cooing of a dove (*T. Berachot* 3a).

For whatever reason, the Gospels insist that God chose the dove as a means of self-revelation. The most important thing, however, is not what was seen, but what was heard. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (v. 11). Matthew and Luke relate the story from an observer’s perspective, suggesting that others who were present also saw and heard these things. Thus, in one brief act, God validated both the teaching of John the messenger and the identity of Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus’ experience reminds us that baptism is an important step in the life of faith. When we remember our own baptism, we are reminded of John’s challenge to repent, and of Jesus’ challenge to follow – not just on baptism day, but every day. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 17, 2021

John 1:43-51

Jesus, the Convincer

Who do you follow, and who follows you? Twenty years ago, we might have been dumbfounded by this question: “following” someone implied serious devotion to them.

Today most of us would have a ready answer, because we’d probably frame the question in terms of who we follow on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and also who follows us. Social media has given the word “follow” a new meaning. ↓

Following someone on social media doesn’t mean that we follow their lead on everything, though it does suggest we are interested in their views or entertained by their posts, and possibly open to being influenced by them.

Today’s Bible study concerns following on an entirely different level: the kind of following that can change and shape our lives. We’re talking about following Jesus.

Finding and following (vv. 43-44)

Today is the second Sunday of Epiphany, when the lectionary gospel texts focus on witnesses to Jesus as the ultimate manifestation of God. ↓ Our text for the day follows the call of Peter and Andrew in John 1:31-42.

Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. (John 1:51)

As usual, the author of John tells the story differently from the other three gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke depict Jesus calling Andrew and Peter near their home on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. The Fourth Gospel, however, holds that Jesus had already connected with them in the southern territory of Judea, where they had come to hear John the Baptizer. The Gospel of John identifies Andrew as a disciple of John (1:40).

From the perspective of John’s gospel, Jesus decided to go to Galilee after connecting with Andrew and Peter, apparently headed north toward their hometown, which John identifies as Bethsaida. ↓

At some point, Jesus met Philip, who also was from Bethsaida (v. 44). The author describes their meeting by saying that Jesus “found” Philip. We don’t know exactly what this means. Does it suggest that Jesus already knew Philip, and that he traveled to Bethsaida to find him again? Or, should we imagine that some manner of divine intelligence or revelation led him to Philip?

We can’t say, but John tells us clearly the outcome of the meeting: Jesus said, “Follow me,” and Philip followed. What is surprising, once we think about it, is that in the context of the story, Jesus has yet to preach any sermons or perform any miraculous signs. The only evidence that Jesus was special – the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” – is the

baptizer’s testimony (John 1:29-36), and we don’t know if Philip knew of that.

Yet, something about Jesus’ demeanor, charisma, or words convinced Philip to follow him. The challenge to “follow me” implied far more than physically trailing after Jesus in his travels. It was an invitation to observe what Jesus did, to hear Jesus teach, to converse with Jesus directly – in short, to become Jesus’ disciple.

Coming and seeing (vv. 45-46)

Philip responded not only by following Jesus, but by bringing others to him. In the text, v. 44 interrupts the action long enough to identify Bethsaida, but not long enough to detract from the immediacy of Philip’s next action: as Jesus had found Philip (v. 43), Philip promptly went and found Nathanael to tell him about Jesus (v. 45).

This outgoing behavior has led some to call Phillip “the great introducer,” a model evangelist who often brought others to Jesus. ↓ Once he had located Nathanael, Philip said “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote – Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth” (v. 45). This suggests to us that Nathanael and Philip were among those who had actively longed for the arrival of a Messiah, believing that his coming had been foretold in scripture. Philip was convinced that Jesus was the long-awaited one, and he was anxious to share the news with his friend. ↓

Nathanael’s response reveals a greater degree of skepticism. Nathanael was reportedly from Cana (John 21:2), about nine miles north of Nazareth. Reflecting a local prejudice against

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Jesus' home village – a place so tiny that it is never mentioned in the Old Testament or any early Jewish writings – Nathanael responded with incredulity: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Later in John, a similar cynicism is expressed when others doubted that the Messiah could possibly come from anywhere in all of Galilee (7:40-41).

Philip responded to Nathanael's dubiety by inviting him to replace prejudice with experience: “Come and see.”

This is how evangelism works: not just by what we hear, but by what we see. Philip did not try to convince his friend Nathanael with fancy apologetics or even scriptural evidence. Instead, he invited him to come and see Jesus: to experience his presence, to hear his words, to observe his actions. It was an invitation to encounter.

If we should be so bold as to encourage our friends to trust in Jesus as Lord, they might react with similar skepticism. We can't offer them an opportunity to come and see Jesus in the same way that Philip did, but we can invite them to come and experience a community of faith made of people who are committed to Jesus.

That raises the issue, of course, of whether we dare to do so. Would a seeker see true evidence of Jesus in our lives, or in our church? Would he or she experience the love and grace and power of God at work?

If not, perhaps we need to spend more time “coming and seeing” in our own lives, experiencing the kind of transformative relationship with Jesus that others can observe as evidence of Christ's presence.

Seeing and believing (vv. 47-51)

Nathanael was curious enough to accept Philip's invitation to come to

meet Jesus, who greeted him with a surprising display of prescience: “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (v. 47).

What does Jesus mean by this? Did Jesus intend it purely as a compliment, indicating that Nathanael was always truthful? Was he saying that Nathanael was not deceitful like Jacob, for whom the Israelites were named? Or was Jesus indicating knowledge of Nathanael's disparaging comment about Nazareth, and making a joking remark that Nathanael kept no thought unspoken?

Whatever Jesus' intent, his remarks intrigued Nathanael, who wondered where or how Jesus had come to know anything about him. John, more than the other gospels, attributes a measure of precognition to Jesus, and this is reflected in Jesus' response that he had seen Nathanael sitting under a fig tree just before Philip had arrived.

Amazed by Jesus' powers of perception, Nathanael quickly changed his tune: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (v. 49). Philip had invited Nathanael to come and see – now he had come and believed.

Jesus acknowledged Nathanael's newfound belief, indicating that he would see far more impressive things (v. 50). He did not criticize him for his skeptical approach prior to witnessing a sign. There is some ambiguity about the relationship between signs and faith in John's gospel, which usually speaks more highly of faith that requires no signs and wonders (4:48, 20:29).

The grammar of Jesus' comment in v. 51 has engendered considerable head scratching. Although Jesus had been in conversation with Nathanael alone, and the sentence begins with “And he said to *him*,” the pronoun for “you” and the verb for “you will see” are both in the plural. Perhaps we are to imagine

that Jesus stopped, looked around, and addressed his comment about angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man to all who were gathered there.

It is more likely, many scholars think, that the saying in v. 51 was originally an independent saying transposed to this story and left in the plural because it was so familiar.

But what did Jesus mean by it? What is the significance of Jesus saying: “You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man?”

The verse is an apparent reference to the familiar vision of Jacob in Genesis 28. As Jacob fled from his brother Esau and traveled toward Haran, he stopped near Bethel to spend the night. As he slept, he saw a vision of a ladder or stairway reaching from the earth to the heavens, with angels ascending and descending upon it. In the dream, God appeared and promised to establish a covenant with him (vv. 10-17).

Jacob celebrated the event by erecting a stone pillar to mark the spot, believing that he had discovered the gateway between heaven and earth. Jesus did not speak of a structure between heaven and earth, but he said the angels would be “ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Thus, Jesus appears to identify himself as the connecting gateway between heaven and earth, between the finite and the infinite, between God and humankind.

Perhaps this metaphor can help us to appreciate Jesus' mission as God incarnate, deigning to surrender heavenly privileges for a season in order to show humankind the depth of God's love and the way to relationship with the divine.

What remains to be seen is whether we will follow him. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 24, 2021

Mark 1:14-20

Jesus, the Summoner

We're all familiar with the old adage that "Time flies when you're having fun."

Vacation days certainly seem to pass much more quickly than working days. When we're engrossed in an enjoyable project, the hours disappear.

While time passes, at whatever pace, activities and accomplishments are piling up. Have you ever tried to calculate how many times you've cooked dinner, mowed the lawn, or done something to support your church? Even small things can bring a sense of accomplishment when we consider how faithfully we have tended to them.

This week we're celebrating the publication of our 500th weekly Bible study. The lessons debuted in July 2011, when we were still *Baptists Today*. Editor John Pierce believed we could offer something valuable to our readers through easily accessible, academically informed, and lectionary-based Bible studies.

Still – five hundred? Isn't that enough? Of course not: neither writing nor reading that many lessons can do more than scratch the surface of what God has to say to us through the Scriptures. No matter how long we've been at it, there's always more to explore.

With that said, let's dive into our

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. (Mark 1:15)

quincentenary study, Mark's version of how Jesus called his first disciples.

A call to the kingdom (vv. 14-15a)


Last week's text, from the gospel of John, suggests that Jesus first called Andrew and Peter in Judea, while John the baptizer was still active, and then called Philip and Nathanael. As usual, John's account differs from the other gospels.

Mark was almost certainly the first of the gospels to be written: it provided the basic outline and source material for Matthew and Luke, both of whom did some rearranging and incorporated additional traditions. The Fourth Gospel was written later, and from a more theologically reflective perspective.

Mark asserts that Jesus did not begin his active ministry until after John was arrested, avoiding competition or confusion between them by waiting until the baptizer was out of the public eye before drawing attention to his own message.

When he did, Mark says, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God" (v. 14). "Galilee" was used as both a geographic and governmental term to describe an area mainly north and west of the Sea of Galilee. Both Jews and Gentiles lived there, along with anti-Roman zealots.

The area was ripe for change and distant from the entrenched religious authorities in Jerusalem. Perhaps that is


why Jesus chose to begin his ministry there. Mark says his first message began this way: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near ..." 

Throughout the centuries that the Hebrews had longed for a messiah, the notion of God's in-breaking kingdom had been envisioned as an earthly rule at a future time. Prophets such as Isaiah and Micah proclaimed hope that one day all nations would come to Jerusalem to worship God, and there would be peace on earth (Isa. 2:2-4, Mic. 4:1-4).

Popular thought was less lofty. Messianic hopes often centered on the arrival of a Spirit-inspired political or military leader who would reestablish an Israelite kingdom.

In the teaching of Jesus, the messianic age was no longer future, but present: the time had been fulfilled in his own coming. Rather than setting up a restored monarchy or new world order, Jesus introduced a radically different notion. The kingdom would not be about peace-loving carnivores or political institutions, but the spiritual realm in which God is king. The kingdom of God is the rule of God, the realm in which God operates, the "-dom" (think "domain" or "dominion") in "kingdom."

Jesus could say "the kingdom of God is at hand" because *he* was at hand. The rule of God was at work in his life and ministry, and those who wanted to experience life in the kingdom had only to hear his words and respond to his call.

The time had come to proclaim the good news of God's eternal rule, because in Jesus the kingdom had become manifest. 

Additional information at
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A call to repent and believe (v. 15b)

The advent of the kingdom in Jesus called for a response, and that was the call for all to “Repent and believe in the good news.”

Jesus called upon *every* person to repent and believe the gospel — not just the elect, nor just the greatest or most public of sinners. Jesus called on everyone to repent, because all of us have fallen short.

The Greek word for repent (*metanoia*) means “to change the mind.” It reflects the Hebrew word (*shub*), which means literally “to turn around.” To repent is to change our mind about whether our way is better than God’s way. To repent is to make a U-turn from the easy road that leads to self-destruction and choose the lesser traveled path that leads to the kingdom of life, the realm in which God is king.

In Mark’s presentation of the gospel, this is Jesus’ first command: “Repent, and believe the good news.” When we choose to believe the remarkable good news of the kingdom, we give up our illusion that this world and its customs are all that matter. We trust that there is a God who loved us enough to create us with free will that allows us to make not only the right choices, but also the wrong ones.

We can believe there is a God who loved us enough to take on human flesh and experience human suffering and die a human death to call us toward a kingdom that is greater than this world, and to open the door that leads to it.

We should not pretend that it is always easy to believe. Sometimes, the older we get, the harder we find it. Children may find it easy to believe when life is simple and they trust whatever adults tell them, but the older we grow, the more mountains and valleys we cross, the more challenging

faith can become. 📌

Jesus sometimes pointed to children as an example of the kind of faith that opens heaven’s doors (Mark 10:13-16). Adults may no longer have the simplicity of faith that children know, but we can have the same sincerity. We can hope with all our heart, and when we entrust that hope to Jesus, the good news of the kingdom really is at hand.

A call to follow (vv. 16-20)

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

As Mark relates the story, Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee when he saw Simon and Andrew, apparently within shouting distance of shore, casting their nets. With no prior recorded conversation, Jesus challenged them to leave their nets, follow him, and start fishing for people (vv. 16-17). 📌

The two men, Mark says, did so “immediately.” 📌 What do we make of this? Mark tells the story as if the brothers had never seen Jesus before, and one simple command led them to leave their boats behind and follow him.

This is where the other gospels are helpful: Matthew says that Jesus had already made his home in Capernaum and began to preach before he called the first disciples (Matt. 4:14, 17). Luke suggests that Jesus spent time in the boat with Simon Peter and had guided him to make a miraculous catch of fish before the crusty fisherman went to his knees (Luke 5:1-11). John suggests that Jesus first met Andrew and Peter

in Judea, where they had come to hear John the baptizer (John 1:35-42).

The variant versions remind us that there may have been multiple opportunities for the prospective disciples to meet Jesus and hear him teach before the day he called them to leave the nets and follow him. Mark gives us a snapshot of the day when Jesus said “Follow me,” but it is highly unlikely that this was their first encounter.

The same would almost certainly be true of James and John, another pair of brothers who appear to have been working on the shore a short distance away, going about the tiresome but necessary business of mending their nets. At Jesus’ call, they left their father Zebedee and the hired hands with the boat and also followed Jesus, Mark says (vv. 18-20).

As we wonder how well the first disciples knew Jesus, and what motivated them to leave their livelihoods behind and follow him, we can’t help but ask ourselves what motivates us to follow Jesus, and to what degree we do so.

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

Would it take a convicting sermon, a sense of desperation that we have no place left to turn, or a spiritual experience that we can’t understand? In many cases, new followers are motivated by the happy example of a friend whose life seems so grounded and joyful that they want to be like him or her.

Jesus’ call to discipleship continues. Can we count ourselves as followers? Does our example encourage others to join us on the kingdom path?

For the 500th time, are we living as Jesus called us to live? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 31, 2021

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus, the Healer

What does “authority” mean, and who qualifies as an “authority”? Sometimes people who are equally knowledgeable about a subject may reach different conclusions. For example, archaeologists with comparable education and experience may examine the same evidence but disagree strongly about the meaning of an artifact or the dating of a site.

At other times, people whose authority lies in different areas may come into conflict because they approach the issue with different agendas. As the world has dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic for more than a year now, political authorities primarily concerned with protecting the economy and preserving a sense of normality have clashed with medical authorities whose central focus is on protecting public health.

What authority should we believe? Who can we really trust?

Wouldn't it be nice to know there's someone who could cut through the endless debates and internal quibbling – at least with regard to faith and practice – and speak with real authority?

Our text for the day describes just that person. Mark believed that Jesus fit the bill.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:22)

Authority to teach (1:21-22)

The passage continues the Epiphany theme of Jesus' public manifestation and growing fame, and its primary purpose is to demonstrate Jesus' authority. Through two vignettes, Mark portrays Jesus as displaying a kind of authority that was as shocking as it was convincing.

On the surface, Mark's account seems to imply that Jesus' first synagogue sermon was proclaimed in Capernaum, and that it immediately followed the calling of Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Mark indicates that Capernaum was their hometown, and it was an appropriate place to begin. 🇺

We often think of Jesus' first synagogue sermon as the controversial appearance in his hometown of Nazareth. Luke's gospel puts greater emphasis on that sermon, in which Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah and declared himself to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, an anointed deliverer come to bring good news to the poor, vision to the sightless, and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

Luke acknowledged, however, that Jesus had been teaching in synagogues prior to his sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:14-15), and Jesus' sermon in Nazareth specifically referenced his previous work in Capernaum (Luke 4:23). 🇺

Mark says little about the circumstances of Jesus' teaching in Capernaum,

only that “when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught” (v. 21).

Likewise, Mark tells us nothing about the content of Jesus' teaching, focusing on his confident stance. Jesus spoke with a certainty that caught other worshipers off guard: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (v. 22).

The verb translated as “astounded” suggests not only surprise, but also discomfort. It consists of the preposition *ek* (meaning “out”) and the verb *plesso* (“to strike”). The combination takes on the sense of being struck with panic, hence, “to be so amazed as to be practically overwhelmed” (from Louw and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*).

If those present had worn socks with their sandals, Jesus would have knocked them off. They had never heard such teaching. It was unlike what they were accustomed to, because Jesus taught with “authority.”

To understand the difference, we must consider how the scribes taught. The word translated as “scribe” is *grammateis* (notice the similarity to the English word “grammar”). The term could describe someone skilled in writing new documents or copying old ones that needed to be preserved, such as the scriptures. It also came to be used in a technical sense to indicate Jewish rabbis who specialized in the study and interpretation of the law – not just commands found in the Torah, but also the 365 derivative rules the rabbis had developed in the postexilic period in order to “build a hedge about the law.”

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In periodic conclaves, rabbis engaged in lengthy debates over the interpretation of laws both big and small. Many of these were carefully recorded and ultimately compiled into a series of judicial commentaries that came to be called the Talmud. 🇺🇸

Long before the completion of the Talmud, however, opinions of the most respected rabbis were committed to memory. Local scribes who taught in synagogues or elsewhere often cited previous rulings. In doing so, they taught on the authority of generations of scribes who came before them.

The practice of finding authority mainly in the teaching of others could be problematic, because the rabbis often disagreed with each other. Thus, a scribe in a given synagogue might teach and agree with the opinions of Rabbi Hillel over those of Rabbi Shammai (two popular first-century teachers), but there was no real certainty about whose conclusions were best. 🇺🇸

In contrast, Jesus did not cite rabbinical opinion other than to call it into question with the occasional “You have heard it said . . .” (Matt. 5:38, 43), or to affirm a traditional opinion on the greatest commandment (Matt. 22:34-40).

More commonly, Jesus’ teachings were focused on living in the present with an eye to the future and a heart for other people. He expressed no doubt about his own teaching, but spoke with an authority that came from within. Jesus’ sense of certainty both amazed and offended some of his hearers. We all know it is possible for someone to be dead certain and also dead wrong. How could they know that Jesus was not only confident, but also correct?

It may be helpful to take a closer look at the Greek term translated as “authority.” The word is *exousia*. Its makeup suggests the literal meaning

“out of one’s being,” but in practical use it meant “power to act,” or “authority to act.” In some cases, it was used to mean “power” alone. One who spoke or gave a command with *exousia* had the power to back up his or her words with actions.

Did Jesus have such power? Was he more than just a convincing preacher?

Authority over unclean spirits (1:23-28)

Mark immediately presents an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate the inner power needed to confirm his unsettling teachings. “A man with an unclean spirit” was in the synagogue (v. 23), according to Mark. At some point the man screamed at Jesus: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (v. 24). 🇺🇸

Mark, like others in the ancient world, attributed various mental and physical illnesses to evil spirits. Most modern people would explain the same conditions with medical and psychological terminology. In addressing the man, Jesus spoke in keeping with the beliefs of those around him.

The afflicted man’s cry, “What have you to do with us?” (NRSV, literally, “what to us and to you”) could carry the sense of “Leave us alone” (NET). It would have been spoken, we presume, from the perspective of the unclean spirit, who spoke in the plural and who feared destruction, knowing that “the Holy One of God” could not abide its presence.

Jesus had no interest in harming the man, but in restoring him to health. Speaking in a way that both the man and those surrounding him would understand, Jesus addressed the perceived unclean spirit with a rebuke and a command to leave (v. 25). The

man then convulsed and cried out before presumably assuming a peaceful posture that made his healing apparent to all (v. 26).

The following verse ties this powerful sign to Jesus’ powerful teaching. As Jesus had shown authority to teach (v. 22), he now demonstrated his authority to heal, even to command the dreaded unclean spirits. Once again, the people were amazed. This time Mark uses a word that describes astonishment over an unusual event.

It seems surprising to us that the people described Jesus’ act of power as “a new teaching – with authority” (v. 27). We would not think of a miraculous display of power as a “teaching,” but Jesus’ audience apparently saw it as a revelation of a new truth, and therefore a teaching that demonstrated Jesus’ uncanny authority in yet another way.

Jesus’ authoritative teaching in both word and deed was bound to have consequences, so we are not surprised that his “fame” (literally, “the hearing of him”) spread quickly throughout the region of Galilee. People came from miles around, and Jesus was soon inundated with supplicants who came to hear his words and seek his healing touch (see 1:32-34).

The radical nature of Jesus’ teaching does not spread as rapidly today, and many do not consider it to be authoritative. Could it be that the version of the gospel we proclaim has drifted from Jesus’ focus on loving God and loving others, thus lacking the clarity and power that attract attention and call for response?

What would it take for guests attending our churches to express amazement and spread the word that something new has come, a teaching that cuts through the moral quagmire of our self-focused culture, and does so with authority? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Feb. 7, 2021

Mark 1:29-39

Jesus, the Traveler

Balance. Wouldn't we all like to live a balanced life, with adequate time for family, work, and play? We'd like to have an active social life, but also attend to our emotional and spiritual needs.

But it's easy for life to get out of balance. Work can get crazy, and family needs can be overwhelming. Things we don't expect – such as a dangerous pandemic – can throw the most organized lives out of whack.

Jesus knew what it was like to face insistent demands for his time and attention, but still find ways to nurture his soul. In today's text, Mark describes three episodes that portray “a day in the life of Jesus” – a day that happened to be the Sabbath. Together, these stories underscore the balanced life that Jesus lived and modeled for those who follow him.

Sabbath work (vv. 29-32)

As we have seen in previous lessons, the gospel of Mark depicts Jesus as launching into his public ministry with gusto, teaching and healing wherever he went. 📌 As a charismatic teacher who could heal the sick, it's only natural that “his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee” (v. 28).

*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.
(Mark 1:31)*

Mark portrays a full Sabbath day that begins with Jesus teaching in the Capernaum synagogue, segues to an afternoon meal, and ends with a late-night healing session at Peter's house (vv. 21-34). The next story follows hard on its heels, taking place early the next morning (vv. 35-39).

As Mark tells it, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew were the first two men Jesus called as disciples, followed by the brothers James and John (vv. 16-20). The four of them earned their living by netting fish from small boats they sailed across the Sea of Galilee. 📌

Having left their fishing career behind, the eager disciples would have followed Jesus to the synagogue and heard him teach “as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (v. 22). They would have watched as he healed a man everyone believed to be possessed by an unclean spirit (vv. 23-26). Surely the disciples would have been as astounded as the others who saw Jesus saying and doing things beyond their comprehension. 📌

Wouldn't we?

Despite his newfound fame, Jesus remained calm and went about his work. After leaving the hubbub of the synagogue, he and the four disciples walked the short distance required to Simon Peter's home. No doubt they looked forward to some quiet time and a restful meal, but on arriving they discovered that Peter's mother-in-law had been taken ill with a fever. 📌

The family quickly turned to Jesus. With no outward to-do, “He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.” The fever disappeared, we read, “and she began to serve them” (v. 31). Lunch at last! 📌

Someone else, having gained similar celebrity status, might have focused on his or her own wants, but Jesus remained concerned for the needs of others. Fevers are not uncommon, and Peter's mother-in-law's condition was probably not life threatening. Yet, Jesus took the time to heal her.

Mark is also careful to add that “she began to serve them.” Jesus did not command this: out of both gratitude and custom, she began to serve (*diēconeī*, the rood word of “deacon”). In doing so, Peter's mother-in-law showed more insight than the competitive disciples, and became the first person said to serve Jesus.

We all face the likelihood of illness, whether serious or merely aggravating. We can't always count on immediate physical healing as a direct work of Jesus, but all of us who come to faith in Christ do experience the spiritual healing of forgiveness and hope. Do we respond with service, or do we go about our business as if nothing has changed?

Compassionate work (vv. 33-34)

As word spread, crowds of supplicants rolled in to seek a curative audience with Jesus. If we had been there and had suffered from a problem infection or loss of sight, we would likely have done the same: underserved people naturally seek help when it is available.

Additional information at
goodfaithmedia.org



Those who participate in free medical clinics serving poverty-stricken areas learn quickly that residents will start lining up the night before to receive medical or dental treatment that they otherwise couldn't get.

In this case, Mark notes that people waited until sundown, when the Sabbath officially ended, to bear their sick friends to Jesus. Rabbinic laws designed to enforce rest on the Sabbath did not allow people to carry burdens or to walk more than a limited distance. 📌 As darkness fell, though, "they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons," so that "the whole city was gathered around the door" (vv. 32-33). Capernaum was more of a village than a city, but that could still mean hundreds of people gathered about, all seeking access to Jesus.

Jesus responded to the mass of human need with both patience and compassion. The text does not say that he healed everyone, but "he cured many who were sick with various diseases," and he "cast out many demons" (v. 34).

Ancient people commonly believed that certain maladies, especially mental illnesses, were caused by evil spirits that could enter a person's body and cause trouble. Mark and other gospel writers shared this worldview, and Jesus worked on the level of the people, speaking the vocabulary that was familiar to them and overcoming their most fearsome threat. 📌

We may no longer attribute illness or other trouble to demons, but we still face troubling and fearful times. Do we believe Jesus has the ability to help us overcome and move on? If we have experienced a sense of divine comfort or encouragement, how did we respond?

As Jesus saw avenues for service in daily life, so we are called to

"lifestyle service," always being open to that person who needs a helping hand, a comforting word, a challenging witness.

Replenishing work (vv. 35-39)

Finding ways to serve Jesus actively is important, but so is serving our spirit. Without proper preparation, our service may be active, but ineffective. In today's text, Jesus models two habits that undergird effective service: time with God, and time to rest.

After a long day of ministry and probably a short night of sleep, Jesus arose "a great while before day" and went out to pray in the quiet countryside (v. 35). 📌 Jesus knew the importance of taking a breather from the crowds and even from his disciples. Quiet time apart from the demands of others not only refreshes the spirit; it opens a window for conversation with God. 📌

Does it seem surprising that Jesus – who Trinitarian thought holds co-equal with the Father and the Spirit – should find it important to pray? During his life on earth, Jesus voluntarily took on the form of humankind, including our human limitations. He grew tired, weary, even cross at times. He felt a sense of distance from the Father. Even Jesus found strength and encouragement as he prayed from the heart, expressing concerns and seeking guidance. 📌

The disciples had yet to understand this. They tracked Jesus down and tried to bring him back to Capernaum, where more sick people were undoubtedly waiting. "Everyone is searching for you," they said (v. 37), but Jesus knew that he could not stay and become the resident healer of Capernaum or any other town. His mission was bigger than that. As much as Jesus felt compassion for those who

suffered, he had to remain focused on the larger picture.

So it was that Jesus called the disciples to go with him into other towns through the region "so I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do" (v. 38). It was the message Jesus was preaching – that the Kingdom of God had come near and that all could come into relationship with God – that was most important. Miracles of healing, feeding, and other mighty works had their place as metaphors of the message, and they served to draw people in so they could hear his words of forgiveness and challenge, but Jesus did not become incarnate to gain fame as a miracle worker for a few short years.

Jesus came to proclaim the message of good news to all people. Some took offense at the open and forgiving spirit that led him to hang out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other folks that the religious elite classed as "sinners," but Jesus knew the kingdom was for them, too.

Following their leader, the first four disciples grabbed their travel cloaks, said their goodbyes, and followed Jesus down the road to other towns and villages throughout Galilee. Mark says he went about "proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons" (v. 39). The disciples were there to assist him, and to learn from him.

Jesus knew what his mission was, and he knew how to keep his physical, emotional, and spiritual batteries charged so that he could do the work he had come to do.

What is our calling? Do we have a clear sense of how God wants us to live and serve in Christ's behalf? Following Jesus' pattern of observing human need and spending quiet time in prayer will surely help us find our role in kingdom work. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 14, 2021

Mark 9:2-9

Jesus, the Dazzler

Have you ever dreamed about becoming more than you are, or different? We like the idea of transforming whatever we don't like about ourselves into something more attractive, more svelte, or more talented.

Superhero movies feed the fantasy that seemingly ordinary people can quickly transform into more exciting personas. Clark Kent rips off his shirt to reveal a Superman logo. Diana Prince twirls around and becomes Wonder Woman. Bruce Banner gets really stressed and morphs into the Incredible Hulk – as likely to go on a rampage as to be helpful.

We may transform in lesser ways, and not always in a good way. Facing enough stress, a normally calm person can suddenly act in ways that are totally out of character. But, a normally shy person may also reveal unexpected moxie and strength.

Our text describes a true story of transformation. Mark 9:2-8, like the parallel accounts in Matthew 17 and Luke 9, describes the fascination and frustration of Jesus' three closest friends when they were granted a glimpse of his eternal identity.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7)

The back story (8:27-33)

Sometime well into his ministry, Jesus led his disciples into the northernmost regions of Israel, not far from the new city of Caesarea-Philippi, a beautiful and fertile area near the foot of Mt. Hermon.

The city boasted a temple dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperor, and on its outskirts was a grotto devoted to worshipping various Roman gods, including goat-footed Pan. Jesus had brought the Twelve on retreat to teach them more about his true identity and his mission. 🇺🇸 We can imagine that he also sought to strengthen his own resolve for what lay ahead: the hard road to the cross.

The Twelve had been with Jesus for some time. They had heard him teach with authority, had seen him perform mighty works, had felt his heart-warming love, and had puzzled over his parables. Jesus may have wondered if they would ever really understand, but when he asked them "Who do you say that I am?" Peter spoke up with the correct response: "You are the Christ" (8:27, 29). 🇺🇸

Peter knew the answer, but he was like a four-year-old who can answer questions about the "plan of salvation" without any concept of what salvation really means. He could identify Jesus as God's messiah, but did not yet understand what kind of messiah Jesus intended to be. Like many others,

the disciples appear to have expected a military leader who would restore a Jewish kingdom.

Jesus used that moment to explain that he expected to suffer and be executed before rising from the dead. Can you imagine what a shock that must have been? To help the disciples understand, Jesus took the three disciples who were closest and most influential – Peter, James, and John – and led them higher up the mountain so they could go deeper in understanding.

The big event (vv. 2-8)

As they settled down at a certain place, Jesus underwent a mind-blowing transformation the Gospels struggle to describe. Both Matthew and Mark describe the change with the Greek word *metamorphoō*, the root of our word "metamorphosis." Mark says that Jesus' clothing became radiant and dazzling white in a way no earthly launderer could accomplish. Luke adds that "his face changed," and Matthew says that "his face shone like the sun." 🇺🇸

It was as if Jesus, who had been disguised as a Galilean peasant, suddenly threw off his human form and reverted to a more heavenly, glorified appearance. Perhaps his clothes were so bright because his body, like his face, was shining through. 🇺🇸

Jesus was *transformed*. A window opened between heaven and earth, allowing eternity to penetrate our world and time, granting the disciples a vision of the eternal Christ within the earthly Jesus.

The vision included two surprise visitors from Hebrew history: Moses and Elijah suddenly appeared, as if they

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had “beamed down” from heaven to have an encouraging conversation with Jesus (v. 4).

The two figures serve an important symbolic purpose. Moses represented the Law, and Elijah the Prophets, the twin traditions upholding Israel’s faith. Jewish traditions held that both Moses and Elijah would return to earth before the “Day of the Lord.” Now they were standing before the disciples, upholding Jesus and giving way to him. When Moses and Elijah departed, Jesus was left alone: The Law and the Prophets had found their fulfillment in the person of Christ.

All three synoptic gospels say that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah carried on a conversation for some time, but only Luke hints at the content of their discussion. He says they talked about what was yet to come for Jesus, his “departure” to be accomplished at Jerusalem. Perhaps it is significant that Luke used the Greek word *exodus* to describe it.

In the first Exodus, God worked through Moses to set the people of Israel free from slavery in Egypt. In Jesus, God would work through the suffering and death of Jesus to free all people from spiritual bondage.

At some point in the conversation, Peter found his tongue. As if with embarrassment, he offered to cut down limbs from the trees and build temporary shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (v. 5).

It’s comical to think that after Moses and Elijah had blinked onto the scene in fiery, glorified bodies, they would have any use for a hillside lean-to. Mark was kind enough to add that Peter and the others didn’t know what to say, “for they were terrified” (v. 6). 📌

As Peter was speaking, a cloud descended with surprising suddenness, no doubt contributing to the disciples’ fright. In the Old Testament,

when Yahweh appeared, it was often in a cloud. A thick cloud had led the people of Israel in the wilderness and had settled over the tabernacle when it was consecrated as a place to meet God on earth. Now, a cloud had descended over Jesus, Moses, and Elijah – as well as Peter, James, and John. God was present. They could *feel* the difference. And they had to have been shaking in their sandals.

As if that were not enough, when the three disciples thought their senses couldn’t possibly get more overloaded, the voice of God sounded, and the disciples fell to their faces as God’s words reverberated through the mist: “*This is my beloved Son: listen to him!*” (v. 7).

And then the voice was still, and the cloud departed, and all was back to normal (v. 8). When the bedazzled disciples peeked through their fingers, there was Jesus, sitting alone on the grass, waiting for them. Had they been awake, or sleeping? Was it real, or a dream? Could they all have had the *same* dream? They chose to believe it was real – shockingly real.

Just as God’s voice had spoken at Jesus’ baptism, validating his call and his ministry, so now God’s voice had spoken again to impress the disciples with the truth that Jesus knew who he was and what he was doing, and that they had best give attention to his words.

The difference it makes

The awesome truth of this story is that Jesus’ transformation carries with it the promise of our own transformation, both internally and ultimately, if we will listen to Jesus and follow him. It may be hard for us to believe that when we are surrounded by our homes and offices, newspapers and briefcases, tax forms and monthly bills. It’s hard to see beyond present realities to eternal hopes.

In this life, it is unlikely that we

will see Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in the way that the three disciples saw them. But, as that astonishing vision reached out to them across space and time, it continues to call us beyond the centuries. When we listen to Jesus, he calls us to take up our crosses and follow him. When we listen to Jesus, He calls us to be transformed, to become new people who love and give and serve as he did.

This does not happen immediately for us, but it can happen. We can experience God’s saving grace in a moment, but transformation as disciples is a lifelong process. Paul understood that, and challenged believers to a lifetime of transforming growth, as in these words to the Christians in Corinth:

“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” (1 Cor. 3:18).

Just think about that: all of us ... being transformed ... into the same image of Christ ... from one degree of glory to another. It’s enough to leave us as speechless as three flabbergasted disciples.

Consider trying this experiment in prayer. Begin by getting comfortable and closing your eyes. Using the power of your own imagination, transport yourself to that mountain in the mist. Crouch beneath the evergreens beside Peter, James, and John. Breathe deeply of the fresh, cool air. Look through the cloud and behold the shining radiance of Jesus’ face. Can you see him? Are you aware of what obstacles and temptations cloud your vision and make it difficult for you to draw close? Can you get them out of the way?

Listen, for God speaks. “This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to Him!”

NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 21, 2021

Mark 1:9-15

Jesus, the Preacher

On my drive to and from Campbell University where I teach, I enjoy watching the crops grow in roadside fields. Tobacco and cotton grow large. Soybeans are less showy, and sweet potato vines stay close to the ground. The potatoes themselves remain hidden until fall, when tractors go through the fields with deep plows designed to turn the vines under while pushing potatoes to the surface.

Farmers often leave the ruddy tubers to dry for a few days before busloads of migrant workers go out to collect them. The pickers focus on marketable potatoes of sufficient size and reasonable shape that haven't been cut by the plow. They don't spend a lot of time digging around for potatoes still lurking just beneath the soil.

Even after the workers have been through, the fields remain covered with potatoes that are perfectly edible but not pretty. A good rain brings even more out of hiding.

Fortunately, the farmers often allow volunteers from charitable food agencies to come and glean a substantial second harvest.

That is not unlike what we're doing with today's text. As we follow the gospel texts through Epiphany and

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15)

Lent, the lectionary has already had us plow the ground of Mark 1:4-11 and 14-20, but today it brings us back for a second harvest in the partially overlapping text of 1:9-15.

Why would the designers of the lectionary do this? Because this week we've left Epiphany and entered into Lent. Ash Wednesday has reminded us how often we fall short and how greatly we need repentance. Today's text takes up that theme by revisiting Jesus' baptism and his earliest preaching, along with a brief account of his temptation.

Step one: initiation (vv. 9-11)

Mark's gospel, as we have noted, moves quickly. He includes no stories about Mary and Joseph, nothing about Jesus' birth, no accounts of a 12-year-old prodigy astounding the scribes in Jerusalem.

In Mark, Jesus steps onto the stage fully grown, fully aware, and soon to be fully prepared for his ministry. Our text appears to describe a three-step process of initiation, temptation, and proclamation.

The first step was baptism. Why?


Jesus was born into Judaism and raised by good Jewish parents. His mission as messiah is presented as a fulfillment of all that Judaism promised and then some. It seems appropriate, then, that Jesus would venture beyond the customary rituals of Jewish life

to mark the beginning of his active ministry.



To do so, Jesus traveled far from his home in Nazareth, a four-day walk deep into the Jordan River, not far from Jericho. The Fourth Gospel identifies the place as "Bethany Beyond the Jordan," indicating a place on the eastern side of the river.

Jesus was not alone. In his typically hyperbolic style, Mark reports that people "from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him" (v. 5). Most of them had a shorter walk: Jerusalem was about 27 miles to the west.

John's audience would have consisted primarily of Jews, and he called for them to repent of their sins, apparently using baptism as a symbolic rite of cleansing and recommitment to following the Law.

But John also pointed beyond the Law, proclaiming that another would come after him who would baptize not with water, but with fire (v. 8). 

That one was Jesus, who apparently walked up and entered the water with no introduction or explanation (v. 9). Mark says nothing of John's objection or of Jesus insisting that it must be so, as Matthew does (3:14-15).

Indeed, John says nothing to Jesus in Mark's account: further testimony comes from above as "he saw the heavens ripped apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him," followed by a heavenly voice ringing out "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (v. 10-11).  

Jesus had no need of repentance, but perhaps he felt a need to publicly identify with humankind. In doing so, however, he also received divine

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endorsement. Jesus was fully human, but more than human, even as he was fully Jewish, but pointing to something beyond Judaism.

Step two: temptation (vv. 12-13)

Jesus' baptism appears to have served a function similar to today's concept of ordination as a mark of one's calling to ministry, but that was not the end of his preparation.

Some denominational groups require extensive education and ministry experience before ordination, while others ordain first and encourage preparation afterward. This was my experience: I was ordained while still in college, having never taken a course in Bible. Although I studied on my own and through correspondence courses, I served as a pastor for seven years before going to seminary.

Jesus did not need a seminary education: he appears to have been well-trained in the Hebrew scriptures and assuredly led by the Spirit within. Apparently, however, he did need something else. All three gospels describe a "trial by fire" of sorts, as the same Spirit that had endorsed him now led him into the wilderness to face a 40-day ordeal.

Indeed, though both Matthew and Luke say Jesus "was led" by the Spirit into the wilderness (Matt. 4:1, Luke 4:1), Mark says "And the Spirit immediately *drove* him out into the wilderness" (v. 12). The word translated as "drove" is derived from *'ekballō*, which is formed from a prefix meaning "out" and a verb meaning "to throw;" it can also mean "cast out" or "sent out."

Does this suggest that Jesus didn't want to go and needed prodding to make his way into a deserted area to fast for 40 days and be tempted by Satan? Mark may have thought so: the prospect certainly did seem appealing.

Mark describes in two verses what Matthew expands to 11 and Luke to 13 verses. Matthew and Luke include specific stories in which a personified Satan tempts the hungry Jesus with prospects of food, glory, and power, but Jesus deflects each temptation by reciting scripture.

Mark relates only that "he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (v. 13).

The presence of Satan in the stories does not require that we imagine a horned devil having conversations with Jesus. After the Persian period, rabbinic Judaism morphed the Old Testament image of a heavenly *sātān* (accuser), a member of God's divine council (Job 1), into an evil being who opposed God and tempted humans to sin.

The gospel writers were conversant with this belief and assumed that any temptation would have its roots in satanic influence, but we all know that we are quite capable of being tempted by selfish desires without the need of a devil whispering in our ears.

The difference between Jesus and us is not so much the setting or the manner of temptation as it is the result: We often give in; Jesus did not.

Perhaps the hard days of temptation were necessary for building the physical, emotional, and psychological strength Jesus would need to carry out an intense ministry that would involve long days, demanding crowds, stubborn disciples, painful rejection, and an inglorious crucifixion.

God's love for Jesus did not preclude doing what was necessary for Jesus' continued growth and preparation for ministry, even to the point of sending him into the wilderness.

Step three: proclamation (vv. 14-15)

Mark portrays Jesus' lengthy tempta-

tion as concluding with divine comfort. After noting colorfully that Jesus was "with the wild beasts," he adds "and the angels waited on him" (v. 13). We are not to presume that angels were at Jesus' beck and call throughout the 40 days; if so, there would have been no real temptation.

The implication is that Jesus received angelic provision to restore his health after the 40 days had passed, and anyone who had fasted for 40 days would need some restoration.

As Mark relates it, Jesus waited until he had regained his strength and John the baptizer had been arrested before launching into his own preaching ministry.

In characteristic form, Mark doesn't mince words. After John's arrest, he says, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.'"

The familiar King James Version and even the New English Translation say Jesus was "preaching the gospel," but most modern translations take the step of translating the word (*euangelion*), because that's what it means.

The good news was that "the kingdom of God has come near." God's long-awaited intervention into world affairs had begun and humans could share in it. Joining God's kingdom enterprise called for repentance from old sins and faith in a new relationship made possible through Christ's redeeming work.

Mark does not say how those first fortunate residents of Galilee responded when they heard Jesus preach his early sermons, and we don't need to know. What matters is how we react. Here in this season of Lent, as we remember our failings and ponder our hopes, how will we respond to Jesus' good news? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 28, 2021

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus, the Challenger

We live in a world that doesn't generally care for radicals. We may have some admiration for athletes who subject themselves to radical training methods, and we respect someone with cancer who opts for a more radical surgical procedure or treatment.

On the other hand, radical political and social views can be another matter. Conservative politicians disavow anarchists from the radical right, and progressive folk keep their distance from full-blown socialists on the radical left.

If we're truthful, our fear of radicalism is also present in church and in our lives of faith, or little faith. We want a religion that is generally comfortable, that promises much while asking for little. We can bear a bit of challenge on occasion, but one that doesn't stretch us too far.

Our cozy approach to faith feels far from adequate when we read the Gospels carefully, for it's clear that Jesus calls us to a radical faith, and a radical faith calls for bigger changes than most of us are willing to make.

Radical Faith (vv. 31-34)

The first part of Jesus' ministry – the part described in Mark 1:1-8:30 – was

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

quite exciting, but also fairly safe. He spent most of that time wandering the hills and valleys of Galilee, visiting villages and healing people and teaching his disciples a new way of living. With the story related in today's text, though, Jesus begins to turn away from safety and toward extremity. This encounter comes just before the account of the Transfiguration, after which he points his feet toward Jerusalem and turns his mind toward suffering and sacrifice that his disciples cannot begin to comprehend. 📖

That theme makes this a most appropriate text for the Lenten season as we, like Jesus, begin to turn our hearts toward Holy Week.

Imagine the disciples' response when Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (v. 31).

Can't you hear them? "Suffering and dying? What? That isn't what a messiah does! Don't you think you're being a little extreme?"

Peter almost certainly spoke for the other disciples when he took Jesus to task for such a crazy plan. So, Jesus may have been looking at all the disciples when he returned the rebuke, saying: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (v. 33). 📖

Jesus wasn't telling his disciples to "Get out of here," or "Get lost," but to "Get back where you belong – behind me, following me." Jesus dared to use the name "Satan" for the simple reason that Peter was tempting him to choose human desires over God's way, even as Satan reportedly had done (Mark 1:12-13). There is something significant about that: Jesus is saying, in effect, that human thought without divine influence will always run the danger of becoming evil. We live in the world, but must remember that we are citizens of God's kingdom.

Peter's problem, in part, is that he knew enough to put two and two together. He knew that if the master must suffer and die, then the disciples must be willing to follow him. Jesus confirmed that conclusion when he turned to all who were present – disciples and "the crowd" who followed them – and said: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (v. 34). 📖

Yikes.

The precise words attributed to Jesus may have been fashioned later, since a cross had yet to enter the picture, but the summons to follow was clear, if not pretty.

Preachers of the prosperity gospel claim that following Jesus will keep us healthy, solve our problems and make us successful, but that's not the gospel Jesus taught. Jesus wanted his followers to understand that the Messiah's way would not be the way of power as the world knows it, but the way of service; it would not be the way of self-gratification, but of self-denial.

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That is not the way most of us would choose. We prefer to play it safe, to show up at church when it's convenient, and avoid any risky business. We want a religion that pays, not one that costs.

Radical living (vv. 35-36)

Jesus knew our penchant for preferring the safe way. That's why he addressed that idea head on, and with no comfort in his words: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (v. 35).

Jesus calls us to deny our selfishness and to follow the way of the cross, even if it leads to death. *That's extreme.* That's also the way it is. Bearing the cross for Jesus is not just dealing with the everyday difficulties that come to everyone. Bearing the cross is about accepting challenges and risks and possibly dangers precisely because we choose to take Jesus seriously.

This does not suggest that we should expect to die for our faith, for that rarely happens. Still, we should expect to die *with* our faith. The question is not about dying so much as it is about *living* with the right attitude about dying. To take up the cross primarily means being willing to live as Jesus called us to live. Loving others as Jesus loved us may call for sacrifice, but that's what it means to live in the light of the cross. To lose one's life in this context is to surrender control of our life to Christ.

How we live makes a difference, both to us and to others. Taking the easy way may leave us physically alive but without really experiencing the life Jesus wants us to know. The Greek word for "life" in this text (*psuchē*) is the root of our word "psychology." Jesus was not just talking about our


physical life, but about our inner being, about our true self.

In this text, to *lose one's life* is not so much about physical death, for sooner or later everyone dies. Rather, it is to miss out on the true life that God wants for us – a life that can only be known through the risky way of looking at the world with a "Jesus point of view" and responding accordingly.

Radical dying (vv. 36-38)

We can work all our lives to gain happiness and security – that is, to "save our lives" – then get to the end of the road and realize we have missed out on what God intends our earthly life to be. Not only that, but the end of the road will be the end of the road.

When we reach that point, we would give every dime in every mutual fund we have for one more chance, but it will be too late. Jesus concluded this frank lesson on discipleship with these words:

"For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (vv. 36-38). 

Those words sound hard. They also sound true. If we are too ashamed to follow Jesus now, how can we expect anything other than for him to be ashamed to claim us later? The text demands that we ask whether we are more inclined to deny self or to deny Christ.


This is not an easy question to answer: we may find it hard even to distinguish between wants and needs, much less to consider giving up either one. Whether it's a bigger TV, or a

place at the beach, or more days of vacation, or a nicer house, or a newer car, we have a way of turning our "wants" into "needs."

There's an old story about a family who moved into a new house that had been built next door to the humble home of a Quaker family. The simplicity-minded Quakers watched in amazement as two large truckloads of furnishings, appliances, toys, and tools were unloaded and packed into the house and a workshop behind it. After everything had been unloaded, the family's patriarch walked over to greet the new family. "We welcome thee neighbors," he said. "And if thee ever need anything, come over to see me, and I will teach thee how to get along without it." I suspect that many of us could use a teacher like that.

The more we try to "save our life" by following this world's idea of what life is about, the more we will lose track of what real life is all about. But, the more we learn to surrender self-will to God's will, the more we learn to say "no" to self and "yes" to Jesus, and the more we learn to give ourselves in loving service to others, the more we will come to appreciate the true glory and meaning of the abundant and eternal life God has in store for us.

Truly following Jesus is risky business, but no risk we take for God will separate us from the love of God or the hope of God's eternity. The biggest risk we can take is that of playing it safe. It was Jesus who said that those who try to save their lives will lose them, while those who surrender themselves to Christ will find their lives not only restored, but also amplified with abundance.

It's not easy to choose the radical way of the cross, but that is the way of Jesus. The question before us, then, is not whether we *can* do it, but whether we *will*.  **NFJ**

Jimmy Carter (1977–1981): Part Three

By Bruce Gourley

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Invoking the language of crisis in his July 15, 1979 address to the nation, President Jimmy Carter spoke of a “crisis of confidence ... threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of America.” Americans were losing faith, he said, “not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy.”

“In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. For the first time in the history of our country a majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years,” he declared.

His words reflected a decline in labor unions, increased corporate lobbying in Washington, and a new generation of economists who assessed the economy not on the basis of work production, but of consumer spending.

CHALLENGES

“Two-thirds of our people do not even vote,” he continued, and “there is a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions.” Beneath these observations lay Republican opposition to improving voting access among minorities, alongside

a growing cultural divide that would soon reshape the media landscape.

The president admitted that Americans often saw paralysis and self-serving special interests in the nation’s capital. Restoring faith and confidence is “now the most important task we face ... a true challenge of this generation of Americans,” he said, words destined to ring true far beyond merely one generation.

Carter offered hope. “We know the strength of America. We are strong. We can regain our unity. We can regain our confidence. We are the heirs of generations who survived threats much more powerful and awesome than those that challenge us now. Our fathers and mothers were strong men and women who shaped a new society during the Great Depression, who fought world wars, and who carved out a new charter of peace for the world.”

But what were Americans to do? “We are at a turning point in our history. There are two paths to choose,” the president said. One path “leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure.”

Another way, “the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values ... leads to true freedom for our Nation and ourselves,” Carter continued. He identified the first steps of this better path as focusing on “energy security” from the Middle East by developing “America’s own alternative sources of fuel — from coal, from oil shale, from plant products for gasohol, from unconventional gas, from the Sun.”

COMMON PURPOSE

Ramping up alternative domestic energy production would take time, however. In the interim Carter asked that Americans conserve energy by driving less and using less electricity in their homes.

Carter’s reframing of his views of America’s “common purpose” from a unifying social construct of human rights to a national energy strategy represented a turning point in his presidency. Was the president, ever pragmatic, seeking to capitalize on the nation’s conservative mood during the economic crisis? If so, it worked: an immediate post-speech poll revealed a 10 percent rise in Carter’s approval ratings.

“My government is not leading the country. The people have lost confidence in me, in the Congress, in themselves, and in this nation,” the president in somber tones informed his Cabinet in a meeting the morning of July 17, two days following his successful energy speech, the words recalled by Joseph Califano, Carter’s secretary of Health, Welfare and Education, in a 1981 *Washington Post* article.

Then, according to Califano, Carter proceeded to blame his cabinet. Comments from Camp David participants about his cabinet were “serious and condemnatory. I was told, they are not working for you, but for themselves,” Carter said to his cabinet.

Some cabinet members were accused of disloyalty, others of leaking hurtful information to the press. Califano detected an “expression of hurt” on the president’s face as he spoke of his “great loyalty” to his cabinet and appreciation for their work.

As Califano recalled, the president declared: “I have decided to change my lifestyle, and my calendar. I have one-and-

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.



In 1982, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter became a university distinguished professor at Emory University in Atlanta and founded The Carter Center. Actively guided by President Carter, the nonpartisan and not-for-profit Center advances peace and health worldwide. Carter Center staff and partners join with President Carter in efforts to resolve conflict, promote democracy, protect human rights, and prevent disease and other afflictions. Photo credit: The Carter Center.

a-half years left as president, and I don't deserve to be reelected if I can't do a better job. I intend to run for office and I intend to be reelected."

Changes would be coming. Carter asked each of his cabinet members to submit resignations. He would choose which resignations to accept. According to Califano, most of the cabinet objected. The discussion grew heated, but in the end the president had his way. That afternoon the White House issued a press release.

CHANGES

"The president had serious and lengthy discussions with his cabinet and senior White House staff about the priorities of his administration," the press release stated. "He reviewed with them progress of the past few years and the problems that remain. All members of the cabinet and senior staff have offered their resignations to the president during this period of evaluation. The president will review these offers carefully and expeditiously."

The statement appeared in newspapers across America the following day, including the *Washington Post*. The *Post* story began: "Thirty-four members of the Carter administration, including the entire cabinet and White House senior staff, offered to resign yesterday in another stunning development in President Carter's effort to revive his presidency."

In short order, Carter accepted numerous resignations. *Time* magazine called the episode "Carter's Great Purge," quoting an "aghast White House official" who declared, "We've burned down the house to roast the pig."

On August 15, U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, accused of improperly meeting with a Palestinian Liberation Organization representative and thereby offending Jews, also departed. Young's forced resignation angered many in the nation's black community.

Carter and Young later reconciled. In time, Carter acknowledged that in an attempt to revive his presidency he had "made a mistake" and "mishandled" the resignations.

EVANGELICALS

All the while and amid the successes, challenges and perils inherent in all presidential administrations, evangelical responses to the most religious president in American history grew increasingly negative.

A defining moment began during International Women's Year. Designated by Carter in 1977 to advance women's rights, including the Equal Rights Amendment, the focus on gender equality incensed a growing anti-abortion movement opposed to women's constitutional right to abortion.

Always trying to walk a fine line on abortion, Carter found himself in the

impossible position of genuinely supporting women's rights yet personally opposing abortion as morally wrong. Pleasing no one, he upheld *Roe v. Wade* but signed the Hyde Amendment in 1977, barring the use of federal funds for abortion.

Carter understood the political quandary of abortion. The president who had promised Americans he would never lie to them openly voiced his conflicted feelings by saying what everyone knew but conservatives refused to say: restricting abortion would further impoverish poor women and the children born to them, especially African Americans. He also consistently declined invitations to attend anti-abortion events.

Meanwhile, a number of other conservative white evangelical interest groups gained traction. Focused on different issues, the groups nonetheless shared a common purpose: defense of America's traditional white, male hierarchy and discrimination against people of color, women and homosexuals.

Spearheaded by anti-public education evangelicals angry at the IRS's revocation of the non-profit status of their private segregation academies, the conservative backlash grew. Together their congregations and political organizations represented a revival of George Wallace's late 1960s white supremacist "law and order" agenda. But this time they framed their racism and xenophobia as "family values." White hate groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, re-emerged as defenders of white Christian families.

Re-emerging, too, none other than Billy Graham eased back into the political spotlight. America's most prominent evangelist, publicly tarnished by his unwavering support of the corrupt Richard Nixon, now sensed a new opportunity to fulfill his decades-long dream of turning America into a Christian nation.

Each year, meanwhile, Carter honored the National Prayer Breakfast, but was never truly comfortable doing so. In January 1979 Washington's Hilton Hotel hosted the annual event, an occasion that brought even more anxiety to the president.

Conservative white evangelicals, many of whom a few years earlier had voted for the president, brooded in their seats.

Their pleas had gone unanswered. America's first evangelical president yet held them at arms length. Graham, sensing a new white conservative evangelical groundswell, opened the event in prayer.

Politically weak and vulnerable, Carter needed the support of those in the room. But as always, from religious conviction he felt compelled to remain true to his conscience.

RELIGION'S ROLE

Beginning his speech with niceties and lightly poking fun at himself, Carter segued to religion by listing the top three stories of the prior year — all religious in nature — as identified by a public opinion poll: the Jonestown tragedy in which hundreds of loyal followers of a charismatic religious charlatan perished “because of misguided leadership;” the selection of a non-Roman pope from Poland; and the Camp David Accord that led to peace between Israel and Egypt.

“[N]ations are intimately related to religion,” the president continued, reaching for his audience. Then the caveat: “Our nation requires by law that the church and the state must be separated. The church cannot dominate our government. Our government cannot dominate nor influence religion.”

Those were the last words many in attendance wished to hear.

As if lecturing, he reminded his audience of a past “in our own nation” when white Christians had “not been willing to accommodate those who have been deprived, who have and do suffer as they struggle for a better life.

“I grew up in a region of the country,” he continued in pointed words, “which has in the past, and still sees quite often — too often — the Christian churches as the last bastion of racial segregation and even discrimination.”

“Truth,” he said, “is a mandatory element of a sound basis for a religious life. But sometimes we cannot accept the truth.” As those words settled in, he continued. “We must guard against the abuse of our own religious faith.” Centuries past when “it was a crime to not be a Christian” must not be forgotten, nor “the true teaching of Christ.”

Then the point, driven home to an

audience not altogether receptive: “When any religion impacts adversely on those whom Christ described as ‘the least of these,’ it can have no firm foundation in God’s sight.”

In closing his remarks, the president of the most powerful nation in the world, speaking to the nation’s most prominent conservative evangelicals lusting for political power over their liberal enemies, charged his audience “to project a deep belief in love, compassion, understanding, service, humility” toward others.

Disappointed, white evangelical men intent on co-opting the White House for purposes of exclusion rather than encompassing love walked out into the cold winter morning.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Shortly thereafter, and led by Lynchburg, Va.-based Independent Baptist preacher and televangelist Jerry Falwell and conservative political activist Paul Weyrich (among others), leading fundamentalist Christians formed the Moral Majority, a political organization devoted to the transformation of America into a Christian nation.

Graham, seemingly smarting from his former alliance with Nixon, declined to formally align with the group. But neither could he support Carter, for visions of a Christian nation still danced in the evangelist’s head.

At odds with a Democratic Congress, struggling to address a spiraling energy and economic crisis, mired in a Cabinet controversy and having lost any meaningful support from the conservative white evangelical community, Carter needed help. He turned to Southern Baptist minister Robert L. Maddox.

Hailing from Carter’s home state of Georgia, Maddox had contacted Carter two years prior and offered to build bridges to conservative evangelicals. At the time Carter refused. But in 1979, with Carter needing the votes of conservative Christians the following year, the president appointed Maddox as his religious liaison.

In the words of Maddox, Carter was “in pretty bad trouble with a lot of religious people.” Southern Baptists, increasingly

under the influence of Jerry Falwell and becoming more conservative, were angered “to the point of animosity” at the Carter administration’s aloofness.

Maddox perceived abortion as the primary issue that anchored the emerging Religious Right, comprised of a “vast chunk of Christendom” — “Independent Baptists, Methodists, many Pentecostal groups and a huge ‘television’ church congregation” numbering some 40 million strong.

To Carter, Maddox also reported, with no small irony, the president himself had legitimized political activism for conservative evangelicals and set them in search of a political savior.

The reach of conservative evangelical television shows troubled Maddox. Among the large contingent of Carter’s evangelical opponents, Jerry Falwell stood out as most vocal and visible. Against all odds Maddox wanted Carter to try and convert his critics.

“My very strong feeling was that the president should talk to” the nation’s leading conservative religious television personalities, Maddox insisted, before they found a new candidate to support in the upcoming 1980 elections.

For months Carter resisted. By the time he invited some televangelists to a White House breakfast meeting in January 1980, it was too late. Meanwhile in November a political miracle from afar arrived disguised as more bad news.

CRISES

With the Iranian revolution continuing, the Carter administration allowed the deposed Iranian Shah to enter the United States for medical treatment. Enraged, a contingent of Iranians backed by the revolutionary government in November 1979 took hostage U.S. diplomatic personnel in Tehran.

Angered at Iran’s transgression, the American public rallied around their president, his approval ratings skyrocketing into the low 60s. Within weeks diplomatic maneuvering on the part of the White House secured release of some of the hostages. Sanctions against Iran followed. Plans to free the remaining hostages took shape.

Magnifying the stakes, another foreign crisis arose as the Soviets invaded Afghanistan,

a nation bordering Iran and that the U.S. had quietly aided in an attempt to counter Soviet influence. In protest of the invasion, Carter announced that the U.S. would not send athletes to the summer 1980 Olympics in Moscow if the Soviets did not withdraw from Afghanistan.

As the two crises consumed public attention, Carter in his Jan. 23, 1980 State of the Union address laid aside his non-military peacemaking persona. Taking up the mantle of a wartime president, he outlined what became known as the “Carter Doctrine.” A policy designed to maintain peace with force, it would have lasting implications in U.S. foreign relations.

Three threatening international developments he identified: “the steady growth and increased projection of Soviet military power beyond its own borders; the overwhelming dependence of the Western democracies on oil supplies from the Middle East; and the press of social and religious and economic and political change in the many nations of the developing world, exemplified by the revolution in Iran.”

He pledged to protect the immediate and long-term interests of the United States and secure a safe release of Americans yet held hostage in Iran. He promised to work with allies abroad in containing the Soviets and protecting Middle East oil supplies crucial to American prosperity. Carter also promised to work with allies to stabilize the region and foster human rights while expanding and modernizing America’s military capacity through a five-year increase in defense spending.

As both a military hawk and a man of peace, Carter chartered a new course for America in the decades to come. In 1985 his successor Ronald Reagan praised Carter for initiating the rebuilding of America’s military forces. At the same time, Carter’s unflagging push for human rights in the Soviet Union played a key role in the fall of the Soviet Union during the Reagan years.

Nonetheless, promises backed by policies that would take years to achieve fell short of realities in the presidential election year of 1980, not the least being the pressing reality of 52 American hostages still held captive in the U.S. embassy in Tehran.

POLITICAL SHIFT

Following months of careful planning a multi-stage, complex hostage rescue mission took place in April 1980. Involving military airplanes and helicopters, special forces, and CIA operatives on the ground in Iran, the operation depended upon efficient execution under extreme circumstances.

Problems, however, quickly plagued Operation Eagle Claw. Shortly after landing in Iran, operational miscues and mechanical failures — the latter in part due to extreme desert conditions — added up one after another. In a sequence of mishaps three of eight helicopters failed, one crashing and exploding in a fireball, killing eight servicemen. A mere five helicopters remained to transport special forces and equipment into Tehran for the rescue of the hostages, one less than the established minimum of six required for the operation.

Commanders on the ground disagreed on whether to proceed or not. America’s top military leaders in D.C., faced with the prospect of failure, recommended calling off the operation. Carter reluctantly acquiesced. The remaining military aircraft and special forces returned home, the mission an abject failure that stunned the nation. Carter’s approval ratings plummeted.

Although Carter subsequently won the Democratic presidential nomination, his reelection bid took place amid the ever-present specter of the failed rescue mission, the 52 hostages yet in captivity, frayed relations with a Democratic Congress, high unemployment and inflation, the Olympic boycott (the Soviets would not withdraw from Afghanistan for another 10 years), and opposition from a re-empowered and racist white evangelical coalition.

Nonetheless, until July the pragmatic and centrist incumbent remained a polling favorite over his Republican opponent Ronald Reagan.

Focused on downsizing government and balancing the budget — ironically an earlier Carter mantra — Reagan campaigned on cutting taxes on the rich, promising that the tax cuts would trickle down to ordinary Americans and revive the nation’s stagnant economy. Carter, in turn, portrayed Reagan as an extreme conserva-

tive with a history of opposing welfare and Social Security.

Late summer arrived, alongside a series of gaffes by Reagan that opened him to criticism as a racist and ill-informed on issues. Making matters worse, in the South the Ku Klux Klan effectively campaigned for Reagan by protesting Carter’s candidacy. The polls began swinging back toward Carter.

Meanwhile, the new conservative leadership of Carter’s religious denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, aligned politically with the Republican Party. On Aug. 7, 1980, Bailey Smith “came by” the White House.

“He’s president of the Southern Baptist Convention,” Carter noted in his White House diary. “He asked me about secular humanism and how I explained my attitude toward it. I told him I never had used the words and weren’t familiar with them.”

The president assumed Smith’s hostility was “part of the attacks being made by the Jerry Falwell right-wing group [the Moral Majority].”

The following month with Carter rising in the polls, Falwell’s Moral Majority, in the words of the president, “purchased \$10 million in commercials on southern radio and TV to brand me as a traitor to the South and no longer a Christian.” It was a massive advertising blitz.

Carter’s campaign was limited by campaign finance laws to \$25 million in the general election. Carter’s religious liaison Robert Maddox charged conservative evangelicals with portraying the president of being “kind of the antichrist.”

As conservative white evangelicals began shifting solidly into Reagan’s camp, Carter also found resistance from some progressive evangelical leaders who perceived his social justice commitments insufficient. Black Americans, on the other hand and despite some disappointments, remained largely supportive.

DEFEAT

The president’s troubles continued during his second national television debate with Reagan. Carter’s attacks on Reagan’s extreme



HISTORIC GATHERING: Former President Jimmy Carter brought together more than 15,000 fellow Baptists from across racial, theological and organizational lines to Atlanta in 2008 for a time of worship and sharing. The New Baptist Covenant continues to foster congregational efforts to advance justice and equality. Photo by John D. Pierce.

political record that resonated from afar fell flat on live television during the debate as Reagan, an actor-turned-politician, deflected with misleading but well-delivered vague and sometimes humorous rejoinders.

Some political historians point to Reagan's closing statement in that debate — beginning with the words, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" — as decisively shifting momentum toward the presidential challenger.

Always from afar the plight of America's hostages weighed down Carter's presidency, his ongoing negotiations for their release in the wake of the failed rescue attempt yielding no results.

Unable to recover his footing from domestic and foreign crises, rejected by many white American Christians, and foiled by the staged charisma of his opponent, the nation's first evangelical president lost decisively to Reagan on Nov. 4, 1980 — one year to the day after the Iranian hostage crisis began.

The loss signaled the beginning of a political alliance between conservative white evangelicals and the Republican Party that remains to the present day.

POST-PRESIDENCY

In the waning days of his lame-duck presidency Carter successfully negotiated the

release of the 52 Americans held hostage in Tehran. On Jan. 20, 1981 in Washington D.C., he watched with detachment the inauguration of his successor.

Carter felt "a sense of relief to be free of the responsibilities" of the presidential office. "Persistent, though, was my concern that at the last minute the hostages might not be released," he wrote in his White House diary.

Then aboard Air Force one for the last time Carter, his wife Rosalyn and daughter Amy flew to Georgia, arriving home "to a huge crowd in Plains." The following day the ex-president on behalf of the U.S. government flew to Germany to greet and visit the just-released hostages, the event covered live on television.

On Jan. 22, 1980, Carter returned home from greeting ex-hostages in Germany. He would live in Plains for the rest of his life. Relieved of the presidency by the will of the people, Carter's decade-long religious and political quest to "establish justice in a sinful world" — words borrowed from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr — remained unfulfilled.

But the story of the only evangelical president in American history, a president whose personal religious faith grounded his candidacy and subsequent presidency, was far from over.

In 1982 Carter, not content to retire and as always driven by his faith, with his wife Rosalynn embarked on a massive new endeavor. In partnership with Emory University they founded the Carter Center, an organization devoted to improving the lives of underprivileged people worldwide.

FAITH IN PRACTICE

Through the Carter Center — in more than 80 countries in the decades following — the Carters worked to resolve conflicts, advance democracy, foster human rights, improve economic opportunity, cure diseases and teach better farming practices, collectively saving millions of lives.

In 1984 Carter received the United Nations' Human Rights Prize, and in 2002 the Nobel Peace Prize "for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development."

The Carters also became personally involved in Habitat for Humanity in 1984, remaining active until the ex-president's health deteriorated in 2020. Despite his busy schedule with both the Carter Center and Habitat, Carter found time to write dozens of books, many on the subject of his faith.

When in Plains on Sundays the former president also taught Sunday School at Maranatha Baptist Church, where crowds from afar came to sit in his Bible class and learn about the faith of a man they greatly admired.

Meanwhile, in 2000 the couple departed the conservative, Republican-aligned Southern Baptist Convention and became members of the recently formed and moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In his new denominational home the former president inspired generations old and new.

"Born again" Jimmy Carter, now 96, has devoted his long life to living the love and grace of God and advancing justice in a sinful world. The farmer, veteran, president and Sunday School teacher from rural South Georgia has changed the world for the good on a scale few other Americans, if any, have ever achieved. **NFJ**

JESUS AND JOHN WAYNE

Manpower evangelicalism has deep roots, toxic results

REVIEW BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The title is catchy and the subtitle is anything but subtle. Its mission is daunting: tracing 75 years of evangelical history that moved this faith tradition from a focus on Jesus to macho Christian nationalism.

Historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez is up to the task, however. And her work reveals not a mid-course shift, but the fulfillment of long-held values within American evangelicalism that came into fuller focus in the era of Donald Trump.

While evangelicals often preach a Bible vs. culture message, it is the preferred culture of exclusivity and white dominance that drives this version of Americanized Christianity to support a political agenda at odds with its own long-professed values.

Jesus is no longer the standard, the role model and lord. A more rugged, butt-kicking savior is the evangelical ideal. And evangelicals will fawn over anyone who appears strong and arrives with promises of protecting them from their pending cultural fall in America.

Du Mez, professor of history at Calvin University, not only shows how white American evangelicals reached this tragic point — but also considers the long-lasting consequences of trading Jesus for a different kind of hero.

Steeped in evangelicalism, Du Mez jumped into this pursuit with the baffling question: “How could ‘family values’ conservatives support a man who flouted every value they insisted they held dear?”

For more than 300 pages after raising that launching question, Du Mez digs into historical evidence showing that evangelicals were doing more than just thinking in transactional terms.

She notes that this political revelation was not an aberration but “the culmination of evangelicals’ embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad.”

Therefore, evangelicals (meaning, of course, white evangelicals) did not cast their votes in record numbers “despite their beliefs, but because of them.”

Survey data, Du Mez notes, show “the stark contours of the contemporary evangelical worldview” that, more than any other religious demographic in the U.S., supports preemptive war, condones use of torture, favors the death penalty and holds negative views of immigrants.

“The products Christians consume shape the faith they inhabit,” writes Du Mez, who was raised in the Christian Reformed Church. “... This is readily apparent in the heroes they celebrate.”

Mount the horses and draw the guns! The heroes of white American evangelism look nothing like cheek-turning, enemy-loving, outcast-lifting disciples who follow Jesus.

More valued are the attributes of rugged individualism, muscled masculinity and patriarchal power. As Du Mez notes, “For many evangelicals, these militant heroes would come to define not only Christian manhood but Christianity itself.”

Muscular Christianity has much deeper roots than one election cycle, Du Mez shows. The whole “family values” structure is built on the foundation of white male dominance. And the structure is fortified with each perceived threat.

“A militant evangelical masculinity went hand in hand with a culture of fear,” she writes, “but it wasn’t always apparent which came first.”

Evangelicalism runs on the fuel of culture war — always in search of an enemy, real or perceived. And those consistently engaged in war need a warrior to lead them.

That is reflected in Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress’ desire for a national leader to be “the meanest, toughest, son-of-a-you-know-what I can find in that role...” He concluded rightly “that’s where many evangelicals are.”

Du Mez walks readers through the evolution of muscular Christianity with characters including Teddy Roosevelt, baseball player turned evangelist Billy Sunday and, of course, John Wayne.

Her thoroughness is impressive. She digs into the blending of “Lost Cause” ideology with Christian theology that elevated failed Gen. Robert E. Lee to near sainthood. This mish-mashed perspective was revealed in W.A. Criswell — who mounted the pulpit of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, where Jeffress attended and later would become pastor — calling racial integration “a denial of all that we believe in.”

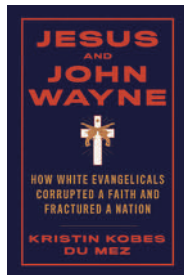
Du Mez gives attention to the contribution of women to the movement, including Marabel Morgan’s book, *The Total Woman*, advocating for wifely submission; former “Miss Oklahoma” Anita Bryant’s attack on gay rights; and political operative Phyllis Schlafly’s opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment.

The impact of Bill Gothard, James Dobson, Tim LaHaye, and Jerry Falwell is also explored. Those of Southern Baptist lineage will recognize that the sixth chapter, titled “Going for the Jugular,” is specific to them.

Oliver North, Promise Keepers, the homeschool movement, Mark Driscoll, and politics aplenty flow through the remaining chapters — each shaping the current state of American evangelicalism.

Du Mez concludes that “Weaving together intimate family matters, domestic politics, and a foreign policy agenda, militant masculinity came to reside at the heart of the larger evangelical identity.”

This knowledge, she notes, will be essential should anyone care to dismantle it. [NFJ](#)



SHAPING STORIES

The dominant population sets the narrative

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 second in a series of his articles exploring racial justice.

BY TERRELL CARTER

In general, white citizens' stories about policing revolve around a long-held fear and distrust of minorities, especially those who invade their space. While some may disagree with this statement, its truth is made evident.

First is the election of a president whose primary plank in his political platform was the promise to build physical and legal walls to keep out those he and others think don't deserve to be allowed into our country. And he promised to deport similar people. This fear tactic led to him being elected as the leader of the world's greatest nation.

Second, this long-held distrust is evidenced by the proliferation of incidents of white people calling police on Blacks because they did not think the black person should be in their community or space.

These interactions are the outgrowth of social and political beliefs that whites must be protected from those who are "other." This long-held fear and distrust of minorities makes it easier for whites to turn over more power to law enforcement as long as law enforcement protects their interests related to interactions with minorities.

Stories by political officials

Political officials tell whatever story they believe will best serve their attempts to get elected to public office. They tell stories about crime and criminality to influence public opinion for their purposes.

Their stories often exaggerate crime and criminality, and who is likely to be a criminal or experience the effects of criminal behavior. These stories also define what criminal behavior does and does not look like.

Actions indulged in by one group of people can be overwhelmingly understandable, if not acceptable, but when a different people group with slightly darker skin engages in the same behavior, their actions are unacceptable and categorized as criminal.

These politicians have developed an ever-increasing, yet continually marginalizing, vocabulary that clearly delineates between who is good and who isn't, who belongs in certain areas and who doesn't, and whose actions should be looked at with suspicion and whose actions shouldn't.

In general, minorities — especially black minorities — and the challenges that are experienced within their communities, are regularly offered up as proof that they are unable to manage themselves or their communities and therefore need whites to come in and manage them.

This is a revolving circle that ultimately ends in multiple self-fulfilling prophecies. Politicians say African Americans from certain neighborhoods are more likely to be criminal due to social influences that come from growing up in poor neighborhoods, although not all African Americans live in poor communities.

They cite a lack of stable parental role models as a staple of African-American life, although many African Americans, like their white counterparts, come from traditional and non-traditional nuclear families.

These politicians deduce that these assumed truths automatically lead many

African Americans to hold inherent tendencies towards criminality, and therefore society should police that people group in a way that is different from others.

In response to these often-held assumptions, this group is viewed and policed differently than other groups and experiences harsher criminal penalties. This over-policing and over-penalization lead African Americans to view the system of law enforcement differently and to assume they will not receive an equitable shake when they interact at any point in that system.

In doing so, the dominant culture is able to keep minorities "safe" and ensure the issues experienced in and around the minority group stay in their neighborhoods, not affecting the property values of the neighborhoods of the dominant culture, or the reputations of those who inhabit those properties, all the while ensuring that societal issues residing at a much deeper level are never brought up or adequately addressed.

There is an overabundance of examples of this type of occurrence. This practice has been in existence from the beginning of our nation's founding and continues today.

Although the practice may not look exactly as it did during our nation's formation, it still seeks to accomplish the same goals that were hoped for then: To keep one group of people in subjection to others with the hope of another group experiencing economic advantages because of the process.

Stories by media

Television outlets regularly contribute stories that reinforce the idea that whites need to be protected from minorities. All sectors of media play their part in keeping the process in motion.

These stories ensure that certain information about the relationship between minorities and police is intentionally filtered before consumption by the public.



Stories by the justice system

Police and court representatives are the primary storytellers for the criminal justice system. Often, their stories are colored by a desire to seek advancement and bolster their professional careers.

Other times, due to changes in the criminal justice system, law enforcement agencies' stories are colored by the opportunity to reap the monetary benefits of making arrests. I do not make this statement as hyperbole.

As a former police officer for the City of St. Louis, Mo., I saw these things happen firsthand. Officers regularly faced the temptation to use their police powers to take things from people they believed did not deserve to have those things. And they committed those actions under the auspices of "fighting crime."

On multiple occasions, I witnessed officers arresting someone who did not need to be arrested and then towing their new vehicle because the officer did not think that person deserved to have that type of vehicle. The rationale was: "You must be a drug dealer, and no dealer should have a better ride than mine."

I also experienced officers towing vehicles under the false accusation that the owner was a drug dealer for the explicit reason of trying to have their vehicle turned over to the asset forfeiture department. If any officer tried to fight against these types of actions, they were essentially taking their lives into their own hands and would eventually suffer the consequences.

White and African-American officers did these things. Officers were rewarded for such action with promotions and choice tactical assignments. Even the staunchest supporter of police can see the temptations officers face when they interact with people whose voices and stories are less likely to be believed than theirs.

All of these groups — white citizens, political officials, media, and representatives of the criminal justice system — regularly work together, knowingly and unknowingly, to shape the stories that are told about minorities.

They impact how the public perceives these stories, and how people interact with

minorities when they occupy the spaces they are allowed to operate in. This reality regularly leads to all parties eventually interacting with minorities in a lopsided, often non-consensual, manner.

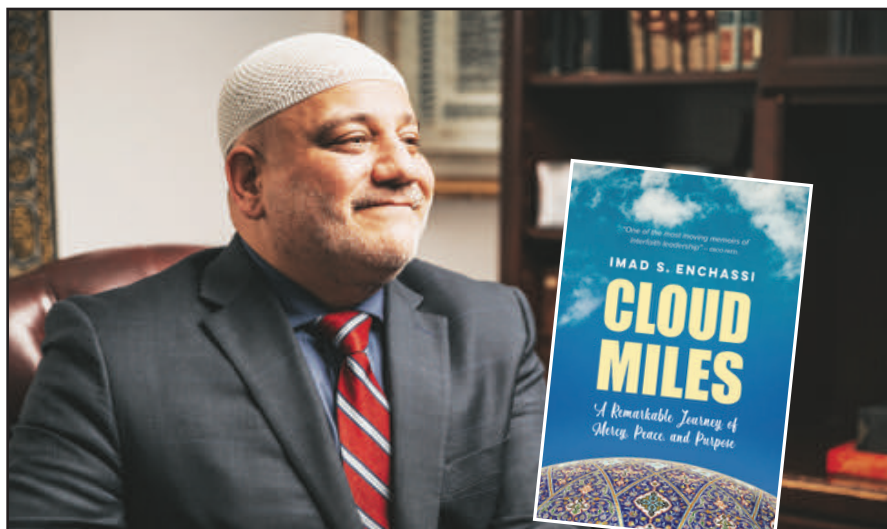
Although we know this is the way African Americans are typically characterized on television, and during election time, those involved in this ongoing process really do not have any incentive to bring about change in the system.

If a reality television star can be elected president of the free world based on a platform of calling Mexicans criminal rapists, there really is no incentive to change

the rhetoric. Instead, that type of rhetoric becomes the preferred message.

If those in power control how, when, and if the story gets told, how can those most affected by the actions of law enforcement and political structures ensure their story will be heard and at least have the opportunity to impact the future? **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.



"WE DON'T DO INTERFAITH WORK DESPITE OUR FAITH, BUT BECAUSE OF IT... IT IS POWERFUL FOR ME, AS A MINORITY, TO STAND UP FOR THE RIGHTS OF MY CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH BROTHERS AND SISTERS. AND IT IS POWERFUL FOR THEM TO STAND UP FOR MINE."

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Co-tilling the earth

God invites us to dig a little deeper in the garden

BY CHRISTOPHER ADAMS

Have you noticed more people walking in your neighborhood, on a college campus, or in a local park during the past year? Have you ventured outside more during this pandemic season to catch a breath of fresh air?

Perhaps you have taken a walk in a place you had never considered before — or visited a long-forsaken state or national park. It is no secret that many facets of our lives have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, the outdoors has become a more valued place in the lives of many people — allowing for a safe and enjoyable way to exercise our bodies and minds in a season of crisis and uncertainty.

But have we stopped to really ponder the natural world around us lately? Have we heeded the words of Christ in the gospel stories, and considered the lilies?

TILLING

At the intersection of our lives and the larger world, we are invited into a faith that calls us to be good stewards of the earth. Not only are we to be good neighbors to one another, but also with the land.

To put it another way: we are to be co-tillers with God in the soil — seeking the flourishing of all creation.

The start of a new year is a good time to step more fully into the rich poetry of Genesis. Here we are invited to consider the soil from which we come.

In this soil we find God — down on hands and knees — tilling the soil with humanity. Genesis 1: 8-9 paints this picture of God as the great gardener:

“And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is



pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (NRSV).

God labors in the same garden where the man whom God had created was placed to bring up trees and plants. God and the man, in this narrative, are co-tillers in the soil that brings up life and takes in death.

God creates man and woman, co-equals, who share in the task of seeking flourishing for one another, within the garden and with God. This poetic image of creation throws into relief a God whose hands are in the soil with the hands of the people.

All creation in this light is a gift to be shared, enjoyed, and given thanks for in response to the Creator who spoke it all into being.

To be with God in the garden is not a position of control and sheer domination, but of fidelity, love and affection toward the earth and all its inhabitants. To be with God in the garden opens our Christian faith to a way of living more fully in the world all



around us.

In his book, *From Nature to Creation*, Norman Wirzba writes: “The point of faith is not to help us escape this life. It is, rather, to lead us more deeply into the movements of love that nurture and heal and celebrate the gifts of God.”

How might we be better stewards of the earth together in this new year? Not just of our neighbor as Christ calls us to be, but to consider the land and the animals within it?

As Christians, we affirm the goodness of all life as created and as a gift. This gift though is not a transactional exchange, but rather a gift that creates an ongoing relationship.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer captures well the nature of God’s grace and holy hospitality. When we extend this holy hospitality to the land that feeds us, and all life around us, we participate more fully in the flourishing of God’s creation.

In this more robust faith that includes participating in creation care, faith communities can better discover the ways we are called to love the land and its people.

The ways we love or desecrate people affect the land; likewise, the ways we love or desecrate the land affect people.

When trash dump sites are erected near communities entrapped in poverty, or when companies dump chemicals into rivers, or when big agricultural firms mass-produce food with very few nutrients due to large amounts of sprayed chemicals, we are not just physically destroying our world but re-describing the kind of world we choose to live in.

Creation care is not built upon the faith of the individual, but rests on the scaffolding of interconnected relationships.

So while it is important to consider the actions we make individually (i.e. recycling, composting, reducing the use of plastics, etc.), the type of imagination that dives into the soil with God — as people caring for creation — involves deeper and more systematic discernment.

Caring for creation as a Christian can open our eyes and ears to see and listen to not only our human neighbors, but also to the land as a “neighbor.” When we desecrate the land or people, the land cries out.

In Genesis 4, God implores Cain: “Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!”

While we may not hear the ground crying out, literally, there is something to hear with rightly tuned ears. Can we hear sea levels rising as millions around the world will be forced to migrate? Can we hear ecosystems crying as mountaintop removal desecrates our mountains and their people?

One place of hope that resides within the church has been Pope Francis. In his 2015 *Laudato Si*, Francis dove deeply into the complex effects our modern society has on the earth and, in connection, those in poverty worldwide.

In an introduction he writes these

words: “I urgently appeal ... for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”

Pope Francis invites us all to join the faith conversation that reminds us of our interrelatedness and shared flourishing with neighbor and land, as creations of God.

This new year is a good time to put our hands in the soil with the great gardener and with our neighbors. Let us grow some vegetables, share a meal with a neighbor, and find new ways our faith might include the soil and all life as we live together.

Let us listen for ways our faith might be enriched in caring for *all* of creation by seeking ways to participate in the kingdom of God in the here and now — caring for the land and the people who live upon it.

Perhaps during that next walk, we might prayerfully focus on how to be a more faithful co-tiller in the garden that is Planet Earth. **NFJ**

—*Christopher Adams of Athens, Ga., is an inaugural Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Intern with Good Faith Media.*

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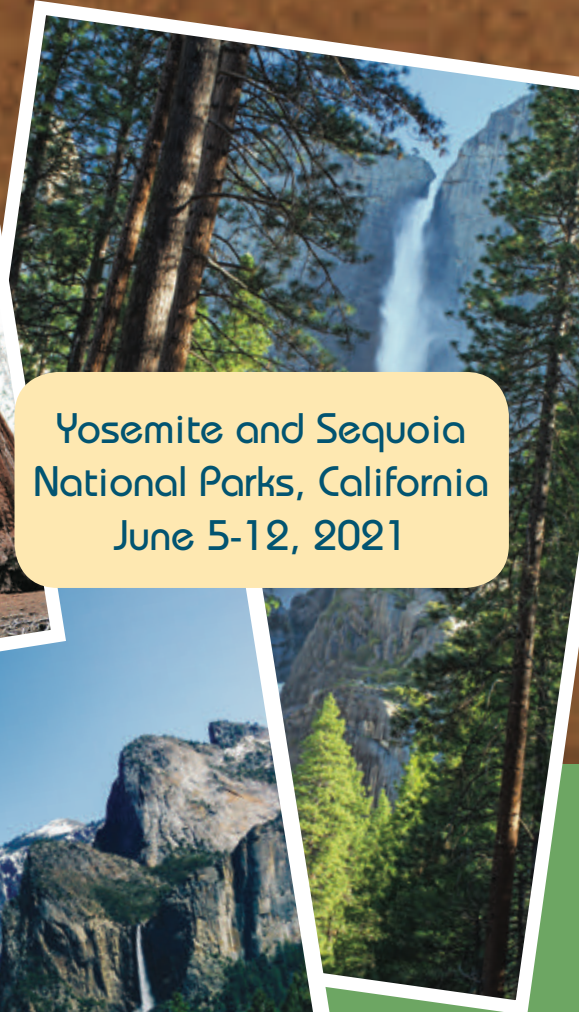
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THE CHURCH REMAINS

A remote chapel on a Swiss mountainside reminds us to persist faithfully

BY AUTUMN LOCKETT

Gliding along an Alpine mountain gondola, floating over clover patches filled with bell-clanging Swiss Braunvieh dairy cows, we spotted a tiny white chapel — precariously perched on a grassy crag almost 7,000 feet above sea level.

No roads led to the church. There were no discernable paths for the faithful to travel. And yet, the church remained.

WONDERSTRUCK

Our family spent the fall semester of 2011 in Lucerne, Switzerland, while my husband studied international law. After spending our lives among the flat cotton and cornfields of Central Texas, we were wonderstruck — or “verwundert,” as our new Swiss-German speaking neighbors would say — by the glacial blue lakes and soaring Alps surrounding us.

We chose Lucerne because it allowed us easy rail access to the major European cities we planned to visit during our semester abroad. In the time it would take us to drive from Austin to Dallas, we could train from Lucerne to Paris. And we did!

Though we traveled extensively during the semester, Swiss classmates and friends insisted we explore our adopted home country too. From the Gruyere cheese factory to the chocolate-famous city of Bern, we were happy to oblige.

Our home base, the city of Lucerne, is famously, quintessentially Swiss. With preserved, medieval architecture, bordered by a 14th-century rampart wall, and bisected



by the Chapel Bridge, built in 1333, Lucerne was a real-life souvenir snow globe.

SWISS TALES

Mount Pilatus was our backyard — and it is steeped in myth.

Legend claims the mountain earned its name because it is the ultimate burial spot for Pontius Pilate. According to the Swiss, on Good Friday the ghost of Pilate comes down to the lake below to wash the blood of Jesus Christ from his spectral hands.

Alternatively, other Swiss tales claim an enormous dragon flew into Mount Pilatus and crash-landed in the summer of 1421. Since then, the rocks and waters around the mountain have held healing powers.

We spent many days exploring the mountain. While we didn't encounter any ghosts or dragons, the experience was no less thrilling.

The Golden Round Trip — the best way to traverse Mount Pilatus — begins

with a glittering boat trip across Lake Lucerne, nestled in the mountain bottoms. The boat ride ends at the foot of Mount Pilatus, where the steepest cogwheel railway in the world click-clacks to the summit of 6,982 feet.

After spending a day on the mountain-top, climbing narrow paths, taking in stunning views of Central Switzerland, eating fine Swiss chocolates, sipping mulled wine, twirling to the reedy melodies of dueling alphorns, a graceful gondola peacefully slid to the other side of the mountain.

PEAKSIDE CHAPEL

At just this point in our Golden Round Trip, we spied the almost-impossible white chapel. Our little cable car immediately erupted with questions about the church's logistics.

How did the builders move materials to construct the church over the mountain's steep peaks? Why was the church located

there? And, most of all, how did people attend services?

A Google search ensued once we returned to our flat. The church was built in 1861, alongside a large hotel.

Located on Klimsenkapelle Peak, the church was inaugurated as the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, and visited by German composer Richard Wagner and Queen Victoria.

After more modern accommodations were built at the summit, the Hotel Klimsenhorn was demolished in 1967. Yet the church remained, primarily used as a shelter for mountaineers.

In 1974, a Swiss monument conservator began work to restore the neo-Gothic chapel. The renovation has continued throughout the years, because the extreme location leaves the chapel vulnerable to intense climatic conditions such as squalls, high amounts of precipitation, and drastic temperature swings.

The Klimsenhorn Chapel is listed as a national monument and continues to serve as a place of worship with seasonally

strategic services scheduled throughout the year.

The church is a breathtaking sight, even among the Alpine vistas. It stands in contrast to the rustic mountain surroundings, providing a harbor for weary travelers and holding space for worshiping the peak's Creator.

STORM SHELTERS

The COVID-19 pandemic has given us all the opportunity to observe our own churches from afar.

Built with hopeful hands in a world where not many roads lead to the kind of inclusive faith celebrated inside, our modern church buildings are not unlike the little Alpine chapel on the side of Mount Pilatus.

Steeped in the tradition of those who loved radically, our churches are filled with all kinds of mythically wonderful and faithful people. When this pandemic railed like mountain storms, our churches remained.

There are no clear-cut paths to worship in a pandemic, but our churches persist. We are shelter for weary travelers, technol-



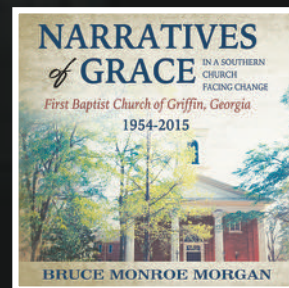
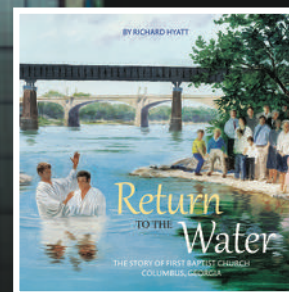
ogy pioneers who bring God's word and a message of hope to our fellow sojourners.

The church remained. Thanks be to God. [NFJ](#)

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

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Women's ministries could benefit from an expanded view of women

BY ELIZABETH FRANKLIN

Church has *been* my entire life for my entire life, and (may Beth Moore forgive me) I have never once enjoyed or felt at home at a “women’s ministry” function.

If I — a white, straight, married, middle-class, mostly Southern, Baptist-turned-Methodist, two-time Christian school graduate, church staff member and seminarian — don’t feel like I belong at these functions, who does?

Some write off the idea altogether, but most critique it with at least a hint of hope for reform. Though each sentiment differs slightly, the general consensus seems to be something along these lines: too many tea parties, not enough biblical equipping, and (willful?) ignorance regarding the diversity of women in the church.

As traditional gender roles have begun to fall away — both in society and in many churches — women’s lives, priorities and needs have expanded far beyond the purview of typical evangelical women’s ministry structures.

Most women work outside the home and cannot come to a 10 a.m. Bible study. A great number of women are single and childless, and they may or may not have plans to change either one of those things.

Not every woman bakes or scrapbooks, and many have no desire to attend the annual Christmas recipe swap. This is not to say that knitting circles or mother’s-day-out programs are unimportant; many women find great joy and value in these types of events.

However, too many women’s ministries rely on a particular style of function that excludes or holds no interest for a growing portion of women in the church. Women can no longer be grouped into the categories of wife, mother and widow; even those who fall into such categories are much more than that one facet of their identity.

They are people with unique gifts, interests, passions, skills, talents, needs, challenges, values, priorities and situations. While it is impossible for a women’s ministry to cater to every aspect of each individual woman’s life and personality, it is past time for women’s ministries to evaluate the population of women in their church and adjust or expand accordingly.

Not only do Christian women form a broader demographic than perhaps they once did, but they also seem to desire richer biblical teaching and greater equipping than many women’s ministries offer.

“We need Jesus. We are seeking deep spirituality. ... Please stop treating women’s ministry like a Safe Club for the Little Ladies to Play Church,” author and speaker Sarah Bessey urged in a 2015 article.

Women are eager to use their skills and passions and to live into their calling as disciples of Jesus. A recent Barna Group study found that a factor in the declining rate of women’s church attendance was a sense of not having avenues in which to use their unique gifts and talents.

How might our communities be impacted if the church created space for women to ask difficult questions, dig into scripture without finding easy answers and use their unique gifts, passions and knowledge to serve?

Perhaps if we want women to serve the church, we ought to equip them to minister in their own capacities and give them more opportunities to do so — beyond the nursery and the bake sale.

In addition to an expanded view of women’s personal lives and theological interests, there is also a need for an expanded view of women in light of social concerns.



First, many structured women’s ministries are born out of a complementarian belief system. Yet a growing number of Christian women find their feminism and personal empowerment at odds with their church’s teachings.

Women are more than capable as leaders in their jobs, communities and homes. Why would they participate in a ministry that tells them (explicitly or implicitly) that they are not capable leaders?

Second, women’s ministry in the evangelical church tends to have a very specific brand that excludes women on any kind of societal margin. Instead of “ministry to women,” our marketing and functions more often communicate that we offer “ministry to white, straight, moderately affluent, cisgender women.”

How many women are we excluding — and even harming — when we conveniently overlook those who may make our friends or us uncomfortable?

A 2015 Barna study revealed that almost half of women surveyed reported they did not feel emotionally supported at all by their church community. Women are not just falling through the cracks; they are hemorrhaging from the church, and we are letting them go as we distract ourselves with chocolate, tulle and seasonal décor.

Women are so much more than wives and mothers. We are athletes and artists, laborers and professionals, queer and straight, skeptical and devout, intelligent and learning, joyful and burdened, leaders and servants.

We are ministers who hold a treasure trove of God-given potential to change the world with the hope of Jesus. We are asking the church to unleash us. **NFJ**

—Elizabeth Franklin attends Baylor University’s Truett Seminary in Waco, Texas, and works as a worship leader at her church. Her column first appeared at goodfaithmedia.org.

The countless women lost in history

BY WILLIAM BRACKNEY

Many of the women have been lost or simply forgotten. That's the sad, but persistent, reality I've uncovered over the last 30 years in piecing together my family's history during the past four centuries.

As chronicles have been kept, the record is more often than not, patriarchal, drawn by the "heads of households," than spouses and children.

This is not unique to my family, and it has been defended as a "biblical" model, though it exists in other religions than Judaism and Christianity.

The national censuses, starting in the Anglo-Saxon context with the Domesday Book (1086), adopted this method and the vast majority of data we have is categorized by male heads of households ever since.

Following the women can be frustrating and confusing, largely because of multiple spouses and "disappearing" women.

Around the world, the predominant family system from the Middle Ages through yesterday involved having as many children as possible to produce a cottage labor force, replenish the family and provide care for the surviving elderly.

I have been amazed at the fecundity (length of capacity to give birth) and fertility (actual incidence of childbirths) of women in my family's narrative since the 16th century.

Twelve to 15 children were not uncommon for a woman starting from 16 to 18 years old until her late menopause. A high percentage of women died in childbirth, husbands remarried and continued to sire children. Sometimes, men married the next older sibling of the deceased wife, producing a crazy quilt of siblings for the genealogist to unravel.

In my case, Quakers did an excellent job of recording births within their meetings, as well as marriages, but lost awareness of the elderly, especially the women. My ancestor, Isaac Archer Brackney, a Quaker tailor, was married to three women and had 12 children in the first half of the 19th century. Two of Isaac's wives vanished at their deaths.

Plagues and pandemics were hard on women and children. In my family's history, diseases such as typhoid, scarlet fever, plagues and dysentery wiped out whole generations.

Many times, men survived because they had greater mobility (they were not confined to close urban quarters), but the young children died without names, and the women were buried without reference or certificates.

During pandemics, toxic human remains were disposed of quickly without registration or death notices. My natural great grandmother, Rebecca Thomas, was one of the lost women of Philadelphia in 1892.

Certain cemeteries took care of the poor but made no effort to record interments, and later suffered mass dis-interments and destruction of monuments in the face of housing projects — in short, total obliteration of identities.

Another area of concern for lost women in our past is their occupations. Men as yeomen, householders, farmers and tradesmen are clearly identified. Women in the lists are frequently indistinguishable from children and servants.

Women are listed as "keeping house" or "homemaking," even though their assets and estates were considerable. One of my ancestors, Elizabeth Harwood Pointer, outlived her husband by 27 years and, at her death, had assets of several thousand dollars.

The work of genealogists has theological implications. Complementary to

historians and social scientists, they seek to recover the data of our families and ancestors: genealogists record the pilgrimages of real persons. A doctrine of "extensive human witness" — as in ancient Israel and the New Testament letters — comes to light.

Genealogists have a moral responsibility to re-create the data around which social and church historians can rebuild the contexts. The majority of local congregation records remain untapped resources for women's history. The narrative that emerges is women and men struggling together to survive and be faithful.

My Aunt Bessie survived 16 childbirths and produced generations of hard-working, committed Christians. I appreciate her much more when I understand the repressed development of southern Maryland at the turn of the last century.

Women's history has often been written from the perspective of institutional or congregational structures, with too little attention to family and personal details.

Among Free Church and particularly Baptist narratives, the majority of participating congregants over four centuries is overwhelmingly female, but we know very little about the recorded, but forgotten, women: a name here, a name there.

Certainly, the Spirit did speak boldly through women leaders whom we have come to celebrate, but what about the Spirit's guidance in home, hearth, trades, businesses and classrooms?

We have work to do as we face the prevailing mortality rates in the age of COVID-19. The frustrations of genealogists have revealed a need in our current situation: No one should be left to die in anonymity, especially the women and children in our midst **NFJ**

—William Brackney is the Millard R. Cherry Distinguished Professor of Baptist Thought and Ethics, Emeritus at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada.



THE NEED TO KNOW

A conversation with scientist Joe Jeffers about pandemics and more

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. — Joe Jeffers, professor emeritus of chemistry at Ouachita Baptist University, holds a Ph.D. in biochemistry and molecular biology from Purdue University. He retired in 2017 as the Charles S. and Elma Grey Goodwin Holt Professor of Chemistry and Pre-Medical Studies and, three times, was named professor of the year by the Central Arkansas Section of the American Chemical Society.

He has given significant attention to identifying and sharing accurate information about the pandemic with friends and others who might be interested. So *Nurturing Faith Journal* decided to ask him about what he's done and what he has found.

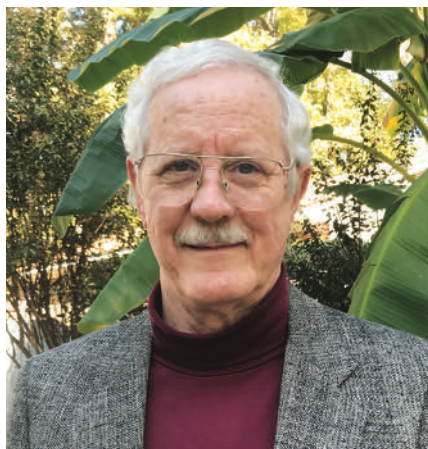
NFJ: Your personal Facebook page has become a trusted source for many people seeking accurate information during this pandemic. Why did you start vetting and curating this information?

JJ: My interest in pandemics began years ago when I read about the Spanish Flu of 1918. It killed 50,000,000 people worldwide, including 675,000 Americans. Further reading about the bubonic plagues and more recent flu epidemics heightened that interest.

It was piqued again during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in China 2002–2004. Fortunately, that outbreak was contained before it achieved pandemic status.

Historian Ray Granade and I offered a seminar titled “Pandemics” for the Ouachita Baptist University (OBU) Honors Program in 2007. We explored many of the world's pandemics and the microorganisms and viruses that caused them. Reading for that seminar added to the sense that the world was ripe for a pandemic.

I followed the scarce news articles about SARS-CoV-2 as they were first reported



beginning Dec. 31, 2019. Washington State reported an American case three weeks later, and soon thereafter cases appeared in Europe and Iran. A pandemic in the making seemed obvious.

As a scientist, I was curious about the nature of the virus — its structure, its infectivity, and the disease it caused. Being retired offered me the time to follow the developing story as it unfolded across a variety of sources.

By mid-March, I typically read two or three hours a day. I knew my working colleagues did not have the time to survey news sources and read as extensively as I, so I began to post salient articles on Facebook. Since February, I have posted more than 1,000 articles.

NFJ: What information do you think the public most needs to know?

JJ: The public needs to understand how infective SARS-CoV-2 is, the importance of taking precautionary measures — wearing facemasks, keeping social distance, washing hands, avoiding indoor groups — and the lethality of COVID-19. I especially like the slogan of the Czech Republic: “My mask protects you; your masks protect me.”

NFJ: Have any topics seemed of particular interest to those who visit your site or speak with you personally?

JJ: The effectiveness of wearing facemasks far exceeds any other topic. Updates on vaccines and other treatments also rank highly. More recently, the politicization of government science/health agencies concerns the group.

NFJ: In his 60 Minutes interview, leading immunologist Anthony Fauci said: “There’s an anti-authority feeling in the world. And science has an air of authority to it. So, people who want to push back on authority tend to ... push back on science.” Have you sensed that?

JJ: During the early months, I avoided posting about politics because I wanted readers on both sides of the political aisle to be well versed about the virus. Admittedly, I strayed from that plan when attacks on science became more prevalent.

Tom Nichols makes the case in *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* that the Internet allows anyone to claim to be an expert. Many such sources are rarely vetted. Add certain news outlets with their espousal of conspiracy theories, and science or any other expertise is rejected if it fails to fit tribal thinking.

While the Internet is relatively new, the ideas behind this way of thinking are not. Richard Hofstadter in his 1964 *Harper's Magazine* essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” indicated large numbers of people have this anti-authoritarian reaction when they see their way of life threatened and, in their minds, see no way out. Many politicians today use this mindset to denigrate the findings of science.

Science by its nature is an evolving enterprise. Science develops explanations based on the best available data. As new information is discovered, explanations may change to incorporate new data.

Over the past several months, more studies of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 have led to changes in practices to combat

the pandemic. In March, for example, experts, including Dr. Fauci, did not recommend wearing masks, partially because masks were in short supply for health professionals.

As studies showed the effectiveness of mask wearing, the recommendation changed. Sadly, opponents of mask wearing were still quoting Dr. Fauci's March advice well into the fall.

NFJ: Christians are often among the last to believe scientific discoveries. It goes back a long way — and includes Copernicus and Galileo regarding a rotating earth, the Scopes Trial concerning evolution, and now climate change and current pandemic realities and prevention. Where's the flaw in how many Christians approach science and faith, and what are the consequences?

JJ: Interestingly, the ancient Hebrews had no problem with scientific discoveries because anything discovered about nature only glorified God. The Church, and by that I mean the Catholic Church, dominated learned thought prior to the Scientific Revolution, and the Church espoused an earth-centered worldview.

To counter that thought was to counter the Church and its authority. The rise of secular universities distanced the authority of the Church in describing nature.

The Protestant Reformation led to a break from the Catholic Church but not from the scriptures as authority. To accommodate developing science, many proponents of the Christian church accepted findings in science but used gaps in scientific knowledge to prove the existence of God.

These God-of-the-gaps theologians kept getting squeezed as science continued to fill those gaps. As science progressed, conflicts with the Genesis story were bound to follow, especially with adherents of biblical inerrancy.

This attachment to low-church evangelical expression led to thinking God speaks to them through their hearts rather than their minds. These Christians have the most distrust of science because science threatens their worldview.

Comfort is found in like-minded followers, so tribalism becomes a safe haven. That cocoon buffers them against addressing ways science and faith can coexist.

One consequence of science denial among these Christians and other followers of paranoid-style politics is a failure to support public policy initiatives where science findings are beneficial, namely pandemic preparedness, climate change needs, and other environmental protections. Opportunistic politicians exploit these views to reduce federal spending, and certain corporate entities do so to protect their bottom lines.

A second consequence is opposition to teaching critical thinking in schools, especially if it should lead students to question strongly held beliefs of that group.

NFJ: How have you dealt with students who came to you seeking to resolve an assumed conflict between their faith and scientific discovery?

JJ: Over a 46-year teaching career at a Southern Baptist institution, human evolution was the predominant faith-science conflict among my students. When beginning the topic of evolution, I wrote four headings on the board: Non-theistic Evolutionists, Theistic Evolutionists, Scientific Creationists, and Creationists.

I explained that Non-theistic Evolutionists accept the basic tenants of evolutionary theory as a natural process and do not invoke the supernatural in the discussion. Theistic Evolutionists accept the basic tenants of evolutionary theory but see the guiding hand of God in the process.

Scientific Creationists believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible; therefore, the earth is fewer than 10,000 years old, not enough time for human evolution. I list Creationists as a separate category because most Baptist students see themselves as creationists.

Then I said that a Creationist believes God created Earth, but one can be a Creationist and fall into any one of the other three groups. Who are we to say that God did not choose to use evolution as the creative method — with or without a guiding hand?

Most students, but not all, were then willing to consider the possibility of evolution. Many students in after-class discussions were troubled because consid-

ering evolution went against what their parents or preachers had taught them.

I loaned or gifted them with J.B. Phillips' *Your God Is Too Small*. Without exception, students who read that book gained a new appreciation of the possibilities.

I cannot say they all accepted evolution, but from their reactions, they had a new way of looking at the relationship between faith and science. Hopefully, I planted a seed.

Harvard paleontologist Stephen J. Gould provided a new schema in a 1997 essay titled "Non-overlapping Magisteria" for *Natural History* magazine, and later in his 1999 book *Rocks of Ages*.

Gould argued that science and religion occupy separate magisterial "domains where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution."

Science operates in the natural world and offers theories that explain it. Religion operates in the "realm of human purposes, meanings and values." Science cannot explain religion; religion cannot explain science.

They are separate but equal ways of knowing. Gould allowed for no overlap. I encouraged students to see how these magisteria fit into their developing worldviews.

While patterns varied, the most common view students described for themselves was a Venn diagram of partially overlapping magisteria. They were developing a way to resolve science and religion conflicts. Perfect? No. Just more seed planting.

NFJ: Is the politicization of science (over pandemic, immunization, evolution, climate change, etc.) the same as the religious resistance to scientific realities? Or are these separate, yet overlapping concerns?

JJ: In my opinion, they are cut from the same cloth. Inaccurate information on the Internet and other media provides "data" (alternate facts) to support pseudoscientific arguments. Leaders who buy into conspiracy theories use the comfort of tribalism to push illogical ideas. If one says something often enough and loudly enough, it must be true, right?

NFJ: We're all eager to get to the other side of the coronavirus. But it seems naïve to think a vaccine will immediately return socialization and other aspects of daily living to pre-virus life. How do you think life will be different for a long time as a result of this pandemic?

JJ: Vaccines are never 100 percent effective. Populations rarely have 100 percent vaccination participation.

The rate of transmission will decrease when a significant percentage of the population is vaccinated, but susceptible individuals will still get COVID-19. The politicization of vaccine development schedules may cause a reluctance to take vaccines even when they become available, so reaching herd immunity may be problematic.

Given that other corona viruses mutate frequently, we must assume that SARS-CoV-2 will too. We may have to have SARS-CoV-2 vaccinations frequently just like we do flu vaccinations. And last year's experience suggests SARS-CoV-2 is not seasonal like the influenza virus, so protective measures are needed year-round.

While new therapies may lessen the severity of COVID-19, expect our hygiene measures — wearing masks, washing hands, social distancing, avoiding indoor groups — to be with us, at least periodically, for some time.

Given the rapid rates of worldwide population mixing with air travel, it is a matter of time until the next pandemic is spawned. If we learn from this pandemic and implement needed improvement in public health planning and prevention

measures, we may ameliorate the next one, but we will not stop it. We must be prepared.

NFJ: You've done significant research on the work of two-time Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, Frederick Sanger. What from his life and work might interest those of us beyond the scientific community?

JJ: I became familiar with Dr. Fred Sanger by studying biochemistry. He had already won his first Nobel Prize for being the first person to sequence a protein, namely insulin.

My graduate school research group studied RNA sequencing methods at the same time as did Sanger's. Late in my career I developed an avid interest in history of science, and Fred Sanger had a story that needed telling.

In preparing for the writing of *Frederick Sanger: Two-Time Nobel Laureate in Chemistry*, I interviewed Sanger 10 times over a 10-year period, and interviewed more than 40 of his students, colleagues and family members.

Dr. Sanger was an introvert. He was raised a Quaker, and their values of honesty and hard work were the hallmark of his scientific career. He was a very private person.

It was clear that during my first two interviews with him I was invading his privacy. Then, he decided I was all right. After that, he was delighted to see me.

The prevailing message from his friends and colleagues was his work ethic. "Try something. If it doesn't work, get on with it and try something else."

Sanger twice turned down a Knighthood because he did not want the publicity. He could have walked across the City of Cambridge, UK, and not one person in 10,000 would have had any idea that unassuming gentleman was a double Nobel Laureate.

Sanger affected us all. The Human Genome Project was based on his DNA sequencing method, the source of his second Nobel Prize. Now, DNA sequencing is a standard technique in forensics, paternity, genealogy, anthropology and biochemical research.

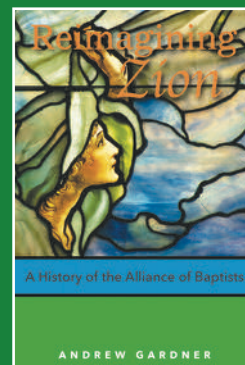
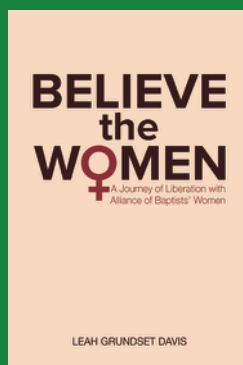
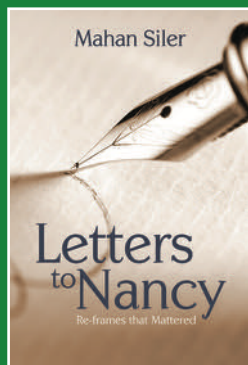
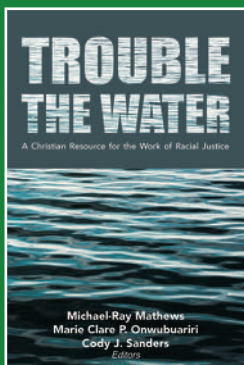
NFJ: You're at a stage in life where you can choose what topics to explore and how to spend your time? What are you choosing and why?

JJ: For each of the past three years, I have written an article for the *Clark County Historical Journal* — "A Geological History of Clark County, Arkansas" (2018); "French Place Names in Clark County, Arkansas" (2019); and "Life in the Time of Covid-19" (2020).

It has been fun stopping to smell the roses in my home county, writing in areas where time and priorities during my career would not permit. As an outgrowth of pandemic projects, I will chronicle the corona virus pandemic for the OBU Archives.

Also I am writing the "Stories of My Life." No, not the story of my life — that would bore even me — rather the little vignettes along life's way that were fun and illuminating. They are for my kids and grandkids. And for me. **NFJ**

Resources from the Alliance of Baptists available at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore



A TIME TO LAUGH

Taking humor seriously may help us endure life's troubled times

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

These are serious times. Is humor totally inappropriate in the face of such suffering and uncertainty? Or is it a needed salve when properly applied?

Philosopher/ethicist Steve Wilkens thinks humor should be well applied to daily living — even in how we read the Bible and think theologically.

“[H]umor is often the conduit by which we express our frustrations, anxiety, joys, loves and opinions about life’s biggest issue,” writes Wilkens in the introduction to *What’s So Funny About God? A Theological Look at Humor* (2019, InterVarsity Press).

He adds: “Since these are obviously matters of theological concern, we ought to be theologically attuned to humor.”

In a press release for his book, Wilkens said: “[H]umor is one of my love languages. If humor is a vehicle for love, I was convinced that God, who is love, had to be in there somewhere.”

Seeking an intersection of his love of humor and love of God drove Wilkens’ exploration and writing.

“I also wanted to address the fact that theological writing almost always lacks a sense of play, levity and joy,” he added. “This seems to be a mismatch of medium and message since hope, joy, delight and similar themes are major theological motifs.”

To fully appreciate the positive role of humor in theology and in life, Wilkens calls for correcting a common misunderstanding. “Laughter,” he affirms, “is not the opposite of seriousness.”

“Most jokes deal with the most significant dimensions of our life — marriage, death, illness, child-rearing, work, sex, God,” he said. “In fact, many people only feel comfortable expressing the joys, shortcomings, frustration and fears in the deepest parts of life through humor.”

The lens of humor can help academics



express the joy and winsomeness of God’s faithfulness, grace and forgiveness in new ways, he suggests, adding: “Christians, surprisingly, are almost like normal people; most of us seem to like humor.”

Wilkens believes Christians should employ humor to gain insight into the Christian faith: “Humor draws us together and is often the lubricant that allows us to engage in conversation about difficult issues.”

Humor, he said, appears in the biblical revelation, in various forms: misdirection, redefinition, surprise, sarcasm, irony, paradox and particularly incongruity. These discoveries shape his faith as well as his writings and teaching.

Humor has a relationship to honesty and humility, Wilkens said. It provides a way to reveal that which we might otherwise conceal from God and others, and perhaps even ourselves through denial.

“Self-deprecating humor is often the only form of confession we will hear from friends and neighbors,” he writes.

Wilkens’ approach to humor is not a call to silliness — or wearing a smiling mask to artificially cover sorrow and pain. It is not “an alternative to the comedy club without the two-drink minimum,” as he put it.

“Reading Christianity humorously has brought a freshness to my faith,” he

said, while warning “but it can lead to the temptation to overstate the case and see humor even where it isn’t.”

He reminds readers of the ancient words from Ecclesiastes that there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh” (3:4). But might this be a time for both?

“It seems more Christians are overdue on finding a time to laugh,” he said, “and I am convinced that our life in God’s presence warrants a lot more laughter than we’ve imagined.”

Unlike Wilkens, writer Elton Trueblood does not include “dad jokes” in his 1964 book, *The Humor of Christ*. But he did have a fatherly experience that led to his exploration of Jesus’ sense of humor.

In the book’s introduction, Trueblood tells of reprimanding his son for laughing during a nightly Bible reading. But the boy pointed out that what his father had just read was funny.

This new perspective led the Quaker theologian and philosopher to note: “Once we realize that Christ was not always engaged in pious talk, we have made an enormous step on the road to understanding.”

Some Christian traditions, more than others, are considered overly serious and less open to humor — Calvinists, Puritans and fundamentalists — hence the various applications of “God’s frozen people” to those who rarely seem to loosen up.

However, Barry Casey, a teacher of religion, philosophy, ethics and communications, advocates for good humor’s connection to good faith.

“Allowing for humor in Jesus’ words does not undercut the seriousness with which he addresses our fears and doubts,” he wrote in *Spectrum Magazine*. “In fact, in his use of exaggeration, irony and paradox, he underscores his unfailing purpose to reach us, despite our tunnel vision and our sometimes humorless rigidity.” **NFJ**

Can these seeds grow?

By Tony W. Cartledge

Eight years ago, I wrote about the near miraculous resurrection of a Judean date palm from seeds that were, at the time, thought to be almost 2,000 years old.

The seeds were found in 1963 in a collapsed storeroom in the desert stronghold of Masada, built by Herod “the Great” as a redoubt near the southern end of the Dead Sea.

Sarah Sallon, a researcher at Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem who was interested in date palms as a medicinal plant, gained access to some of the seeds and wondered if they could still be brought to life. She entrusted them to Elaine Solowey at the Arava Institute of the Environment in Ketura, a kibbutz deep in southern Israel.

Solowey pretreated the seeds with a solution of fertilizer and plant hormones, and one of them sprouted. With careful nurture, it began to grow, and she named it Methuselah in honor of the ancestor that Genesis 5:27 claims lived to be 969 years old.

Unfortunately, date palm trees have gender, and by its sixth year, Solowey had determined that Methuselah, like its namesake, was a male and would never bear fruit.

Solowey successfully cross-pollinated the ancient tree with an Egyptian date palm, but Sallon also managed to obtain additional ancient pits. Solowey worked her magic again, and in time a half-dozen of them sprouted.

Two of the new-old trees turned out to be female, and were dubbed Judith and Hannah. Hannah was grown from a seed found near Qumran, where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. Hannah and Methuselah were successfully cross-pollinated, and this Hannah produced about 100 dates. Some were preserved for research and planting,



while others were ceremonially eaten.

The resulting dates were reportedly a bit drier and sweeter than the medjool dates that dominate current date plantations. Their DNA indicates that both trees are closer to eastern dates common to Iraq than to those more typically grown in the Levant today.

The seeds, by the way, have been carbon dated to the 2nd-4th century BCE. Just think about that. They weren't exactly Jurassic, but the thought of producing dates from seeds at least 2,200 years old seems nearly miraculous.

It wasn't a miracle, though. The trees owe their rebirth to careful thought, hard work and considerable persistence.

Could such near miracles happen in other areas? Some of us remember a time when people on opposite political sides treated each other as honorable rivals. Instead of seeing each other as enemies, they believed the cross-pollination of compromise could produce workable legislation for all Americans.

Twenty years ago, I was in the editorial trenches, constantly urging fundamentalist

and moderate Baptists to respect each other and work together. On an institutional level, at least, that didn't happen: the allure of power won out.

I grieve at the thought of our country embroiled in perpetual turmoil. Will we always be as divided as we've become? There truly are some real hate-mongers out there, but could we entertain the thought that most people on either side are actually decent folk whose perspectives are shaped by many factors, not all of their making?

The task may seem far too large, and the opponents too deeply entrenched, but there is something we all can do. We can do some work in our own hearts. We can get out of our echo chambers and listen to others and treat them with kindness.

If we ever get past our polarization, the impetus won't come from the top; it will come from the rooted hearts of people who have had enough of enmity and suspicion, and who believe in the power of love.

With thoughtful intentions, compassionate work and faithful persistence, the fruit of mutual respect and cooperation may yet grow in our land. May it be so. **NFJ**

Reconsidering affirmations of faith

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

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Affirming what one believes has a long history in religious traditions. Confessions and creeds have often been used to confirm orthodoxy and express communal faith.

Some consider orthodoxy — as they and their circle define it — essential for inclusion in the Christian faith. Others are content being deemed apostate by those so sure of themselves.

Such thoughts arose recently when I came across a taped interview with the late author/activist Will Campbell at his writing cabin in Mt. Juliet, Tenn., in September 2004. Among the topics of our wide-ranging conversation was his close relationship with country outlaw singer Waylon Jennings who had died two years earlier.

“I loved Waylon to death,” said Will, who officiated at the singer’s funeral in Arizona and a memorial service in Nashville.

Waylon and his wife, Jessi Colter, who had the crossover hit, “I’m Not Lisa,” in 1975, first came out to Will’s farm for the wedding of a mutual friend, singer Johnny Darrell.

Will and Waylon hit it off, and Waylon started visiting the farm — usually just to sit quietly in Will’s cabin. “He said he got renewed here,” Will told me.

One summer when book royalties were slow, Will asked Waylon for work and hit the road with the band. Aboard the bus, Will never quite figured out his job. So he decided to be the “cook” since he opened and closed the microwave the most and chose where to stop for meals.

At one point, Jessi, whose mother was



a Pentecostal preacher, asked Will to talk to Waylon about his personal faith. It was not something Will wanted to do.

“I always had trouble being an ecclesiastical Peeping Tom, talking to someone about the state of their soul,” Will confessed.

On the bus very late one night, Waylon, who had a serious drug addiction he later kicked, was still awake. So, Will decided to reluctantly do what Jessi had asked.

“I said, ‘Waylon, what do you believe?’ He said, ‘Yeah.’”

“I said, ‘Yeah? What is that suppose to mean?’ He said, ‘Uh-huh.’”

“And that was the end of witnessing to ol’ Waylon,” said Will. “But he remembered that.”

Years later, Waylon wrote and recorded a song titled, “I Do Believe.” It begins, “In my own way I’m a believer; in my own way right or wrong. I don’t talk too much about it; it’s something I keep working on.”

And it concludes, “I believe in a loving Father, one I never have to fear. That I should live life at its fullest, just as long as I am here.”

Waylon’s longer, musical testimony was stirred by a brief, middle-of-the-night conversation with a trusted, unorthodox preacher. However, Waylon’s initial grunting responses, said Will, were “an affirmation of faith; he knew it and I knew it, so why pursue it.”

Often faith affirmations are so well packaged and overly enforced that they miss the need for authentic faith to be worked out and expressed individually within one’s

own timing. But perhaps uncertain faith is not contradictory or weak, but necessarily pliable enough to adapt to the priorities of newly discovered realities.

Many of us have faced (or have been) those cocksure believers who compile their own “essentials” of faith and then demand that others believe likewise in this version of orthodoxy. The natural reaction from those on the receiving end is often: “If believing like this causes me to act like you, then, no thanks.”

My preference is for healthy doubt over unhealthy certitude, especially when watching the masses of so-called orthodox believers eagerly go over the falls of fear-based authoritarianism.

Just think of all the confessions and creeds they have muttered or signed that apparently meant less than claimed. Even the basic Christian values of compassion, justice and facing the future with faith rather than fear are expendable.

So, Waylon’s “yeah” and “uh-huh” are more appealing affirmations to me than the worries of fine-tuning orthodoxy. When reading the Gospels, it’s hard not to notice that Jesus sought risk-taking, faithful followers while reserving his harshest judgments for religious elitists who claimed doctrinal and behavioral purity.

Through the decades, my appreciation for lived faith over professed faith has grown. And I find my own faith rooted now in fewer but firmer embraces of the truths worthy of my time and attention.

And they were there all along: faith, hope and love — with the greatest of these being love; loving God with all my being and my neighbor as myself; and seeking to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

When Jesus and Paul deem something “the greatest,” it is probably wise to believe them.

Yeah. Uh-huh. **NFJ**

Questions Christians ask scientists

Who is your favorite scientist?

BY PAUL WALLACE

For years I have been a great admirer of astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630). He was born in Weil der Stadt, Germany, and raised in the Lutheran Church.

He had intended to be a Lutheran minister, but when his scientific work began to show promise, he wrote an elated letter to his former professor, saying, “Just as I pledged myself to God, so my intention remains. I wished to be a theologian, and for a while I was anguished. But behold, now God — who wants to be known from the Book of Nature — is glorified also in astronomy through my work.”

Kepler’s theology and science were blended in a way unseen in virtually any other scientist before or since. This is not to say he was always right.

His earliest model of the universe, in which his Trinitarian theology was evident and played a large role, was utterly, thoroughly wrong. But his insistence on the harmony of science and faith led him beyond those wrong ideas toward one of the most astounding achievements in the history of science.

He expressed his foundational belief when he wrote, “The laws [of nature] are within the grasp of the human mind; God wanted us to recognize them by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts.”

Kepler believed that the world was rational, that his scientific work expressed the divine image within him, and that he drew close to God through astronomy. Far from being a stumbling block or a threat or

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a problem, Kepler’s science opened the very door to communion with God.

But virtually all his contemporaries disagreed. You may have difficulty imagining how radical it was, in the early 17th century, to believe that the earth revolves around the sun.

Today we accept this idea easily; your second-grade teacher probably told you it’s true, your parents didn’t fight it, and NASA says it’s true too. So you believe this particular idea because authorities say it’s true.

But what *evidence* do you have? The answer is that, unless you are a scientist in a narrowly specialized field called “*astrometry*,” you have never actually seen first-hand any material evidence that the earth moves around the sun.

In early 17th-century Europe the situation was far more difficult. All the universities, along with the church, lined up with Aristotle when it came to questions of the earth, sun and cosmos.

The great philosopher had written that the earth stands still and that the planets —

which for centuries included the sun and moon — moved around it. Importantly, this was not just an isolated fact; it affected *everything*.

Aristotle’s cosmology was foundational not only to the philosophy of the day but also to theology. Science, philosophy and theology were so tightly connected that any rearrangement of the heavens demanded a rearrangement of all conventional thought, academic and theological, and resistance to such a rearrangement was thoroughly baked into the major institutions of the age.

So when, in 1609, Kepler published his first successful theory stating that the sun resides at the center of the cosmic arrangement, virtually no one believed him. It was widely held that Copernicus, who had published his sun-centered theory 66 years earlier, had been wrong.

Less than a half-dozen European astronomers agreed with Kepler, but one of them was more famous than him. In fact, it was someone you have certainly heard of: Galileo Galilei.

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“It is difficult to imagine how far out on a limb Kepler went, working on the fringes of a far-out theory, taking seriously what nearly everyone else in the world thought was a joke.”

It is well known that Galileo’s support of Copernicus got him into hot water with the Catholic Church. But Kepler had his own trouble with the Lutherans. In fact, he was denied posts at Lutheran universities for his scientific convictions and was even excommunicated by the Lutheran Church for his theological convictions.

This made life very difficult for Kepler. During the last half of his life, Europe was in the midst of the Thirty Years’ War. Central Europe was fractured into dozens of warring Catholic and Protestant regions.

As a Protestant, he could not live and work in Catholic cities. As an excommunicated Lutheran, he could not live peacefully in Protestant ones. So, welcomed nowhere, he and his family were forced into a strange liminal existence, moving often and making few friends along the way.

But Kepler caught a break in 1600, when he joined the team of one of the foremost astronomers of the day, Tycho Brahe, a great observer (although the telescope would not be invented until 1608, by a Dutchman named Hans Lippershey).

Brahe needed the great mathematician as an assistant. But what he really wanted was for Kepler to help him prove his own pet model of the universe, which agreed with neither Copernicus nor Aristotle. But instead of using his boss’s observational data to prove him correct, Kepler took it and showed once and for all that Copernicus was right.

The work took years. He covered many hundreds of folio pages in mathematics and geometric diagrams, looking to make sense of the data Brahe had given him.

It is difficult to imagine how far out on a limb Kepler went, working on the fringes of a far-out theory, taking seriously what nearly everyone else in the world thought was a joke, believing in the rationality of the world, and, most fundamentally, in the goodness of a God who speaks to us through pattern and order and mathematical harmony.



Sometimes the one with an ear tuned most carefully to the voice of God rejects what everyone else values, and Kepler is no exception. In his insistence that God’s very truth could be found deep within Brahe’s data, Kepler jettisoned two pillars of astronomical science.

First was the idea that planets move at constant speed. This axiom of Aristotle went unquestioned by astronomers for nearly 2,000 years, as did another idea — that planets must move along circular paths.

Like a prophet who rejects the assumptions and values of the day in favor of a new, higher vision, Kepler dismissed these axioms out of a conviction that God was trying to tell him something — something no one else was ready to hear. He was laughed at by nearly everyone.

But his openness to new things and his insistence that God does not deceive led Kepler to scientific triumph with the publication of *Astronomia nova* in 1609. This work contained the first two of Kepler’s three so-called laws of planetary motion.

These are the first physical laws in the modern sense, being precise, universal and

falsifiable. They, and the planetary model they support, were sufficient to prove to the world that Copernicus had been right all along.

But we normally think of Galileo, and not Kepler, as the one who overturned the old earth-centered universe. It was Galileo who turned the telescope to the heavens and proved that the earth goes around the sun, not Kepler. Right?

Well, maybe. Galileo certainly was a brilliant observer, and his observations clearly showed that things in the heavens were not as they had always seemed, but he never could prove that the earth goes around the sun (and his detractors knew it).

In other words, Galileo *popularized* Copernican astronomy; he did not *prove* it. But Kepler’s work, abstruse as it was, was sufficient to turn the tide.

Its predictions were so precise and, over the subsequent years, matched observations so well, that it demonstrated Copernicus’s model in a way Galileo’s work never could.

There is much more to say about Kepler. He wrote the world’s first science fiction story (*Somnium*). He insisted, against all prevailing belief, that the motions of the planets could be understood physically and not just mathematically.

He saw more than his share of hardship. He was frail and weak-eyed his whole life. He defended his mother during her witch trial (she was not a witch; the charges were trumped-up).

He lost a wife and four children to disease. He was chased from town to town by the Counter Reformation. He was chronically underpaid for his work, and he never saw much of the money that was due him. He cast horoscopes to survive yet knew they were nonsense.

All this, yet he never failed to see God shining through the universe; his last major publication was called *The Harmony of the World*. Yes, Johannes Kepler remains, after all these years, by far my favorite scientist. **NFJ**

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

Online archives enhance journal research access

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Willie Nelson wrote a song called “Three Days,” which Faron Young made into a hit in 1962. It’s a “hurtin’ song” about lost love.

“Three days filled with tears and sorrow — yesterday, today and tomorrow. And it does no good to hope these days will end, ’cause the same three days start over again.”

With less twang and despair, *Nurturing Faith Journal* can also be viewed in terms of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Literally, viewed.

YESTERDAY

Past issues of the journal are now being archived on the new Good Faith Media website. This allows for persons doing research, or simply looking for an opinion piece or feature story they recall, to dig around freely.

Journals dating back through 2009 are currently available in this user-friendly

digital format at goodfaithmedia.org/journal-archives. As time allows, additional issues will be added until we reach the inaugural one dated April 1983.

Over the past 37 years this national publication has evolved in format and focus — while staying true to its core commitments — including name changes from *SBC Today* to *Baptists Today* to *Nurturing Faith Journal*.

So much of the original content is found nowhere else in print or online. The archives offer free access to past issues that are six months old or more.

TODAY

Current issues of *Nurturing Faith Journal*, with weekly Bible studies by Tony Cartledge, are available in print or digital form, or a combination subscription. Check out the options for individual, gift, group or bulk subscriptions at goodfaithmedia.org/journal.

Subscribers with digital subscriptions have exclusive access to the three most

recent issues of the journal. When a new issue is posted, the oldest of the three is moved to the archives.

Current subscribers, of course, will continue receiving the journal in print as usual. Those with digital subscriptions can simply click the “my account” link at the top, right-hand corner of the GFM site to access the online journal and manage their subscription.

The formation of Good Faith Media has strengthened our operations and capacity for marketing — and provided a larger team and enhanced web and social media presence. Yet the same familiar team of journal editors and writers is on hand.

Changes such as phone numbers, mailing address, and email addresses can be found in the journal and online so readers and supporters can stay in touch.

TOMORROW

The formation of Good Faith Media provides an exciting and hopeful future in which the journal, Bible studies, books and other resources can thrive and evolve through continually changing times.

This new environment of innovation with an expanded team of creative communicators is opening new doors. The multi-media offerings — print, digital, audio and video — allow for addressing timely issues in a variety of effective ways.

New collaborations are being formed nearly weekly. Having *Nurturing Faith Journal* as an integral part of Good Faith Media allows for strategically and creatively shaping this historic publication for yet another time of cultural and technological change.

We want readers to enjoy and benefit from reading *Nurturing Faith Journal* — as well as all else Good Faith Media is doing — yesterday, today and tomorrow. **NFJ**





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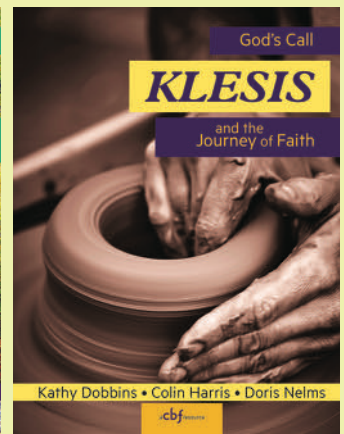
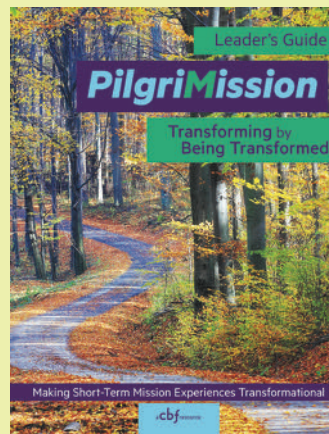
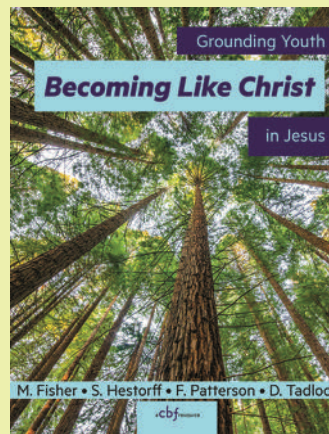
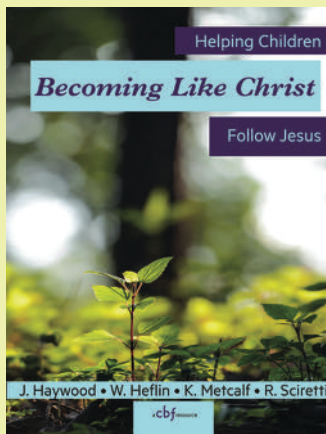
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