

MARCH-APRIL 2021

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

FIRM & FAITHFUL

A conversation with
Jennifer Butler about
resisting tyranny

EARTH AS HOME

Restoring a broken relationship

TOLSTOY'S CHALLENGE

Author's faith grappling is
relevant for Christians today

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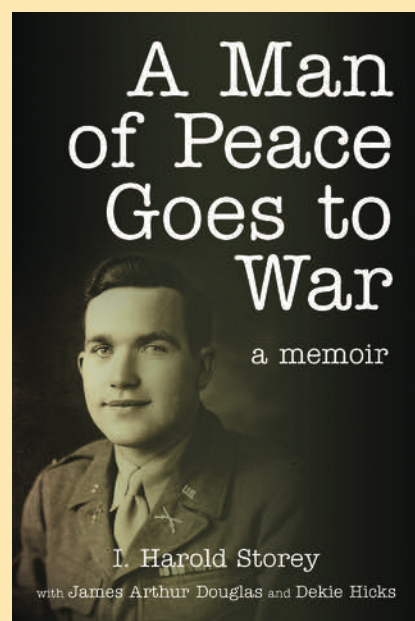
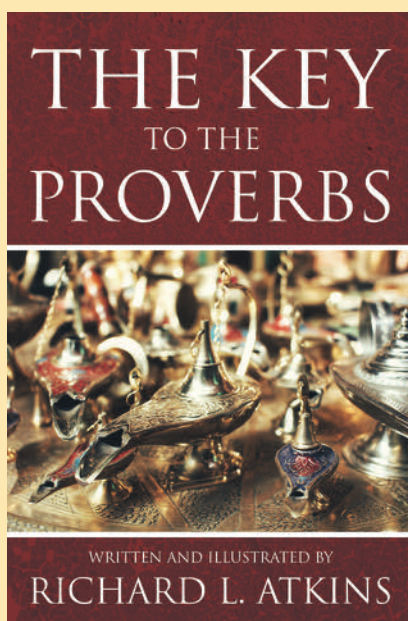
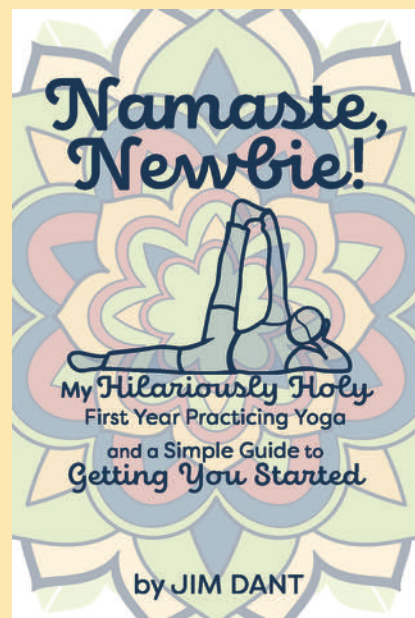
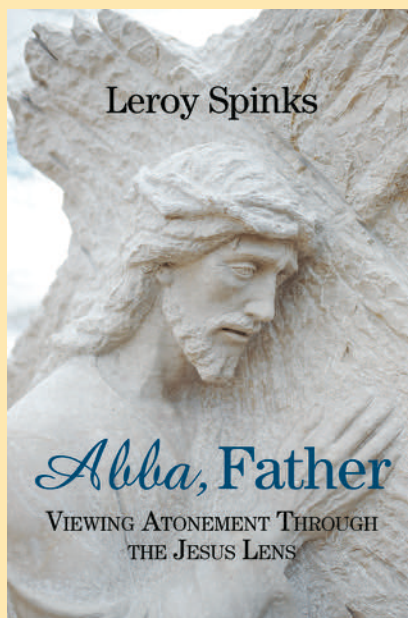
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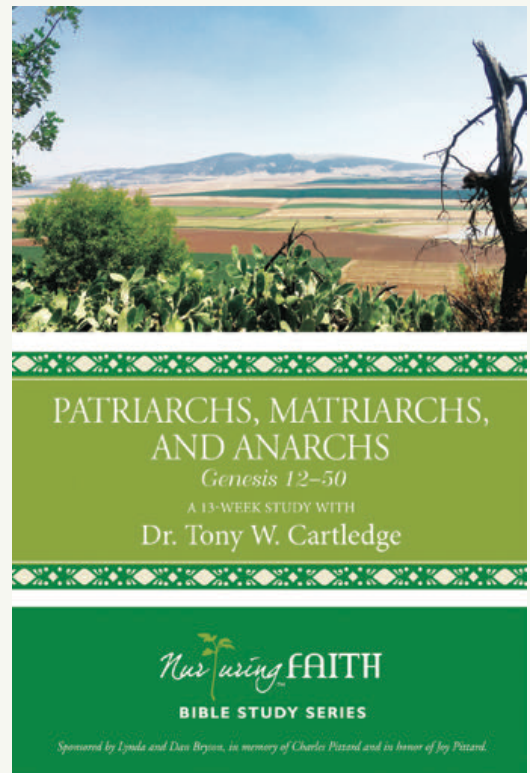
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Nurturing Faith Journal provides relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

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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RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

Ronald Reagan (1981–1989):

Part One

By Bruce Gourley

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"Your minister might be watching too many movies if..."

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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Hold on! Spring is coming, when rhododendron bloom in the North Carolina high country.

Worth Repeating

“Your church’s purpose is not to make you happy. Your church’s purpose is to help you become like Jesus.”

Mark Tidsworth, team leader for Pinnacle Leadership Associates (Facebook)

“Loving your neighbor is not a suggestion.”

Recording artist Lecrae (Twitter)

“If God is always at work in the world, we don’t have to be. It’s OK to rest. We are not messiahs.”

Esau McCaulley, who teaches New Testament at Wheaton College (Twitter)

“The act of praying locates us in the ZIP code of help.”

Keith Herron, bridge pastor of First Congregational Church of St. Louis, Mo. (GFM)

“When the world sees Christians as gullible, naïve and unwilling to do the hard work of critically evaluating information, we lose credibility on everything — including our assertions about the historical veracity of the gospel.”

Dean Robert K. Vischer, University of St. Thomas Law School in Minneapolis (RNS)

“Almost all right-wing support in the United States comes from a view that Christians are under attack by secular liberals.”

Matthew Sheffield, who created right-wing websites before seeing how they undermine faith in democracy (*New York Times*)

“Many ... get their main political information not just from messaging platforms that keep their audiences in a world that is divorced from reality, but also from dedicated religious networks and reactionary faith leaders.”

Katherine Stewart, author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, writing in *The New York Times*

“It is not the church’s purpose to shape our society into a safe and commodious place for Christians. But that’s really all you’ve got if you think the church shouldn’t be pursuing justice.”

Scott Coley of Mount St. Mary’s University (Twitter)

“[Y]ou can change laws, but you don’t change the individual people who are subject to those laws. There is still this stuckness in America around race.”

Heiress/activist Abigail Disney, host of “All Ears” podcast (The.Ink)

“There is ... considerable doubt about conservative Christian leaders promoting religious liberty for all persecuted religious groups abroad or if they are primarily concerned with religious liberty for other Christians.”

Historian Lauren Turek, author of *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (RNS)

“A more helpful statement would have cited what has been and continues to be the greatest threat to Christianity in the United States: Christian Nationalism.”

Jemar Tisby, president of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective, on Southern Baptist seminary presidents calling critical race theory incompatible with SBC doctrine (thewitnessbcc.com)

“American history has been tainted with racism. America codified it. And more, our public and private institutions propagated it.”

African-American pastor Ralph D. West of Houston’s Church Without Walls who broke ties with the Southern Baptist Convention after the SBC’s six, white male seminary presidents denounced critical race theory as inconsistent with convention doctrine (*Baptist Standard*)

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That which unites us matters

By John D. Pierce

Many long years ago, before email, I had a pastor who kept two files in his desk drawer — one marked “roses” and the other “stones.” A nice note from someone went in the “roses” file, while something harshly critical or condemning went into the other.

He said he’d revisit those letters on occasion — dipping into the “stones” file if a dose of humility or at least reality was needed. Or reading from the “roses” file if he needed some affirmation that his work really mattered.

After 26 years of putting my thoughts into the public sphere I have well learned to respect the opinions of others but not to take disagreements too personally, and in many cases, not too seriously. And I’ve counseled a few upon entering the world of opinion writing that they either needed tougher skin or to stop putting their ideas into the public arena.

Criticism comes in a variety of forms and often in response to those things I thought were “safe” topics rather than the more controversial ones that might bring expected pushback.

Some feedback is constructive, revealing a perspective I’d missed or misinterpreted. It’s helpful to view one’s opinion writing as the first lob in a conversation rather than a definitive statement on a matter.

Often the responses are defensive. A scab has been knocked off an unhealed wound or a dark side revealed about a hero. Or a well-embraced, even identifying, way of being “Christian” has been exposed

as misguided.

The most common criticism I receive today, however, is that my writings are divisive to the “body of Christ” when the Bible calls for Christian unity. On the surface, that seems to make sense.

Indeed the psalmist, Jesus and Paul had a lot to say about unity and like-mindedness. But there doesn’t seem to be a biblical call for avoiding critiques of those things that pull us away from our primary allegiance as people of faith.

Otherwise, the prophets would have had no role and Jesus wouldn’t have ended up on a cross. Turning a blind eye to perversions of faith — such as continuing injustice, the rise of white Christian nationalism and the absence of Jesus within much of Americanized Christianity — is not a responsible option.

I can appreciate the sentiment of those who dislike confrontation, or even expressed disagreement, and want everybody to “just be nice and get along.” That works well for those who aren’t on the blunt end of injustices that are ignored and advanced in the name of “keeping the peace.”

Unity does not mean simply ignoring any uncomfortable reality. Or to stop pointing out inconsistencies and untruths that are now the building blocks of a religious/political ideology deemed “Christian,” but in contrast to the life and teachings of Jesus.

A recent response got my mind in gear about the whole idea of Christian unity. The charge was that my writings (and the Good Faith Media website in general) “fuel the division tearing this country apart,”

adding, “And I thought our faith should help to unite us in some ways.”

The prevailing question is: Around what are we to be united? While highly valued, unity in itself is value-free.

Is it merely an act of self-imposed amnesia or an embrace of false equivalencies — so nothing is ever really right or wrong? No, because there is no virtue in “getting along” if it requires the loss of virtue.

All values are not equal in value. Advancing white nationalism, for example, is not just as valid for a Christian as following Jesus.

Unity in itself is unmerited. Crime rings are united around a singular purpose. The Klan, with claims of being Christian, rallied around a common hatred.

Biblical calls for unity are not generalized or formed around narrow doctrinal or political tests. They consistently call for believers to unite around common compassion, relentless forgiveness, shared possessions, equality in diversity, sympathy, humility, peace, and especially radically inclusive love.

As the Colossians were told: “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (3:14 NIV).

It is worth noting also that often the most divisive people are the ones seeking to dismiss any critiques of their attitudes and actions that are causing disunity.

The call for humility in offering our own perspectives and respecting the opinions of others is worth hearing and heeding.

On the other hand, avoidance is not a Christian value — when it enables visions and versions of “Christianity” that pull us away from the demanding but clear call to first and foremost follow Jesus. [NFJ](#)



FIRM & FAITHFUL

A conversation with Jennifer Butler about Christians resisting tyranny

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Jennifer Butler is the founding executive director of Faith in Public Life and the former chair of the White House Council on Faith and Neighborhood Partnerships. She is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), who previously represented the denomination at the United Nations and advocated for international human rights.

A former Peace Corps volunteer, she and her husband Glenn lead Iona Conversations, a Christian spiritual community in downtown Washington, D.C. Her writings have challenged religious extremism, including her latest book, *Who Stole My Bible?: Reclaiming Scripture as a Handbook for Resisting Tyranny*.

The following conversation is adapted from an interview with Jennifer about her book and other issues facing those who seek to follow Jesus in a time when Christianity is being redefined in contrasting religious/political terms.

NFJ: What did you want to convey by the title of your latest book, *Who Stole My Bible?*

JB: I didn't hear the full message of Jesus growing up in my all white, southern megachurch. Someone stole my Bible and I had to go on a long journey to "unlearn" the religion I was taught as a child.

Had I attended [Atlanta's] Ebenezer Baptist Church, Martin Luther King's spiritual home down the road, I would



"To build a society based on love of creation and human dignity is central to biblical texts and our faith journey."

have heard an accurate gospel — one that emphasized Jesus came to bring good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

My subtitle — *Reclaiming Scripture as a Handbook for Resisting Tyranny* — proposes the solution. We can reclaim our faith by drawing closer to those that God is closest to in the Bible: those who are oppressed by unjust systems of governance — by tyranny.

In that journey we find hope and joy and grow closer to the God who liberates slaves, throws tyrants off of thrones (to quote Mary) and cares for the least of these.

NFJ: Those who claim to believe the Bible the most are often the ones who ignore its encompassing theme of justice. Is it possible to change that thinking or just seek to counter it?

JB: I have met many Christians who feel disillusioned and confused by the hypocrisy and sometimes outright hate speech coming from religious leaders. They see the discon-

nect between what the Bible says and what is being preached in church or in the public square.

I think many people today are spiritual nomads, pilgrims looking for a deeper faith, fleeing intolerance and bigotry in many churches. Some leave church all together. Others stay in church with their family or friends but are searching quietly for a true biblical approach to the issues of our day.

My heart goes out to them and I hope the book helps with their journey. The book is dedicated to "the brave and sometimes lonely Christians finding their way out of the wilderness and into the streets." I believe they will find joy in reclaiming and resisting.

NFJ: We tend to think of tyranny as something that happened in the past or happens elsewhere. Is authoritarianism really a concern here and now?

JB: I understand the surprise. Growing up I was taught, like most Americans, a very progressive view of history. I assumed our democracy was unassailable.

I thought we had some flaws but we were getting more democratic and enlightened over time. I think that's why this moment is so disorienting to many of us, particularly those of us who are more privileged.

What I try to do in the book is help us to understand the new reality we are all witnessing so that we can have an analysis, rooted in scripture, of how to build the democracy we claimed to be but never fully achieved in America.

To build a society based on love of creation and human dignity is central to biblical texts and our faith journey.

Authoritarianism is on the rise throughout the world as well as in the United States according to experts. Today authoritarians take over more quietly. We may not see tanks rolling down our streets; but we do see armed white supremacist groups standing in state houses and Neo Nazis marching through a college town.

We see our government tear-gassing racial justice protesters, among them pastors and lay leaders. We see our government separating babies from their immigrant parents. Economic inequality is on the rise alongside voter suppression. There were proposals to strip millions of Americans of their health-care in the middle of a pandemic.

The media isn't controlled the way it is in a communist regime, but misinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories have captured the minds of at least a third of the population.

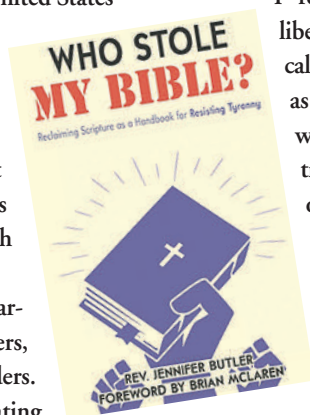
I present the stages of democratic decline in the book and root these in the human condition described in the book of Samuel and in the prophets. And I draw on these lessons to help Christians find spiritual disciplines and strategies to counter tyranny.

Fortunately the Bible is truly a handbook for moments like these. Throughout history the Bible has inspired movements, like the abolition and civil rights movements, and I think God is on the move today in the Poor People's Campaign and other efforts.

NFJ: The capitulation of so many American Christians to the politics of white nationalism has many running for the exits. How are you addressing that reality?

JB: There was a moment in my life when I almost left the church. My heart aches for people who have left. I find that they are closer to God than many who stay.

In the book I share how an encounter with Muslim women who were challenging religious extremism pushed me to decide not to let anyone steal my faith. I decided to stand my ground and question those who had hijacked Christianity for abusive purposes, rather than abandon my faith to those who were being hypocritical.



I realized that embracing a liberationist faith was critical to my spiritual health as well as the state of the world. Tyrants will always try to hijack faith to control others and it is morally incumbent on us all not to allow this to happen.

Some leave thinking religion is the problem, when it is the abuse of religion that must

be addressed. But if we leave, we do a disservice to our own spiritual life and we allow people to cynically use faith to control and denigrate others.

NFJ: You advocate "revival" as an effective way to shape justice in the political realm. How does that work?

JB: I have felt closest to God when leading rallies, lobby visits and press conferences. You can watch these on our Faith in Public Life Facebook page. The remarks, the singing, the marching, all amount to a truly passionate revival type experience — usually multi-faith at that.

I was standing in solidarity with a press conference of African-American church leaders on the Capitol grounds one day when a young black man approached. After listening for awhile, he shouted, "Yo, we havin' some church up in here!"

Another young man, this one white, approached me and asked if we were doing civil disobedience and if he could get

arrested with us. He had driven from Ohio to protest cuts to health care.

I think the more we see the connection between scriptural teachings and defending the rights of the least of these, the more spiritual renewal we will all see in ourselves and in young folk who are looking for the church to really live out its prophetic teachings. They need to see a church living up to its teachings on the nightly news.

NFJ: "Resistance" was not a "church word" for most of us. In fact, it sounds quite different from what we were told "good Christians" should be. Yet you say the Bible equips us for that role. How?

JB: It's funny, we interpret "being good" as being well liked or obedient. But when you look at scripture, the heroes were going against the grain, even and especially, among those who claimed to be the guardians of morality.

Moses challenged Pharaoh. The prophets continually challenged Israel's kings and false prophets who deviated from the Sinai covenant's demands for justice. Mary announced that her son would cast tyrants off their thrones (Luke 1:52). Jesus was crucified by the Roman Empire. Paul spent lots of time in prison.

The biblical vision of how we live together disrupts the ways of the world. If we truly follow a God who welcomes the stranger and hears the groans of slaves, we are going to be disrupting the status quo.

I think we saw that when then Attorney General Jeff Sessions quoted Romans 13 ("obey the laws of government") in a vain attempt to silence faith communities when we cried out against his separating migrant children from parents at the border.

Tyrants cannot tolerate God's radical love because their control rests on dehumanizing others and dividing and conquering.

NFJ: You give a lot of attention to the biblical account of creation. Why is that story so important?

JB: In the ancient Near East, people believed that the gods created people to be their slaves. The Genesis story teaches that humans are made in God's image. God creates, and calls creation good.

The contrast in these stories reveals that our creation story is a moral corrective to the prevailing myths of the day. Think of it this way: If gods are tyrants, then tyranny is an acceptable ordering of our world. If gods enslave humans, then humans can enslave one another.

The Genesis story says no to that worldview. Genesis tells us that God made every human being in God's own image. No other creation myth had such a vision.

Many see this concept of human dignity as the foundation for the modern idea of democracy and human rights. Those of us who follow the Creator God are called to image all people as God's own children.

The illustration I give of that is Sister Norma Pimental, who ministers to migrants at the border, and whose organizational vision, posted above the door of her respite center, is: "Restoring Human Dignity."

NFJ: You note that 40 percent of Americans, according to a 2019 Gallup Poll, hold a young-earth worldview despite all the scientific evidence to the contrary. How do we have constructive engagement with those who are uninterested in facts?

JB: We need to start by connecting through our mutual values. For starters, we can all agree that scripture conveys deep and abiding truths.

I think even if a person holds to the young earth theory, they can embrace the fact that this passage was a moral critique. They can share in the excitement that the text teaches us to value all human beings even if it means standing against the prevailing beliefs of our culture.

I think at the root of the young earth theory is a fear that scripture is being dismissed as unimportant or that science undermines faith. The interpretation I propose can help us see that scripture is even more important because of its moral assertions and that it was not intended to be a science text.

NFJ: What have you discovered about speaking truth to power?

JB: I have found that speaking truth to power deepens my faith. This is where

I most experience God.

In this era, the work has been so intense that it has forced me to develop a whole new dimension to my prayer life, which admittedly was sloppy before. My faith was centered around action; so my big challenge is to root my action more in prayer.

Prayer is where God restores me; helps me listen; helps me pull back or engage as needed.

I am also learning what Alice Walker meant when she said that resistance is the secret to joy; and I think the converse is true as well: joy fuels the ability to resist.

A reporter took a photo of me in 2017 looking over my shoulder and smiling at a line of a hundred people of faith as we marched to the Senate to demand health care for all Americans. After that march, I was arrested alongside Rev. William J. Barber and Rev. Traci Blackmon for refusing to leave and demanding a meeting with Senate leadership.

I was terrified that day, but I remember I lost my fear and found joy when I saw the cloud of witnesses singing behind me. I'm glad that photo was taken to fix that moment in my memory and remind me that joy comes from being a part of something larger than yourself.

NFJ: You remind us that, as in biblical times, false gods and false gospels are among us. How do we identify them and respond faithfully?

JB: Jesus in Matthew 25 implies that his followers will be known by how they treated the least of these. Repeatedly scripture indicates that to draw near to God we have to draw near to the realities of those who suffer because of the injustices in our world.

When we do that, we'll know how to read the Bible accurately and hear God's voice speaking to us today. Then we will know false gods when we see them.

Each of us will be called to different ways of living out the biblical call to liberation — for some direct service, for others advocacy or teaching.

In the book I share stories about how different people are responding to false gospels today and reclaiming faith as a force for liberation from oppression.

NFJ: Please give us your elevator speech about the mission of Faith in Public Life. And why is the diverse, multi-faith dimension of your work so important? (We're glad to travel a few extra floors with you.)

JB: Faith in Public Life is a movement of 50,000 religious leaders working to end systemic oppression and advance just policies. We reflect the religious diversity of America: we are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Sikh.

We believe that each religious community has a critical moral tradition that needs to be heard in the public square in order to shape public opinion and encourage policymakers to root their decisions in care for the least of these and human dignity.

We have helped advance a range of policies from addressing the opioid crisis and police brutality in Ohio; to paid family leave and fair wage policy in Florida; to anti-discrimination work in Georgia.

We were instrumental in passing then defending the Affordable Care Act. Our network is loose enough that people can opt in or out of the issues we take up, but we always stay in relationship and ready to stand with one another.

In this era where there are many seeking to divide and fear-monger, it is critical at the local level that we connect as far and wide as we can. We need not agree on everything in order to have that basic trust and ability to pick up the phone and end intolerance, bigotry or violence.

We train faith communities in those skills and often staff them when the need arises.

In this work I can find myself hanging out with Catholic priests on a mission at the border; then attending an anti-gun violence event at The Temple in Atlanta, preaching at historic Ebenezer Baptist, or removing my shoes to sit at the feet of an Imam in Columbus, Ohio.

At that event, I watched a Jewish Cantor sitting with Muslim women to talk about what its like to wear one's religious dress in public and how to stand firm in the face of bigotry. In each place I feel God on the move teaching us how to build loving communities and it gives me hope. **NFJ**

LEGACY GIFTS: A LASTING INFLUENCE



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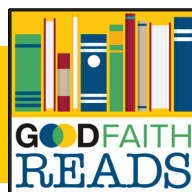


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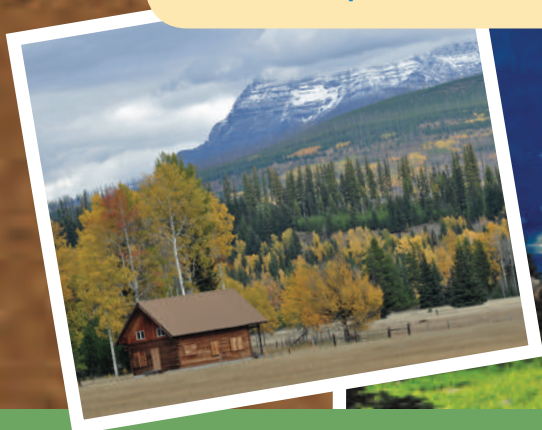


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Facing up to a failure of theology

BY LARRY HOVIS

It is a gross understatement to say that 2020 was a difficult year. A global pandemic, massive economic disruption, severe racial unrest and toxic political polarization produced a perfect storm of social upheaval for which there appears to be no easy (or even difficult) way out.

For the better part of two decades I have worked with a family of churches that more or less share common values and a shared approach to mission and ministry. But many of these churches have found themselves struggling with the same issues dividing the culture at large.

Pastors with whom I work are discouraged because many in their congregations have expressed viewpoints (on social media and in person) that seem diametrically opposed to what these pastors try to preach and teach. Some of these pastors have been attacked for preaching a gospel message that, in their estimation, is no different from what they have preached for years, but now are being heard in a completely different way.

In the middle of 2020, I found it hard to understand Christians who begrudged assistance from government or the private sector for the 20 percent of our population who suffered job losses during the pandemic.

I found it hard to understand Christians who condemned those advocating for racial justice, who claimed that racism really isn't a problem today.

I found it hard to understand Christians who refused to wear masks when in the stores, despite the proprietor's request. Even if they aren't concerned for their own personal safety, I thought, shouldn't they

respect the concerns of those around them?

But lately, I think I'm starting to understand. And I think the problem is theological. Specially, I think the problem is a theology that focuses almost exclusively on the individual with little consideration for the social.

Let me offer three examples:

1. About 30 years ago, the family of churches that I am part of now — the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship — came out of another family of churches — the Southern Baptist Convention — in which critics argued there were serious theological errors in need of correction. Those with whom I identified responded that our problems were not theological but political.



But we did rally around the concept of freedom, which was actually a theology of the individual. That is, the individual's interpretation of scripture, determining an individual relationship with God, while forming individual churches that champion their autonomy. In this theology, freedom of the individual Christian and individual church are paramount.

2. The larger SBC family was formed in 1845 when we Baptists in the South separated from our Baptist kindred in the North over slavery. Some of our forebears argued, from their individual interpretations of scripture, that slavery was not only acceptable but also God-ordained.

Some of our forebears didn't go that far, but they did argue that the rights of the individual Christian, even the slave-owning Christian, took precedence over the objections of the larger body. In other words, the interpretation and practice of the individual were paramount.

3. One of the best-known Bible verses, certainly one of the most memorized, is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life."

When I was younger, a Sunday School teacher taught me to insert my name in the verse: "For God so loved *Larry*, that he gave his only son..." My classmates and I were taught that if only one of us had been born, then Jesus would have still died on that cross.

And at one level, that teaching is absolutely correct. God loves everyone, and Jesus died for everyone. Everyone matters to God.

Unfortunately, that theology has an unintended consequence. It makes us think that we are the center, the focus, of God's mission in the world. It creates Christians who think God exists primarily to meet our individual needs.

That is not only a gross misunderstanding of God, Jesus and the gospel, but it can create Christians who lack the empathy to put the needs of others before their own.

How did we arrive at this point where many Baptists and other Christians have lost any sense of acting for the common good? I fear that in spite of the solid teaching and preaching of many faithful pastors through the decades, our theology — at the most basic, granular, maybe even unconscious level — is so individualistic that the majority of us, like Cain, do not see ourselves as our brothers' and sisters' keeper, and no longer have the ability to "love our neighbors as ourselves."

May God have mercy on us and show us a better way. The survival of our churches and our world may depend on it. **NFJ**

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

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MUSIC WORSHIP LEADER

Kia Walker is a vocalist, instrumentalist, songwriter and recording artist. She specializes in jazz, classical and contemporary vocal techniques along with piano, guitar, and violin. Kia has an Master of Divinity (with church music) from Campbell University Divinity School in Bales Creek, NC.



WORSHIP LEADER

Professor Jerusha Matsen Neal is the Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Duke Divinity School. Her scholarly work examines the action of the Spirit on the performative borders of body and culture. Her research interests focus on postcolonial preaching, preaching and gender, and the implications of Mariology for a Spirit-dependent homiletic.

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with Jerusha Matsen Neal & Kia Walker



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10 proactive ways to prepare for post-pandemic ministry

BY BARRY HOWARD

Recently, a commercial architect described the challenge of reenvisioning office space for the post-pandemic era. His team was designing a versatile space to feature things such as enhanced video meeting technology, flexible spaces for large and small groups, and air ionization or filtration systems for safer work environments.

Congregations must retrofit for the future, too. But the reenvisioning involves much more than our buildings. There will not likely come a point when someone declares the pandemic officially over. More likely, we will gradually emerge into a season when it is safer to gather, travel and attend events.

We should not expect to return to pre-pandemic norms. Here are 10 ways congregations can prepare for healthy, effective ministry in the next season of church life:

1: Revisit, reaffirm or revise your mission and vision statement. COVID-19 has likely rocked your world, rattled your economy and reconfigured your ministry opportunities. It is important to reexamine your mission statement to ensure it addresses the ministry needs of your community.

2: Develop a tiered contingency budget. Many financial analysts believe the economy may be in for a topsy-turvy journey as we recover. Decrease in business, lost wages, and an increase in government spending may all set the stage for a turbulent financial year. Typically, churches have incurred unexpected expenses, deferred maintenance and frozen salaries in an effort to survive the pandemic. A church would be wise to prepare three tiers of budget possibilities: a “best case” scenario, a “what if” scenario and a “worst case” scenario.

3: Prepare for long-term safety protocols. Since the church is, among other things, a place of gatherings, it is wise to proactively adopt practices that maximize

the safety of our people for the foreseeable future.

4: Plan to continue a hybrid model of ministry with online and in-person opportunities. Hybrid ministry is here to stay. The way we teach and equip someone on Zoom will be as important as the way we disciple someone in the room. Hybrid ministry will not look the same in every church. Some will anchor their ministry in a brick-and-mortar campus, with a few opportunities to connect online. Other churches may be primarily online and maintain office spaces and/or gathering places on a much smaller, perhaps even non-traditional campus.

5: Update church policies to provide for online or in-person decision making. Most church bylaws allow only for in-person decision making during a church conference, announced two weeks in advance of an in-person worship service. Churches need to consider online options for decision making via interactive platforms such as Zoom, Join.Me or GoToMeeting. Churches may also revise bylaws or policies to allow the church council or administrative leadership team to function as an executive committee during times of emergency.

6: Upgrade your staffing model. To be effective, a staffing model must be contextualized to the mission and opportunities of each congregation. Once the mission statement is updated, the staffing model should be upgraded to empower the mission. After a staffing configuration is affirmed, important documents (e.g., bylaws, policies, procedures) can be adapted to empower the new staffing paradigm.

7: Establish new pastoral care guidelines and expectations. Many churches excel in pastoral care with a personal touch. Ministers and deacons visit hospitals and senior care facilities frequently. These ministries came to an abrupt halt during the pandemic. As visitation gradually re-opens at these facilities, it is possible that visits by non-family members will be

limited or discouraged. In the near future, churches will likely network with chaplains to provide in-person pastoral care, and ministers and deacons will rely more on handwritten notes, phone calls and emails than in-person visits.

8: Create new metrics to measure effectiveness. Churches tend to count attendance, offerings, baptisms and new members to measure their effectiveness. Life transformation is hard to measure. Churches may discover that, in the new era of increased online participation and multiple worship/study opportunities, keeping up with how many individuals are connected, giving and serving may be more indicative of effectiveness.

9: Conduct a sanitization audit and reevaluate your cleaning plan. Include periodic deep cleans in your regimen. Churches may also want to clean ductwork annually, replenish hand-sanitizer stations, and continually reevaluate touch points including the ways the offering is received, communion is distributed, and toys are disinfected in the nursery.

10: Redesign or redesignate campus space. Stewardship of space should become one of the new spiritual disciplines for a congregation. This may involve downsizing or right-sizing your campus. It could include sharing space with other organizations on a cost-sharing basis. It certainly should include strategically rethinking where groups meet and how the rooms are equipped for technology and safety.

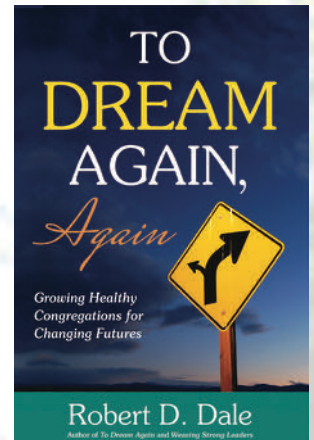
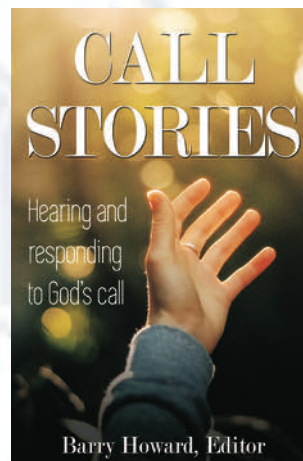
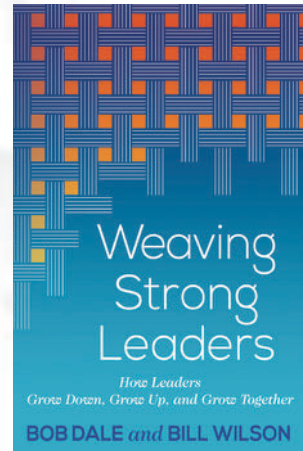
There are a lot of unknowns. But be proactive, intentional and collaborative. Being ecclesial architects for the next chapter of church life is exciting and important work. [NFJ](#)

—Barry Howard is pastor of Atlanta's Church at Wieuca. This “Being church in changing times” column is provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches (chchurches.org).



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Journey toward justice

By R. Mitch Randall

For three years Jesus traveled through Palestine preaching, teaching and healing. He embraced outcasts and sinners as though they were brothers and sisters. He touched the untouchables, bringing healing and hope through human contact.

Now, he set his course toward Jerusalem, where he would either be welcomed like a king or branded a traitor.

With the Lenten journey underway this year, Christians around the world are walking toward Jerusalem with Jesus. With each step, we feel the tension build.

Jesus grew bolder before he set out for Jerusalem, speaking against injustices and speaking up for those left out. Moving closer to the temple city, Jesus' critics grew more and more uneasy with his message and followers.

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus followed a divine mandate for seeking justice. He laid out his vision in Luke 4: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (v. 18).

As people of good faith on the Lenten journey with Jesus, we could benefit from listening to his voice and following his lead. Jesus was not crucified for merely advocating for love; he was executed because he dared to seek justice for those the world marginalized and disregarded. Jesus delivered salvation to the world by seeking justice for the oppressed.

Therefore, as we journey toward justice with Jesus, let us look at some tangible

ways to support and advocate for those the world continues to reject. We do not have to engage in every suggestion but rather find one that might challenge preconceived thoughts and inspire transformative action.

First, let us educate ourselves on issues that matter. After last year's protests broke out over the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others, I realized the need to reeducate myself on matters of systemic racism and injustices. Delving into a plethora of excellent materials, I found myself unlearning preconceived notions and learning new perspectives.



Second, let us pray for the oppressed. We must never separate our work for justice from the significance of spirituality. Following in the footsteps of Jesus, prayer was foundational for him as he ministered among the poor and ostracized.

Praying for internal strength, he also prayed for those he encountered, asking for God's providence and mercy. Prayer remains one of the most underused tools for combating injustices in our world. Let's pray, and pray often.

Third, let us establish social justice teams in our churches. Local congregations remain incredible assets in combating injustices and advocating for social justice issues.

A social justice team can concentrate on one issue of importance to the church, such as food insecurity or racial justice. Focusing on one issue sharpens and empowers the congregation to make maximum impact within its community.

Fourth, let us volunteer at social service organizations. While we always support and empower local churches, we realize many

wonderful organizations are doing fantastic work. Volunteering at a local food bank or with Habitat for Humanity can make a tremendous difference.

Fifth, please engage with Good Faith Media. Our mission is to provide reflection and resources at the intersection of faith and culture through an inclusive Christian lens. We believe in inclusion, freedom and justice for all.

Through a variety of compelling stories and thought-provoking resources, Good Faith Media advocates for those important Christian values. Your support and involvement help us fulfill that important mission.

As we continue the Lenten journey, let us keep the mission and ministry of Jesus in mind. Let us thoughtfully consider what brought him to the moment when he entered Jerusalem. He risked his life because he believed in a more significant cause.

Jesus affirmed that God loved everyone, which meant God's people should include everyone. Whenever God's people excluded others based on their identities and conditions, then Jesus sought justice through love and justice.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, 'Wait on time.'"

The time has come for people of good faith to follow Jesus toward justice. It is a Lenten journey that includes sacrifice and loss.

In the end, however, the journey always brings life — not to just one individual — but to a world in desperate need of God's love. **NFJ**

—Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.

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Who is Jesus?

By John R. Franke

As we enter into the Easter season this year, we focus once again on the astonishing and disturbing events at the headwaters of Christian faith, known in the tradition of the church as Holy Week.

It begins with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, an event we remember on Palm Sunday. Knowing the details of the week that unfolded after this event, we cannot help our astonishment at the incredible twists and turns in what follows — an unexpected arrest, a brief trial, a brutal execution, and a glorious resurrection.

In order to understand the identity of Jesus as the Christ (Messiah), we can focus our attention on the contrast between Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

To understand this juxtaposition, we need to look at the expectations of the people who were welcoming Jesus on Palm Sunday. Many in the crowd would have been aware that when one of Israel's great kings defied an existing and threatening power, that king's followers would spread their cloaks under the new leaders' feet as a sign of loyalty.

They wanted to make a statement about what they perceived to be taking place, namely that God was preparing to deliver them from an unjust situation.

They also waved branches cut from trees to mark a celebratory procession — which also carried royal implications. In the long memory of Jerusalem and its surrounding villages, stories continued to be told about the famous Judas Maccabaeus who had arrived in triumph 200 years earlier after conquering the pagan armies that had oppressed Israel.

In addition, the crowd shouted royal chants and slogans welcoming Jesus as the

“Son of David, who comes in the name of the Lord.” For generations, the Jews had waited and prayed for a king like David to arrive and deliver them from the oppression of foreign powers — currently the Romans.

With the coming of Jesus, the crowd anticipated the possibility that their long-awaited freedom from Roman rule had arrived and soon, by the power of God working through the Messiah, they would see a return to the greatness of the Davidic Kingdom.

For many people, the expectations for the Messiah (the Christ) involved the dramatic overthrow of the powers that oppressed Israel. They were waiting

for a strong and powerful messianic leader who possessed the favor of God and was thus able to do mighty deeds and restore Israel to its rightful place in the world as the chosen people of God.

Jesus had a different agenda, however. He taught repentance, forgiveness, sacrifice and love, even for the enemies of Israel. Now he has come to Jerusalem to demonstrate and live out this alternative vision of what it means to be the Christ — one who is not only for Israel, but also for the whole world.

He has come to Jerusalem not to be enthroned like David or Judas Maccabaeus, not to win great military victories. Rather, he has come to Jerusalem to die for the sake of the world.

That he understands himself to be the Messiah in Matthew's account is plain from the way he instructs his disciples in order to fulfill the words of the prophet.

The message is clear: Jesus is affirming that he is the promised Messiah, but he rejects the common notion of just what the Messiah would do.

Who is this Jesus? This is Jesus the Christ, the messiah.

This messiah, however, was not going to conquer Rome in order to make Israel great again. Instead, he challenges their aspirations to greatness and calls on them to look after the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed through self-sacrificial love for the sake of others, including their enemies.

He was not simply going to deliver them and serve their interests. Instead, he declares God's love for all people to form a new, inclusive family made up of every tribe and nation living in peace and harmony. Suffice it to say, in light of the events to follow, this is not what the crowds expected, or wanted.

Like those who shouted “Hosanna” to Jesus long ago in Jerusalem, we sing his praises today. But why do we sing? Is it because we imagine that God will be on our side and against those who oppose us?

In examining American Christianity, I cannot help but think we have expectations about God similar to those who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem so many years ago. That God is on our side — whatever side that may be — and greatness is secured at the expense of others.

As Holy Week makes abundantly clear, this is not the way of Jesus. May we learn from him and become his faithful disciples. [NFJ](#)

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



HYNDS INTERNSHIP

Jessica McDougald, Jana Peterson
new Good Faith Media interns

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

After the successful launch of the Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Internship in the fall semester of 2020, two new interns were selected for the spring semester of 2021: Jessica McDougald and Jana Peterson.

“We were thrilled with the energy, perspectives and gifts our first interns, Rebekah Gordon and Christopher Adams, brought to Good Faith Media,” said CEO Mitch Randall. “And we are very pleased to have Jessica and Jana serving as our second class of journalism interns.”

McDougald is a third-year Master of Divinity student at Campbell University Divinity School and youth minister at Millbrook Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C. She has written previously for Good Faith Media’s *Nurturing Faith Journal*.

“I am interested in knowing what it is like to be a writer in the real world — how the topics are decided, ground rules, what a typical day is like, etc.,” she said. “I have only within the last year or so realized that my calling to ministry might somehow be wrapped up in or tied to my passion for writing.”

Tony Cartledge, who writes for Good Faith Media and teaches at Campbell’s divinity school, described McDougald as “a delightful person, a multi-talented student, and an effective minister.”

“In much of her writing, Jessica creatively explores the ins and outs of motherhood and ministry with tenderness, transparency and courage,” said Cartledge. “I’m confident she will be a valued asset to the Good Faith Media family during her internship.”



Jessica McDougald



Jana Peterson

Jana Peterson lives near Bozeman, Montana, and is nearing completion of her M.Div. degree at the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology. A mother of six, she was a self-described “homeschooling homemaker” for 15 years before pursuing her education while working with non-profit organizations.

She became acquainted with Good Faith Media, she said, through a friendship with GFM’s Bruce Gourley at First Baptist Church of Bozeman, where they both attend.

“Through this internship, I hope to gain a wider perspective of where God is at work in the world and how I might be able to be a part of it,” said Peterson. “I’m looking forward to interacting with all the elements that make Good Faith Media what it is, especially the editing and writing.”

“Jana’s enthusiasm in sharing the expansive love of God for the common good of all is contagious,” said Gourley. “She is a deep thinker, a student of cutting edge theological discourse, and a gifted communicator.”

The internship program was established with an initial gift from the foundation of First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., where Ernest (Ernie) C. Hynds Jr. was a beloved member and a longtime professor/department head in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

Gifts to support this ongoing engagement with the next generation of communicators may be made by emailing Mitch Randall (mitch@goodfaithmedia.org) or Autumn Lockett (autumn@goodfaith-media.org) or by calling (615) 627-7763. **NFJ**

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Your minister might be watching too many movies if ...

By Brett Younger

When the pandemic sent ministers home, many of them landed on the couch in front of their televisions. They had only heard about Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and Disney Plus. They told their spouses, “I’m going to do the free trial,” but they never canceled.

They told themselves they were watching for sermon illustrations. They convinced themselves that watching movies would make them better preachers. Who wouldn’t want more Tom Hanks or Viola Davis in the pulpit?

A few ministers have overdone it, though. Church members should be on the lookout for signs that their minister has been watching too many movies.

If worship begins with “Hello, gorgeous”¹ or “Play it, Sam. Play ‘As Time Goes By,’”² your minister might have a problem.

While an increasing number of services are online, “All right, Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my close-up”³ is not an appropriate call to worship.

Congregations that pass the peace know the line is “Peace be with you” and should not be told to say “May the Force be with you.”⁴

“You don’t understand! I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I could’ve been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am”⁵ sounds like a prayer of confession, but it is not.

“Here’s looking at you, kid”⁶ is out of place in most children’s sermons.

“It’s alive! It’s alive!”⁷ is not the same as “He is risen!”

But it’s also true that “Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary”⁸ sounds like Jesus talking to the disciples.

“You can’t handle the truth!”⁹ would work in a sermon on the eighth commandment.

“Well, nobody’s perfect”¹⁰ is a reasonable paraphrase of Rom. 3:23.

If ministers welcome new members with “You had me at ‘hello’”¹¹ or “Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine”¹² a conversation is in order.

“I’m walkin’ here! I’m walkin’ here!”¹³ “I’ll be back”¹⁴ and “Hasta la vista, baby”¹⁵ are benedictions that suggest the minister is watching too many movies.

“Toga! Toga!”¹⁶ is not something your minister should drop by the choir room to say.

“Love means never having to say you’re sorry”¹⁷ does not belong in a wedding, though “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship”¹⁸ is okay.

A fixation on movies can be troublesome when dealing with church stewardship. “I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse”¹⁹ is not something to say to the finance committee.

“Show me the money!”²⁰ and “Greed, for lack of a better word, is good”²¹ are bad stewardship themes.

“Houston, we have a problem”²² might

work if giving is low — and your church is in Houston.

When “Let’s talk” becomes “Why don’t you come up sometime and see me?”²³ ... watching too many movies has gotten in the way of effective counseling.

“Round up the usual suspects”²⁴ is poor advice for the nominating committee.

“If you build it, he will come”²⁵ is a dubious argument for a new sanctuary.

Movies are a problem if ministers use any of these lines in a church business meeting:

- “Fasten your seatbelts. It’s going to be a bumpy night.”²⁶
- “Go ahead, make my day.”²⁷
- “Well, here’s another nice mess you’ve gotten me into!”²⁸
- “I’ll get you, my pretty, and your little dog too!”²⁹
- “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!”³⁰
- “Gentlemen, you can’t fight in here! This is the War Room!”³¹
- “Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.”³²
- “You’ve got to ask yourself one question: ‘Do I feel lucky?’ Well, do ya, punk?”³³
- “You talkin’ to me?”³⁴
- “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”³⁵

“After all, tomorrow is another day!”³⁶ might be a helpful conclusion to a peculiar column. **NFJ**

Endnotes

¹ *Funny Girl*
² *Casablanca*
³ *Sunset Boulevard*
⁴ *Star Wars*
⁵ *On the Waterfront*
⁶ *Casablanca*
⁷ *Frankenstein*
⁸ *Dead Poets Society*
⁹ *A Few Good Men*
¹⁰ *Some Like It Hot*
¹¹ *Jerry Maguire*
¹² *Casablanca*
¹³ *Midnight Cowboy*
¹⁴ *The Terminator*
¹⁵ *Terminator*
¹⁶ *Judgment Day*
¹⁷ *Animal House*
¹⁸ *Love Story*
¹⁹ *Casablanca*
²⁰ *The Godfather*
²¹ *Jerry Maguire*
²² *Wall Street*
²³ *Apollo 13*
²⁴ *She Done Him Wrong*
²⁵ *Casablanca*
²⁶ *Field of Dreams*
²⁷ *All about Eve*
²⁸ *Sudden Impact*
²⁹ *Sons of the Desert*
³⁰ *The Wizard of Oz*
³¹ *Network*
³² *Dr. Strangelove*
³³ *The Godfather, Part II*
³⁴ *Dirty Harry*
³⁵ *Taxi Driver*
³⁶ *Gone with the Wind*



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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Teaching resources to support these weekly lessons available at teachers.nurturingfaith.net. Use the new password (life) beginning March 1 to access Tony's video overview, Digging Deeper and Hardest Question, along with lesson plans for adults and youth.



Adult teaching plans by **David Woody**, associate pastor of French Huguenot Church in Charleston, S.C.



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

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 7, 2021

John 2:13-22

Jesus, the Activist

When you think of Jesus, what's the first image that comes to mind? Do you see him sitting with children or holding a lamb to his breast? You may imagine him standing by John in the Jordan, teaching on a mountainside, praying in the garden, or emerging from the tomb.

These are the images that commonly appear on the cover of children's Bibles, in paintings behind baptisteries, or in colorful stained-glass windows.

How often have we seen pictures of Jesus with fire in his eyes and a flail in his fist, upsetting tables and chasing miscreants out of the temple courts?

Today's text paints a rarely seen portrait of Christ. Gentle Jesus had a temper, and he was not afraid to use it.

A shocking action (vv. 13-17)

The Fourth Gospel is not alone in describing what we often call "the cleansing of the temple," but its version of the story is quite different from that of the synoptic gospels. 📖 📖

In Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, and Luke 19:45-46, the event occurs near the end of Jesus' ministry, following Jesus' Palm Sunday ride into the city on the back of a donkey. In all

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (John 2:19)

three of the Synoptics, the event leads to further exhibitions of Jesus' power, prompting the temple officials to question by what authority Jesus dared to act in such drastic fashion.

In contrast, John's gospel places the event near the very beginning of Jesus' active work, soon after he had called four disciples (Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael, 1:35-51) and performed the first miracle recorded by John, the turning of water into wine at a wedding in Cana (2:1-12).

The story in John, as in the other gospels, is followed by a question about Jesus' authority, but it is presented differently, as the temple leaders asked what "sign" Jesus could cite to justify his actions.

Some readers have accounted for the difference in chronology by proposing that Jesus roused temple merchants on two different occasions, but the event probably occurred just once, during the final week of Jesus' ministry, as described in the other three gospels. The Fourth Evangelist, who had a special interest in Jesus' "signs," apparently transposed the shocking act to the beginning of Jesus' ministry in order to set the stage for Jesus' unfolding work and help readers understand its significance. 📖

The story begins by saying that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Passover, an annual springtime celebration commemorating Israel's deliverance from Egypt. That the author

calls it "the Passover of the Jews" suggests a growing separation between Jews and Jesus followers: John wrote many decades after the resurrection, and for a primarily Gentile audience.

Observant Jews were expected to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem when they could, and the Fourth Gospel speaks as if Jesus went up to Jerusalem at least three times for the Passover (2:13, 6:4, 11:55ff), possibly four if "the festival of the Jews" in 5:1 was also Passover.

When Jesus entered the temple complex, according to the story, he found a bustling marketplace where moneychangers and livestock merchants were doing a booming business (v. 14). 📖 Jews were required to pay a half-shekel temple tax each year (Exod. 30:11-16), but doing so was not straightforward. The Romans forbade the Jews from minting their own coins, while the Jews refused to accept Roman coins for the temple tax. They considered the coins' image of the emperor to be a violation of the commandment against graven images.

To get around the problem, temple authorities required that taxes be paid in an alternate currency, such as coins minted in the nearby kingdom of Tyre. 📖 Most Jews would not have easy access to Tyrian coins, however. Currency exchanges could have been set up anywhere in the city, but the temple rulers had allowed vendors to locate their booths inside the temple complex. This would have allowed them to exercise control over exchange rates and presumably to share in the profits.

Similarly, worshipers were expected to offer sacrifices during

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Passover, but the law made provision for people who traveled long distances to bring money rather than driving their livestock, and to purchase the needed animals in Jerusalem. Again, while one might have expected livestock sales to be on the outskirts of the city, officials had apparently turned the law's requirement to their own profit, allowing vendors to set up shop within the temple complex.

Imagine the scene: animals ranging from pigeons to lambs and goats might have been penned in stalls or tied to stakes, bringing a cacophony of noise, smells, urine, and excrement — sharply diminishing any sort of worshipful atmosphere in the temple courts.

Jesus reacted to the sacril violation with such anger, according to John, that he fashioned a whip out of cords and used it to chase both traders and animals from the temple compound while overturning the moneychanger's tables and scattering coins all about (v. 15).

This was not a gentle Jesus. The word translated as “whip” is *phragel-lion*, a term that could describe a whip made from one or multiple strands, either with or without bits of metal tied to the ends to increase their force. Jesus would have been more interested in expediency than harm; a few small lengths of rope tied together would have been sufficient to clear out both merchants and cattle. 📌

The version of the story in Matthew, Mark, and Luke says that Jesus quoted Isa. 56:7 (“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”) and Jer. 7:11 (“Has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your sight?”). John does not cite those prophesies, but has Jesus shouting “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a

marketplace!” (v. 16).

Note Jesus' brashness in referring to the temple complex as “my Father's house,” which is typical in the Fourth Gospel. The question about turning the temple into a market may be a reference to Zech. 14:21, where Zechariah predicted a coming age in which “there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD on that day.”

If this is correct, then Jesus' intent was not only to show offense at the desecrating presence of a market in the courts reserved for Gentile worship, but also to announce that his arrival had inaugurated the last days, when merchants in the temple would no longer be tolerated.

Expelling the merchants and their wares from the temple may also have foreshadowed the more serious work of Jesus' suffering and death, in which a heavy whip and worse would be used against him. The eschatological act of Christ's death would bring to an end the need for the temple as a place of sacrifice.

Later, John says, the disciples remembered a quotation from Ps. 69:9: “It is zeal for your house that has consumed me” (v. 17). That psalm had come to be interpreted as a reference to a coming righteous sufferer, and Jesus quoted from Ps. 69:21 on the cross (Matt. 27:34, 48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:28-29).

A surprising prediction (vv. 18-22)

Jesus' furious charge left the temple officials equally fired up. “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” they huffed (v. 18). In other words, “Who do you think you are?”

“Signs” are a central element in John's gospel, where miracles are often labeled as signs designed to indicate Jesus' power and authority,

culminating with his crucifixion and resurrection as a final sign.

Jesus told them who he was, though cryptically: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (v. 19). Unaware that Jesus was speaking about himself, the officials scoffed at the notion that a massive temple still in its 46th year of renovation could be rebuilt in three days (v. 20). 📌

The narrative is intended to work on two levels: in the present, it was a confusing claim about the temple, where the presence of God was thought to dwell. Only later would believers come to understand that Jesus was speaking of his body, in which the presence of God dwelt in human flesh (v. 21). Jesus' body was subject to being killed, but he would rise again on the third day.

In the moment, Jesus' disciples were just as confused as the temple officials. The author says it was only after the resurrection that they remembered what Jesus had said and made a connection between his death and resurrection and “the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken” (v. 22).

This story may feel quite alien to us. Surely we have nothing in common with the merchants who had taken over the temple. Or do we? You may have known churches that forbade fund-raising sales as equivalent to moneychangers in the temple, but there are more important things to consider.

Have we ever seen church attendance primarily as an opportunity to gather with friends, to enhance our reputation, or to make business connections? Do we reserve worship as a sacred space and time for God alone, or think only in terms of what we get out of it?

If Jesus were to walk into our church today, would he need to clean house? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 14, 2021

John 3:14-21

Jesus, the Savior

Some scriptures are so familiar that they can become like white noise in the background. We know them, but we pay them little attention. With the possible exception of Psalm 23, no passage is more familiar than John 3:16 — but knowing the verse doesn't mean we understand it or live by it. 📖

We cherish John 3:16 as a comforting promise that God loves the whole world and offers eternal life to all people.

But what else do we know about the verse and its context? Our goal for this study is to tune that white noise into gospel music.

A bit of background (vv. 1-13)

Today's text begins smack in the middle of an intense conversation, so let's back up and find where it started.

The story introduces us to a man named Nicodemus, who was both a Pharisee and an admirer of Jesus. Surprised? Labels can be misleading: the gospels often portray scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees quite negatively, and that's unfortunate.

Jewish leaders such as Nicodemus had labored for centuries to ensure the survival of Judaism, which was often

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

threatened. Those who opposed Jesus were sincere in their belief that he and his followers were a danger to Judaism. They saw many Jews deserting their tradition to follow Jesus (John 12:11). They also feared that Jesus' talk about a "kingdom," combined with popular messianic expectations, could bring the wrath of Rome upon all Jews.

Still, Nicodemus was intrigued by Jesus, impressed by his mighty works, and more willing than most to hear Jesus out.

Whether seeking secrecy or for other reasons, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He addressed Jesus as "Rabbi" and said, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" (v. 2).

That sounds like the flattering prelude to a question, but the author did not report it. Jesus' response seems to assume that Nicodemus wanted to hear his views on eternal life, a concept that was hotly debated at the time: some believed in an afterlife, and some did not.

Whether or not the question was voiced, Jesus stated both cryptically and emphatically: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (v. 3). 📖

The familiar King James Version renders it as "you must be born again," choosing an alternate but secondary meaning for the same word. Jesus almost certainly meant "from above"

— that is, with the intervention of God — but Nicodemus heard it as "again." 📖

That misunderstanding led Nicodemus to ask how a grown man could possibly crawl back into his mother's womb and be born a second time (v. 4).

Jesus responded with another "Truly, truly" statement, insisting that those who enter the kingdom of God must be "born of water and Spirit" (v. 5).

Still confused? Childbirth is accompanied by the "waters" of placental fluid. "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit," Jesus said. So, it shouldn't be surprising that he had spoken of being born "from above," by the Spirit (vv. 6-7).

Those who prefer the translation "born again" argue that Jesus spoke of one's spiritual birth as a metaphorical second birth.

John's fondness for double meanings is evident in the next verse, where Jesus spoke of the wind blowing where it will and those born of the Spirit having similar characteristics: the same Greek word is used for both "wind" and "spirit" (v. 8). 📖

Nicodemus appears to have grown even more confused. He asked "How can these things be?" If he said anything else, it's not recorded (v. 9).

Jesus appeared frustrated with his guest's failure to understand, or with his willingness to accept his authority as "the Son of Man," the only person on earth to have also experienced heaven (vv. 10-13).

Answers and Questions (vv. 14-21)

Having introduced the concept of Jesus as the "Son of Man," the author

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says Jesus reminded Nicodemus of a Hebrew story found in Num. 21:5-9. After escaping from Egypt and entering a covenant with God at Sinai, the early Israelites were pressing on, but not without considerable complaint.

At one point they charged both God and Moses with bringing them into the wilderness just to die. God's gift of manna, they said, was miserable and detestable food.

Yahweh responded, according to the story, by sending poisonous serpents among them. Many were bitten, and many died. Soon, the people repented and asked Moses to pray that God would take away the snakes.

Moses prayed and God answered — but with a twist. Pointedly, Yahweh *did not* take away the snakes, but offered healing despite their presence. Yahweh instructed Moses to fashion a serpent out of bronze and lift it up on a pole, promising that those who came and looked upon it would live. 📌

Nicodemus would have known the story and probably thought he understood it — but then Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (vv. 14-15).

This is the prelude to the verse we remember: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (v. 16).

Now we have a connection between Jesus as the “Son of Man” and as the Son of God. No doubt, Nicodemus would have been even more confused.

God's purpose in Christ was not judgment, but grace, Jesus said. God had not sent him to condemn the world, but “in order that the world might be saved through him” (v. 17).

“World” translates *kosmos*, which

does not refer to the earth or to evil in this context, but to the people who make up the world's population.

John's account argues that humans are prone to choosing evil over good and their own way rather than God's way, thus plotting their own course toward death (v. 18). They might choose to walk in the shadows in a vain attempt to hide the darkness within (vv. 19-20), but God loves all people and wants something better for them.

For this reason, Jesus brought God's life-giving light into the world, and “those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (v. 21). They don't earn their way into the light: it has been done “in God,” through what God has done.

How did Nicodemus, the man who famously came to Jesus in the dark of night, respond to Jesus' claims? Did he leave in the light?

The author does not say, though there is some evidence that he did. 📌 In any case, we may be sure that Nicodemus was left with much to ponder. He seems to have wanted Jesus to *show* him the way. He had not expected to hear that Jesus would *be* the way.

An unanswered question

None of us want to waste our one and only life, but we have widely different ideas about what it means to make the most of life. Where do we find ourselves in this story?

Some of us put our faith in physical fitness, devoting endless hours to sculpting a better body or running a faster 5K. The gospel of fitness is good for our bodies indeed, but any gospel that applies to our physical lives alone is not enough.

Others follow the easier and more appealing gospel of materialism. Our culture would lead us to believe that

focusing on wealth and things and pleasure is what life should be about, but this physical life is not our only life. There is something greater. 📌

It is hard for us, in a world we think of as “enlightened,” to comprehend the Spirit's work. Though we may not understand it, we may sense that our lives are not complete without it. We cannot control God's Spirit any more than we can direct the wind, but we can open the windows of our hearts to receive it. 📌

“No one comes into the kingdom unless they are born from above,” Jesus said. Those who come into the kingdom are born of the Spirit, and “the wind (Spirit) blows where it will.” We had no part in engineering our own conception or in bringing about our birth. We don't generate our birth from above, either — other than to turn loose of our search for physical or emotional or financial salvation, turn our hearts toward Jesus, and allow the wind of the Spirit to usher us into the kingdom.

There is a perplexing tension between grace and faith: in a mysterious way, each seems to activate the other. God offers grace freely, yet also calls for faith. We can't earn God's favor, yet we are called to believe. God's love seeks our salvation.

In this Lenten season, when we feel the March winds blow, let us remember that there is a God who loved us enough to send the beloved Son into the world so that whosoever believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.

Our physical life has its roots in the dust, and it returns to the dust, but there is also a spiritual element at the heart of our being. The image of God lives in us, and when the wind of the Spirit blows, that part of us resonates like wind chimes in a gentle breeze, calling us to believe, calling us to live, and not perish. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 21, 2021

John 12:20-33

Jesus, the Lover

Sometimes we rush to Easter. You might think that's the case with this week's text, which the author of John has located after Palm Sunday, which isn't until next week. But John's chronology differs significantly from the other gospels, and the timing isn't as important as the lesson.

The kernel of this week's text provides appropriate food for thought as we near the end of the Lenten season, which is designed to put us in a reflective frame of mind. The subject is life, death, and life beyond: something we would do well to chew on.

Encouraging signs (vv. 20-22)

Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, ceremonially riding on a young donkey, stirred all sorts of excitement. His journey began in Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus had honored him with a dinner the night before. The author makes a point of saying that a great crowd gathered, not only to see Jesus, but also to see Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead not long before (vv. 9-11).

Those people and others contributed to the commotion surrounding Jesus' entry to the city (vv. 12-15). Among the people gathered, the author

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 20:24)

notes that a group of Greek speakers who worshipped the God of Israel had also come for the Passover, and they asked for a meeting with Jesus.

The interested group communicated through Philip, whose name is Greek and who came from the Hellenistic city of Bethsaida. Philip took the message to Andrew, who had a reputation for introducing people to the teacher, and together they approached Jesus with what they saw as exciting news for the Jesus movement.

Surely, the disciples thought, Jesus would be anxious to build a broader base of support. Opposition to his movement was growing rapidly among the Jewish leaders, and there were dark rumors that they intended to do him harm. Support from the Gentile population might offer some measure of protection.

Philip and Andrew would certainly have been smiling when they approached Jesus to arrange the meeting.

Surprising words (vv. 23-26)

Like the disciples, we would have expected Jesus to respond with pleasure. But did the Lord say "Well done, good and faithful servants?" Did he say "Great! I'm looking forward to meeting them"?

He did not.

According to John, Jesus responded in a curious way: "The hour has come

for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (vv. 23-24).

What? Jesus went on to declare that those who loved their lives would lose them, while the one who "hated" his or her life in this world would "keep it for eternal life" (v. 25). Serving Jesus — whether for Jews or Greeks — would mean following Jesus wherever he led (v. 26). At the time, only Jesus knew where that would be.

We can imagine the disciples' puzzled response. "What's up with that? We talk about growth, and he talks about death. We talk about reaching out, and he talks about turning away. We talk about live prospects, and he talks about dead wheat!"

Jesus' cryptic response may seem strange to us, too. Can we understand this interchange any better than his disciples'?

The surface meaning of what Jesus said is fairly obvious. To have more wheat for tomorrow, we have to sacrifice some of what we have today. This was a familiar reality in an early agrarian society where people couldn't go down to the farm supply store to purchase a supply of the latest hybrid seed for their planting needs.

When harvesting each year, smart farmers would keep back part of their crop to use as seed for the next planting. If possible, they would also hold back a reserve supply in case that crop failed, or the next one.

Every planting was a risk. Birds might eat some of the scattered grains. Rain might fall — or fail. The wheat might produce a bumper crop — but

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the planter had to give up the seed before he knew how it would turn out.


Agrarian economics was a familiar equation. The disciples understood that, but what did it have to do with meeting potential Greek converts? Why not show a little optimism about the interest these people had shown?

Evidently, Jesus knew that his disciples were still thinking short term. They called him “Lord.” They believed he was the Messiah. But they still apparently expected him to set up an earthly rule, to conquer Rome, and to usher in a kingdom on earth.

For the disciples, the addition of fresh followers with Greek influence would be a sign of progress.

For Jesus, it was a temptation. He had the power. He had the charisma. He could have ruled the world and saved his own skin in the process. But that was not what we needed most, and Jesus knew it.

Troubled spirits (vv. 27-33)

The disciples weren’t the only ones feeling uneasy, for Jesus admitted that his own soul was troubled (v. 27).  He knew what lay ahead: he would have to face the hard and painful realities of a cruel death, or he would have to bail out. When he prayed “Father, glorify your name” (v. 28), it was as if he were asking for the needed strength to stay the path. John says that God answered with vocal assurance that the people heard as thunder. Jesus said the message was for their benefit, not his (vv. 28-30).

Jesus knew he had come to save *all* people from eternal death, not just to save *some* people from Roman domination. Jesus’ work would drive out “the ruler of this world,” and he would be “lifted up from earth” to “draw all people” to himself (vv. 29-33). To accomplish that goal, Jesus had to look down the long road,


knowing that death lay ahead but was not the end.

Somehow, in God’s wisdom, for the church to be birthed, for the kingdom of God to sprout and take root on the earth, Jesus had to die. In that light, v. 24 begins to make more sense: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”


As Jesus faced the last week of his earthly life, recruiting potential Gentile followers was less important than committing himself to the road ahead.

As he did so, Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that the story would not end with his death. For his mission to be accomplished, for the church to grow, for the world to be reached, Jesus’ disciples would have to follow him down the same path. That’s why he had told them “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (v. 25).

Here we come to the core of the gospel and the central reason we observe the Lenten season: we must learn to die if we want to truly live. And John is not alone in telling us this. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus saying “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24). Paul reflected that reality when he said “I die every day” (1 Cor. 15:31a).


We must die to our old way of living if we are to find a new way of living. We give up our old way of dying in order to discover a new way of dying — and living again. 

We can lose ourselves in ourselves and be lost to the world — or we can allow ourselves to be constantly shaped by Christ through the realities of life, and in doing so become new and stronger and somehow more holy

because of our experience. 


Jesus called on those who would follow him to throw themselves into the cosmic ground like wheat and die to their old life, believing that a new and more productive life would follow. The servant follows the pattern of sacrifice that has been set by the master: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also” (v. 26a).

Our word “sacrifice” comes from a Latin root that means something like “to make sacred by setting apart.” Sacrifice is not a dollar here and a volunteered hour there. To sacrifice is to give up anything that rivals our relationship with Jesus, and not just during Lent.

In Jesus, God comes after us in holy pursuit, calling us to follow, calling us to walk in his footsteps, calling us to be where he is. 

And where is Jesus? Some popular writers suggest that we must “find out where God is working” (defined largely as where evangelism is bearing fruit and church planting is easy) and to focus our efforts there, but the Bible does not teach that God’s work is limited to those places where ministry yields quick results.

Rather, if we listen to what Jesus has to say in scriptures such as Matthew 25, we come to understand that Jesus is especially present in the places where children are hurting, where parents are searching, where people are losing themselves to the broad way of destruction.

Jesus is present in the lowest depths of human misery, and in the highest reaches of eternal glory. Today he calls us to take with us our scars and go with him into the pain of a hurting world. One day he will call us to come with him into the joy of eternal life, remembering his promise: “My Father will honor the one who serves me” (v. 26b).  NFI

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 28, 2021

Mark 15:1-47

Jesus, the Sufferer

It's Palm Sunday, and we long for the palms. We relish the thought of Jesus riding into Jerusalem surrounded by cheering throngs waving branches like pennants. We enjoy watching children or the choir march into the sanctuary while waving branches of greenery as we sing praises to the King.

But, for many of us, not this year.

Disease is in the air, we know not where, and we're still taking care not to gather in large numbers within enclosed spaces.

It's as good a year as any to choose the alternate text for Palm Sunday, the lengthy and painful account of Jesus' crucifixion.

We often look more closely at that story through Holy Week services, especially in larger or more liturgical churches, but those may not be practical this year, either.

Vaccines are becoming available, making their way through the population, clawing back our freedom of movement and closeness, but not yet.

Not fully yet.

As we endure enforced separation while looking toward the return of a more "normal" life, so we look forward to Christ's resurrection — but we have to endure the darkness first.

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34)

An early morning trial (vv. 1-20)

Our text begins in the early morning hours after a brutal night that began with Jesus being taken from Gethsemane by armed temple guards, then hustled through a sham trial before a hastily called gathering of religious officials known as the Sanhedrin, which the NRSV translates as "the council" (14:55). ⚓

Through a long night of questioning and conflicting testimony that concluded with Jesus affirming his role as "the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One" (14:61), the council found him guilty of heresy.

As morning broke, the council bound Jesus as a prisoner and turned him over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor (v. 1). Pilate usually governed from his palatial residence in Caesarea Maritima, but he came to Jerusalem to oversee civil order during the major festivals.

Pilate probably cared little about whether Jesus was guilty of religious heresy, but he would have been very concerned about any type of insurrection, so the council charged that Jesus was guilty of sedition by claiming to be king of the Jews. Pilate questioned Jesus on the matter, but Jesus remained silent (vv. 2-5).

We know the familiar story of how Pilate appeared to try circumventing the council's demand by going to the

people. He had a practice of releasing one prisoner each year as a sign of good will, and would have been aware of Jesus' popularity, so perhaps he expected the larger population to call for Jesus to be freed (vv. 6-10).

The crowd, however, had turned against Jesus following his arrest. Like people egged on by leaders at a highly charged political rally, they called for Jesus' execution and began to chant "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Pilate appeared to be hesitant but relented. He ordered Jesus to be whipped and turned over to the execution squad (vv. 11-15). Soldiers took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, possibly in the Antonia fortress, ⚓ where they robed him in royal purple and mocked him as a pretend king (vv. 16-20). ⚓

A day-long execution (vv. 21-39)

The gospel of John says that Jesus was forced to carry his own cross to the place of execution, which Mark calls Golgotha, "the place of the skull (John 19:16-17)." ⚓ All three synoptic gospels, however, imply that a man named Simon of Cyrene, who happened to be passing through, was drafted into carrying the cross from the beginning, "as they went out" (Matt. 27:32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26). ⚓ An early church tradition assumes that Jesus carried the cross until he fell beneath its weight, then Simon took over.

We should note that Simon was an African, from near modern Tunisia. Mark identifies him as the father of Alexander and Rufus, who must have been known to the early church — leading us to wonder if the experience led to his conversion.

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We often fail to appreciate that Jesus' crucifixion lasted an entire day. We expect executions to be brief. Aside from the basic cruelty of capital punishment, we consider it excessively brutal if the victim lingers in the electric chair or after a lethal injection.

Jesus was nailed to the cross at nine in the morning, according to Mark (v. 25), and hung there in excruciating pain for more than six hours before he died sometime after three in the afternoon (v. 34). 📖

Crucifixion was a barbarous instrument of terror to reinforce governmental authority. The offer of drugged wine, which Jesus refused, would have brought little comfort.

We need not dwell on the specifics of the story. Accounts of the soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothing (v. 24), the "King of the Jews" sign above his head (v. 26), and the convicted bandits crucified beside him (v. 27) are familiar. 📖

Mark emphasizes how his accusers, perhaps in an effort to exonerate themselves, derided Jesus as a fraud who had claimed to save others but could not save himself (vv. 29-33).

Jesus refused to rise to their bait, but at noon darkness descended upon the city, according to v. 33, lasting for three hours. We may imagine the preternatural gloom would have spooked and silenced the boldest of them, so that Jesus' tortured voice would have rung clear when he cried in the words of Ps. 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 34).

An attempt to revive him with sour wine failed, and Jesus expired (vv. 35-37).

As if the unearthly darkness had not been sign enough of God's presence, Mark says that the curtain before the Holy of Holies was torn from the top to the bottom (v. 38), and a centurion stationed at the cross realized they had

made a mistake: "Truly this man was God's Son!" (v. 39).

A twilight entombment (vv. 40-47)

The beautifully terrible story winds down with an account of several women who had remained to the last, looking on from a distance (vv. 40-41). The same faithful women stayed around until they saw Jesus wrapped in linen and placed in a nearby tomb (v. 47). They would return to honor Jesus' body with spices on Sunday morning, but find him no longer there (16:1-2). 📖

The appearance of Joseph of Arimathea, who possessed sufficient prominence and confidence to boldly ask Pilate for Jesus' body, comes as a surprise (vv. 42-46). Joseph was a respected member of the same council that had condemned Jesus, but in the minority. Matthew notes that he was wealthy (Matt. 27:57), and Luke adds that he was "a good and righteous man" who "had not agreed to their plan and action" (Luke 23:50-51).

Mark says that Joseph "was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God," and the Fourth Gospel pointedly says that he "was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews" (John 19:38). John adds that Nicodemus, whom we know from John 3, also assisted, bringing a hundred pounds of burial spices when Jesus was placed in the tomb.

A ponderous question

Can you imagine what it must have been like for those early disciples? For those women and men who had left everything else to follow Jesus? How they must have felt when they saw the one they loved whipped and humiliated and tortured in a slow and dehumanizing execution?

Those first followers' struggles to

understand, along with efforts of those who came after them, is what led the gospel authors to put in written form their attempt to grasp the meaning of Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

Will we ever truly understand? People of equal devotion have studied the same scriptures for many years, and yet interpret Christ's act of atonement in very different ways. [See "The Hardest Question" online for more on this.]

Whatever the true understanding might be, this is evident: *Jesus died that we might live*. "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

It is a hard and ugly thing to think about the crucifixion. The brutality of the cross not only reminds us of how cruel humans can be, but also that we are one of them. It reminds us that, because of our own sin, we share in the responsibility for Christ's death.

But, by the same token, we also share in the gift of Christ's death. In some way beyond our comprehension, Jesus' death on the cross facilitated our forgiveness and opened wide the door of life for those who can and will accept it.

The cross is terrible in what it asked of Jesus, and incredible in what it offers to us: present hope, lasting forgiveness, eternal life. Jesus has blazed a pathway into eternity and he beckons us to follow, but we do so knowing that the road he traveled included a cross.

Jesus' death does not just show us how to live eternally; it shows us how to live presently. Jesus calls us to live out the same kind of unselfish, self-sacrificial love that he showed to us, the same love that led him to the cross.

The triumph and tragedy of Holy Week is a challenge to follow Jesus — not only down the palm-strewn road into Jerusalem, but also up the blood-stained path leading out. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

April 4, 2021

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Jesus, the Victor

It's Resurrection Sunday, and who doesn't like the thought of resurrection? For more than a year now, a raging pandemic has left us feeling a bit entombed. We've been encouraged to stay at home, to limit gatherings, to wear masks. It has been necessary, though not easy.

Those who have been unable or unwilling to bear the wait flaunt medical advice by gathering in close crowds for parties or rallies or church services without masks, often leading to more sickness, more death.

But there is hope: vaccines are making a difference and will continue to do so. A time will come when we are fully freed from our masks, and that day may feel a bit like resurrection.

Perhaps our yearning for personal liberation can help us to appreciate a much more significant event of resurrection, the one that opened the door to Christian faith and life that extends beyond our time on earth.

The Apostle Paul understood that when it comes to our hope and faith in Christ, everything hangs on the resurrection.

The gospel truth (vv. 1-2)

Our text comes near the end of a letter Paul wrote to believers in Corinth. ↓

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For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures ... (1 Cor. 15:3)

It was not his first letter to that church, but was regarded early on as the most important one. ↓

The letter is an appeal for unity and a response to several thorny issues that had been raised by members of the church. These included questions about sex (5:1-3, 6:12-20, 7:1-29), questions about lawsuits (6:1-11), questions about relationships and dining practices within the community (8:1 – 11:1), questions about worship and the Lord's Supper (11:2-34), and questions about spiritual gifts, including tongues (12:1 – 14:40).

In chapter 15, Paul turned to questions about resurrection in general and Christ's resurrection in particular. We may find it strange that early believers would question the resurrection. The gospels had not yet been written, however, or accepted as authoritative scripture. The emerging church depended on oral traditions passed on by witnesses of the events and repeated in various forms across decades.

Although early witnesses made the resurrection a central teaching of the gospel, others questioned it. The uncertainty in Corinth may have grown from Jewish believers in the congregation, or from the teaching of competing religions.

Jewish belief in a resurrection had begun to develop in the second century BCE. ↓ Many Jews had come to expect a day of resurrection at the

end of the age, though others remained skeptical. Among those who did expect a resurrection, some thought all would be raised, while others believed only the righteous would rise again. Some anticipated a bodily resurrection, while others imagined a more spiritual return from the dead.

An emerging belief system that became known as Gnosticism (from the word *gnosis*, "knowledge") brought questions from a different perspective. While there were different strains of Gnosticism, all put a heavy emphasis on the belief that one must gain secret knowledge in order to ascend to a spiritually higher plane of life. Gnostics considered one's physical existence to be relatively unimportant, flawed, and relegated to the lower world. In their view, only the spirit mattered: the notion of a physical resurrection was unnecessary.

As such beliefs infiltrated the early church, some claimed there was a distinction between the human Jesus and a spiritual Christ, whom they believed had rested upon Jesus prior to the crucifixion. Christ had the needed knowledge to ascend to the highest of spiritual levels, they argued, while the human Jesus, once crucified, remained dead.

Living amid this hodgepodge of competing claims, it's little wonder that some believers began to question whether Jesus was really raised from the dead, and whether they could also look forward to life beyond the grave.

Paul could not let such questions go unchallenged, for they denied a foundational truth of the gospel. So, Paul writes to remind the Corinthians "of the good news that I proclaimed

to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand” (v. 1).

Salvation comes only by means of this gospel, Paul insists, “through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you – unless you have come to believe in vain” (v. 2).

Notice that Paul uses the present tense to describe salvation as an ongoing process: “through which also you are being saved.” Baptists have tended to compartmentalize salvation as a one-time event of “getting saved,” with the unfortunate result that many believers assume they are set for eternity, with no further participation required.

Paul would have none of this. He notes two conditions: that believers “hold firmly to the message,” and that they have not “come to believe in vain.” For Paul, true believers continue to express and practice their belief. Failure to hold firmly to one’s faith suggests that there is no real faith to begin with.

The statement about believing in vain could be interpreted in two ways. First, Paul could be speaking rhetorically, with tongue in cheek: “unless all of our belief is in vain” – in which case no one would be saved. Secondly, the expression “believe in vain” could suggest that some who had gone through the motions of belief fell short of developing an effective faith.

The foundation of faith (vv. 3-7)

To counteract troubling questions about the resurrection, Paul underscored what he considered to be the heart of the gospel, the message he had received from the earliest witnesses and had passed on to the Corinthians as of first importance:

“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. He was

buried, He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (vv. 3-5).

This brief recitation bears the marks of an early confession of faith that was repeated in the churches. Verbs carry the freight in these brief statements: Christ *died*, and *was buried*. Both verbs are in the aorist tense, indicating completed action.

But death was not the end. Jesus *was raised* from the dead and *appeared* to Cephas (the Aramaic form of “Peter”) and the twelve (disciples). The verb form of “was raised” is in the perfect tense, which in Greek indicates something that happened in the past but continues to be true and have significance for the present. Jesus rose from the dead and remains alive. 📌

The verb is passive in voice, showing that Christ did not raise himself, but was raised by the power of the Father (cf. Acts 2:23-24, 3:15, 4:10, 5:30).

The Old Testament canon had not been codified in Paul’s day, and the word translated as “scriptures” literally means “writings.” Still, many Jews considered most of the books we now call “scripture” to be authoritative. Paul does not name particular texts he believes Jesus fulfilled, but Deut. 21:23, Isa. 25:8 and 53:5-12, Ps. 16:10, and Hos. 6:2 are good candidates.

The original confession may have ended at v. 5, but Paul strengthens his case by adding that Jesus later appeared to more than 500 people at one time, and to “all the apostles” (vv. 6-7).

The voice of experience (vv. 8-11)

To these testimonies Paul adds his own life-changing encounter on the Damascus Road. As recorded in Acts 9, Paul had been a zealous Jewish rabbi named Saul who was rabidly seeking to under-

mine the church when Christ appeared in a blinding light, manifesting himself to Paul “as one untimely born.” 📌

Paul believed Christ had literally appeared to him, so he had no qualms about calling himself an apostle who had seen Jesus and been called as his messenger. Paul’s purpose in writing was not to glorify himself, but to testify that the resurrected Christ was still alive and able to reveal himself. Thus, the change in Paul’s own life was further evidence of the resurrection: “by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain” (v. 10a).

God’s grace – manifested through the risen Christ – had brought Paul to salvation and given him strength to “work harder than any” (v. 10b). Thus, Paul insisted that his own life and work, no less than that of the original apostles, constituted convincing testimony of the resurrection of Christ and the validity of the gospel.

Paul believed that Christ’s resurrection was “of first importance” for believers. His own life demonstrated that the doctrine of resurrection involves more than the hope of a future transformation: it also transforms the present experience of Christians who are “raised anew” to a new and abundant life (see Rom. 6:1-14).

Consider spending some time meditating on Paul’s statement: “By the grace of God I am what I am.” Have you become what God wants you to be? Do others see evidence of the resurrection in you?

Paul testified that Christ’s grace, extended toward him, “was not in vain,” because Paul accepted God’s grace and allowed it to transform his life.

The same option lies before us: Will the grace of God through the work of Christ do its transformational work in us, or will it be in vain? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 11, 2021

1 John 1:1–2:2

To Follow Jesus, Walk in the Light

Daylight and darkness: which do you prefer? Darkness has its advantages: it helps us sleep, for one thing, and a stroll in the late evening can be delightful. For the few folk who still go coon hunting or frog-gigging, the darkness of night is essential – but so is a good flashlight.

If we had to pick, most of us would prefer more light and less darkness. Winter months can be hard, not only because of the cold, but also the shorter hours of daylight. It takes an effort to get enough sunlight to avoid “Seasonal Affective Disorder.”

People who are blind learn to live without light, but for humankind as a whole, light is essential. Whether walking or driving, hiking or biking, we like to see where we’re going. Today’s text speaks to the subject of light, but in a more spiritual sense. The author of 1 John calls us to walk in the light of God. ↓

Knowledge and joy (1:1-4)

The small book we call 1 John begins with themes also common to the Gospel of John’s opening prologue (1:1-18). ↓ Both speak of Jesus as the eternal Word of life who came to

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

earth in Jesus, the Word made flesh. Both point to Jesus as the Son of God, through whose grace we find redemption and life. ↓

Both 1 John and the Fourth Gospel were probably written late in the first century. Early tradition attributed the book to John the son of Zebedee, but many scholars believe the author was an anonymous member of the “Johannine community,” a group of disciples who followed John’s teaching.

The writing reflects a time when some believers, apparently influenced by an early form of Gnosticism, wanted to separate the human Jesus from the heavenly Christ. They believed a spiritual “Christ” had simply dwelt for a while in the human man Jesus. ↓

To combat this distorted belief, the author of 1 John emphasized the testimony of those who had known Jesus personally, and wrote as if he had been among them. Such testimonials were a common way of writing in the first century.

The writer wanted to leave no doubt that the Word of life was made physically manifest in Jesus, that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and that the Word was present “from the beginning” (compare John 1:1). ↓

As mentioned above, the author claimed to declare eyewitness testimony. He speaks of “what we have heard,” “what we have seen with our eyes,” “what we have looked at and touched with our hands” (1:1). “That

life was revealed, and we have seen it,” he insisted: “the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us” (1:2).

Having affirmed the testimony of witnesses, the author proceeded to denote two purposes in writing. The first is “so that you may have fellowship along with us” (1:3).

The word translated as “fellowship” is the familiar Greek word *koinonia*. The fellowship John had in mind was not a church dinner or social occasion. *Koinonia* comes from a root that means “common,” and in the New Testament it describes the common bonds that Christians share as fellow children of God, saved by the same grace from the same sin to the same end of abundant and eternal life. In many cases, early believers shared not only a common faith, but also a common purse to be used for the common good.

The author’s second purpose in writing was “so that our joy may be complete” (1:4). ↓

Here he included his readers in the word “our.” If he enjoyed *koinonia* fellowship with them, if they were partners in faith and devotion to Christ, then they were family. It was not just his own joy that concerned the writer, but the joy of all God’s children.

Light and forgiveness (1:5–2:2)

Having warmed to his subject, the writer raised a concern that darkness threatened the church and its fellowship with God.

We recall again the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, which describes the Word as both life and light: “in

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him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). John the baptizer was depicted as one who came to bear witness to “the true light, who gives light to everyone” (John 1:9).

The metaphor of light versus darkness is common in the Fourth Gospel (see also John 3:19-21; 8:12; 11:9-10; 12:35-36, 46), so we are not surprised when the author of 1 John, who probably drew on the same traditions, turns to the same metaphor: “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1:5). One who claims to have fellowship with Christ while “walking in darkness” is a liar, he said, while those who “walk in the light as he himself is in the light” find forgiveness and fellowship with one another (1:6-7).

“Light” was also a favorite term among mystics who claimed to have special “enlightenment” that others did not have. Their concept of light was abstract and unrelated to daily life, but for John, the concept of God as light is central to our ethical and moral behavior. Those who know the light of God understand the importance of living as people of the light.

The author describes this as “walking,” an accessible metaphor for how we conduct our lives. Those who walk in the light of God have fellowship with God. In contrast, those who claim to have fellowship with God “but walk in darkness” are lying and “not practicing the truth.”

In other words, John called on his readers to recognize the goodness of God and the moral imperative of living as Jesus taught us to live. That means being honest with ourselves and honest with God and honest with each other.

Walking in the light of Christ leads to forgiveness: together we believe that “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses

us from all sin” (1:7). The word for “cleanses” is in the present tense in Greek, which denotes continuous action. The constant grace and continuing forgiveness offered by Christ is good news, for even those who seek to walk in the light continue to struggle with sin.

Some who claim to know the light are “deceived,” John said: they actually walk in darkness (1:8). This may be directed toward those who had bought into the dualistic notion that flesh is inherently evil and the spirit is inherently good. Some believers were apparently influenced by philosophies that thought of God as an impassive heavenly spirit, not connected with life on earth or with anything physical, including sin. Some taught that the human body was not only evil but also inconsequential. If the body didn’t matter, they could rationalize all manner of gluttonous or immoral behavior.

John saw their argument for the lie that it was. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” He understood what Jesus and the prophets before him taught, that God cares deeply about what we do and how we treat each other. A good God calls for good people.

Those who seek God’s favor and confess their sin find forgiveness, while those who claim to have no sin make God out to be a liar (1:9-10), John said. Through Christ, God confronted our inability to live without sin, making redemption possible. Those who claim that their actions are without consequence live in open defiance of God’s teaching and devalue the death of Christ as unnecessary.

John does not want his readers to believe this aberrant teaching, but he knows they might be tempted. Old Testament stories about God and Israel pointed to one failure after another as

God’s people traded the redemptive call of God’s covenant for the siren song of idolatry. As the eighth-century Israelites forsook social justice and appropriate worship for selfish greed and temple prostitution, so the early church was threatened with those who would forsake the fellowship of those who walk in the light for the misguided ways of darkness.

John wants his readers to recognize the falsehoods inherent in the false teaching they were hearing and to confess their sins, trusting that the one who “who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9).

Thus, John specifies another motive for writing: “so that you may not sin” (2:1a). He wants to counteract the lies of those who would discount the seriousness of wrongdoing, while assuring the believers that “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:1b-2).

In opposition to those who would discount Jesus’ death, arguing that salvation comes through a separate Christ who acts as a spiritual guide, John reminds his readers that Jesus serves not only as our advocate but also as the one who reconciles us to God.

He notes, too, that Christ’s compassionate work is sufficient “for the sins of the whole world.”

In some way beyond our full comprehension, Jesus himself has acted to effect full forgiveness for those who seek it.

We, no less than John’s original readers, face competing ideas about faith and life. We can spurn God’s offer of grace and go over to the dark side, or we can seek forgiveness and walk in the light. Which will it be? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 18, 2021

1 John 3:1-7

To Follow Jesus, Do What Is Right

My wife Susan is a nurse by vocation, but also a painter. During the past year she spent several months focusing on portraits of children. Each painting brought its own challenges and its own joys, but all of them turned out beautifully. Parents and grandparents will long cherish the paintings as reminders of little ones characterized by innocence and joy in a world that is still fresh and exciting to explore.

For family, teachers, or anyone who has regular contact with them, children can bring overwhelming pride – or devastating grief. Many of us have children, and all of us have been children: it’s not hard to think of ways we have brought delight or distress to our parents, or ways in which our own children or grandchildren might have blessed or bothered us.

The author of 1 John spoke forcefully of Christian believers as the children of God. As such, he believed, they should behave like God’s children, and be confident of God’s abiding care. 📖

The children of God (vv. 1-3)

The writer evokes a sense of excitement in v. 1. The NIV11, HCSB, and NET

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. (1 John 3:1a)

conclude the sentence with an exclamation point, though the NAS20 and the NRSV are more reserved: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.” 📖

The image of believers as God’s children carries forward a theme from the previous chapter: “If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him” (2:29).

How could anyone be privileged to call themselves children of God? It is because of God’s great love for us, according to John. We could not earn our way into God’s heart with even our cutest behavior, but God, who is righteous, loved us when we were neither adorable or particularly endearing. “We love,” John said, “because he first loved us” (4:19).

The writer describes God’s love with the word *agápē*, a term that was rarely used outside of Christian contexts. Early believers used it to describe the kind of selfless love that God has shown to us and expects from us.

With the added phrase “And we are,” John insists that we are not just called God’s children: we *are* God’s children, adopted by one who is faithful and true and loving, who will neither forget us nor fail us. The verse is reminiscent of the Fourth Gospel: “But to all who did receive Him, He gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in His name ...” (John 1:12).

Many early Christians faced public antagonism. Life could be hard, and some might have wondered how God’s children could be treated so poorly. The reason, John says, is that the world does not know or appreciate believers because it doesn’t know God. Thus, it can hardly be expected to show kindness to God’s children.

While American believers are more likely to be ignored than attacked, the unpleasant truth is that believers in many places are still persecuted and prosecuted, arrested or shunned because of their faith. This does not happen because they have done wrong, but because their oppressors have rejected God – or have adopted a far different image of God – and thus reject the believer’s life as a child of God.

We don’t have to face hostility in order to know life may be difficult, as the past year has attested. Heartache and tragedy can come even within a supportive community, even to God’s children. Whatever our current state, John insists that a glorious future lies ahead, a day when heaven’s mysteries will be revealed and we will become more like God.

While we hope for what is yet to come, we live in the present, and our position is already secure. John says: “Beloved, we are God’s children now” (v. 2). In the light of that hope, we strive to “purify” ourselves, that is, to become more like the people God has called us to be (v. 3). 📖

John urges all believers to that same end, to look toward the day when we meet our ultimate parent, and hoping that when we meet, there will be a family resemblance.

Additional information at
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The issue of sin (vv. 4-6)

The imagery of childhood implies a need for growth. For us to mature and become more like our ultimate parent, believers must take seriously the issue of sin. John doesn't mince words on that account.

We might be alarmed by vv. 4-10: a surface reading might suggest that true believers never sin. We know that we sin. Does that mean our belief is not sufficient? It can be helpful, as we read these verses, to understand something about verbal tenses in New Testament Greek.

The *present* tense typically indicates ongoing or continuous action. The *aorist* tense generally suggests point action, usually in the past but sometimes in the present. The *perfect* tense describes something that happened in the past but continues to be true in the present.

In vv. 4-6, John addresses the subject of sin: "Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness," he says, but "No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him."

This statement seems strange, for John has previously argued that anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar (1:8, 10), but those who confess their sins can trust Christ to forgive (1:9), restoring the relationship.

There is some comfort in noting that the verb underlying "who commits sin" in v. 4 is a present participle, and the verb translated twice as "sins" in v. 6 is also in the present tense. This suggests the sense of continually practicing or living in sin, as opposed to one who strives to do right but occasionally stumbles.

The Greek word used for "sin" is *hamartia*. Like its Hebrew counterpart, it reflects the idea of falling short of the mark, failing to live up to God's

standards, violating the ethical and moral ideals expected from a child of God.

Sin creates a barrier between humans and God, precluding fellowship. But, John reminds us, Christ "was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin" (v. 5). As we abide in Christ and strive to follow Jesus' teaching, we are less in thrall to sin and more open to fellowship with God. 📖

If Christ has forgiven our sin, we are free from its bondage. That does not mean we become perfect and never fall short – we all know better. Still, those who "abide in him" seek to become more like him. That truth may seem self-evident, but John needed to address it because some who had left the church (2:18-19) were teaching precisely the opposite. They claimed that God was neither concerned with sin nor connected with the human side of Jesus.

Children of the devil (vv. 7-10)

The writer shows little patience with those who hold flippant attitudes toward sin. He considered them to be "children of evil, which has existed from the beginning."

Thus, John paints the conflict as deeper than a disagreement between orthodox teaching and misguided notions arising within the church. He imagines a conflict between the power of evil and the Son of God, who "was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (v. 8). In this verse, "practicing sin" and "sinning from the beginning" are also in the present tense.

The word translated as "devil" is *diabolos* (from which we get the word "diabolical"), a term that means "slanderer" or "accuser." The Old Testament counterpart, though different in some ways and not considered evil, was called *ha-sâtan*, which means

"the accuser." John hopes that, as the adversary was unsuccessful in tempting Christ to abort his mission (Mark 1:12-13, Matt. 4:1-10, Luke 4:1-13), so God's children would resist temptation and choose to live in righteousness rather than sin. 📖

The language in v. 9 is surprisingly graphic: it describes Christians as being born of God because God's "seed" (*sperma*) abides in them. As human parents pass on genetic materials to their children, something of God's nature is implanted in believers. Thus, John says, "they cannot sin (present infinitive), because they have been born of God." John uses the perfect tense for "have been born," indicating a past action that continues to have force in the present. Past forgiveness inspires present obedience.

This is how John says one can identify a child of God and a child of evil: one's daily walk – whether characterized by sin or by an effort to overcome sin – betrays one's parentage.

Few movies portray the contrast between good and evil better than the *Star Wars* series, in which young Luke Skywalker battles the powerful and malevolent Darth Vader – a good man gone bad who happens to be Luke's biological father. Darth Vader implores Luke to "come to the dark side" as he has done. Luke remains true and love ultimately wins over Vader, who experiences a redemption of sorts as he dies while defending Luke from the emperor's efforts to torture him into submission.

When watching *Star Wars*, it's not hard to tell who is on the good side and who is on the dark side. When observing those who claim to know God, John tells us, it should not be hard to distinguish between the children of God and the children of evil.

What does our living say about which side we're on? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 25, 2021

1 John 3:16-24

To Follow Jesus, Love One Another

Don't you just love love? We sing about love, talk about love, and maybe even fantasize about love. 🇺 Those of us who are fortunate experience love on a regular basis: we know love as something deep that is not always as exciting as infatuation, but lasting and sure.

Popular notions of love, whether in music or movies, are often far from the real thing. 🇺 And, we often use the word in shallow ways. Can we really love ice cream or pecan pie, even when served together, or should the word be reserved for people?

In today's text, John points to Jesus as the prime example of what love really means, and challenges believers to follow the Lord's example.

True love (vv. 16-17)

In 1 John, the theme of love first surfaces in 3:11, where the author reminds readers of "the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." He then cites the story of Cain murdering his brother as an example of what happens when hate reigns (v. 12). The world might hate believers, but those who follow Jesus should respond with love,

*How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?
(1 John 3:17)*

knowing that they have eternal life. Those who do not love, John says, abide in death (vv. 13-15). 🇺

But love can be risky, painful, or even fatal. With reference to Jesus, John says "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (v. 16).

The kind of love John describes is serious business. It is not a mushy or sentimental affair with someone who makes us feel warm and good. It is a commitment to others that is willing to go not only the second mile, but also the last mile. Christians in America are rarely faced with situations in which they are called to risk their lives for the sake of others, but we are to learn from Jesus' example that love means doing whatever it takes to help those who are in need. This is especially true within the family of faith. 🇺

While few are faced with making the ultimate sacrifice, all who follow Christ should be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of others. No biblical text shouts this louder than v. 17: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" Do those words sound convicting?

Earlier, the writer had charged that some who claimed to have fellowship with God really walked in darkness. He urged his readers to demonstrate their faith by walking in the light

(1:6-7). Now, in essence, John is again challenging Christ-followers to "walk the walk" and not just "talk the talk."

Suppose we see someone living in poverty or struggling to bear a heavy load without adequate resources. If we have the ability to help them but do not, can we claim that God's love abides in us?

The sense of "abiding" is central to John's teaching. Believers are called to abide in God, trusting that God's loving Spirit abides in them. Our outward behavior gives evidence of what lies within: the presence of Christ should be manifest in what we do.

We may never be called to give up our lives for another, but the challenge of our needy brothers and sisters is constant. Every day we have the opportunity to help others who are in need – or to ignore them.

The scene John describes indicates that a believer has sufficient goods to live and to share, and becomes acutely aware of another's need, but looks the other way rather than offering assistance. We all have been faced with that situation. 🇺

We know what it is like to feel compassion, and we know how easy it is to look the other way so that we're not plagued by the nagging needs of others. The writer believed that our characteristic response reveals the relative health of our faith. When we consider our daily response to those who are in need, can we say that the love of God resides in us?

The author's challenge doesn't mean we're obligated to tip every panhandler we see: donations to a local homeless shelter could be more effective. But do we do even that?

Additional information at
goodfaithmedia.org



In this passage, John seems to be speaking mainly to and about the Christian community, where believers are most aware of needs in the lives of their brothers and sisters in Christ. As Christ-followers, his readers would have been a small minority in a hostile environment who may have needed one another to ensure survival. In that setting, it was appropriate to focus on needs within the community of faith.

The principle behind it, however, extends beyond the church. The ethic of caring for the poor and the stranger was an important element of Old Testament teaching, and Jesus echoed the importance of ministry to the needy on a regular basis. As the church grew from a persecuted minority to a larger and more popular place in society, church leaders put greater emphasis on caring for others outside of the faith community as well as within.

This remains a challenge for believers. If members of a church care only for their own and neglect the needs of homeless persons in their community, people in poverty because COVID-19 put them out of work, or persons suffering from disease or famine in any part of the world, can they claim that the love of Christ abides in them?

The bottom line (vv. 18-24)

In the following verses, John elaborates further what it means to share Christian love. Talk is easy, but John insists that true love is not found “in word or speech, but in deed and truth” (v. 18). Our actions speak louder than our words, even to us. A quick look at our checkbooks or our calendars reveals how much time and effort we put into loving others as Jesus loved us.

In the next three verses, John turns to a discussion involving the heart, not

as the seat of love, but as the source of a clean conscience for those who love as Jesus did. Modern folk commonly associate love with the heart, and the simple image of a bivalve heart is ubiquitous in Valentine’s Day promotions, sweetheart cards, or surrounding initials carved on trees. The ancients associated feelings with the gut rather than the heart, which they saw as the seat of thinking, decision-making, and the conscience. 📖

When we love “in truth and action,” the author wrote, we “know that we are from the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him” (v. 19). The word translated as “assure” typically means “to persuade” or “to convince.” Thus, NET says we “will convince our conscience in his presence.”

John seems concerned that some readers will be too hard on themselves, and given his strong “either/or” language, that’s not surprising. But the writer’s purpose is not to make believers feel guilty or worry whether they are truly God’s children because of uneasy hearts. Our standing with God does not rest on our personal fears.

God is the judge of that: John reminds his readers that “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (v. 20). There may be times when we are uncertain, and we need to trust in God for the assurance we cannot find in ourselves.

On the other hand, “if our hearts do not condemn us,” we can have confidence in our standing before God (v. 21). Then we can pray with greater boldness, believing that God hears and responds to our prayers: “and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him” (v. 22).

We must be careful not to read this as a promise that confident prayer will persuade God to give us anything we

want. Context is important: this verse must be read in the light of 5:14, where John also speaks of confidence in prayer – so long as we seek God’s will: “And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” 📖

People who love unselfishly as Jesus loves can be confident in prayer because they will not ask for anything that is outside of God’s will: they “obey his commandments and do what pleases him.”

And what are God’s commandments? What does it take to please God? For the writer it is straightforward: “this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us” (v. 23).

Jesus was on record as saying we should love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:28-31). For John, to love God is to invest one’s life in God by believing in the name of Jesus. To believe means more than giving intellectual assent; it is to devote one’s self to God.

The love we have for God through Christ motivates us to love as Jesus loved, which means loving one another. Though John focused on reciprocal love within the faith community, the call to compassion extends to all people.

Our trust in God and love for others is both evidence and assurance that we abide in God and God abides in us through the indwelling of the Spirit (v. 24).

Do we feel confident about our faith in God, sensing the presence of God’s Spirit and a joyous future yet to come? Do our actions of obedience and love match our assurance? If not, some serious reflection might be in order. NFJ

Frank Kendall, faithful Bible teacher, remembered and honored

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Patsy Kendall of Lancaster, Penn., made a generous gift recently to Good Faith Media in memory of her husband, Frank, who died Aug. 14, 2020. Sweethearts since junior high, they were married for 62 years.

“Behind the primary importance of his family came his love of teaching Bible classes in all five of the states in which he lived,” declared an obituary in the *Houston Chronicle*.

In making the gift, Patsy said Frank loved teaching the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge inside this journal with teaching resources online at goodfaithmedia.org.

A native of Tuscaloosa, Frank received his degree in chemical engineering while playing tennis at the University of Alabama. His work with Exxon and its affiliates took the Kendalls to Texas, New Jersey, New York and finally to Greensboro, N.C., for the last 15 years of his career.

The biblical truths he studied and taught were put in action. In the 1960s Frank helped integrate schools and housing in Baytown, Texas. In Summit, N.J., he served on the school board and, in Greensboro, chaired several school bond elections.

Before moving to Pennsylvania two years ago, the Kendalls were members of River Road Church, Baptist in Richmond,



Va. Retired pastor Mike Clingenpeel hailed them as “outstanding members.”

“Frank was a thoughtful and faithful man of faith, and a winsome Sunday School teacher,” said Clingenpeel, who earlier served as editor of the *Virginia Baptist Religious Herald*.

The family that held such a high priority for Frank and Patsy include two daughters and a son, along with seven grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

For information on making a gift in memory or honor of someone, or including Good Faith Media in your estate planning, please email Autumn Lockett at autumn@goodfaithmedia.org or contact us by phone at (615) 627-7763. **NFJ**

Director of the Center for Vocation and Rural Ministry

Barton College seeks a director for the newly created Center for Vocation and Rural Ministry. The director will support ministers in small, rural, and diverse congregations in Eastern North Carolina. This position is funded by a 5-year grant provided by Lilly Endowment and reports directly to the Director of the Center for Religious Studies. The Director will work closely with Barton College students, the chaplain, the Assistant Provost for Integrative Learning, and other staff and faculty.

Applicants should have a master of divinity degree (M. Div.), substantial experience serving in the church environment, and proven ability to relate effectively with ministers to support their well-being. They should have a demonstrated understanding of small, rural, diverse congregations and the ability to develop relationships with local and regional pastors of various denominations.

For full details, including desired education, skills, and experience, please see the complete job listing online at goodfaithmedia.org/classifieds/

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*“In Sabbath, we celebrate goodness. We celebrate God’s provision.
We celebrate our dependence on someone bigger than us.”*

Sabbath can bring clarity and difficulties

BY ELIZABETH FRANKLIN

For many months we have all experienced grief in a new, confusing and prolonged way — and we are likely exhausted. Even while longing for an end to the hard, slogging walk through the valley of the shadow of death, however, we are still here.

Yet the losses pile up. Social injustices, natural disasters and a turbulent election compounded the pandemic tragedy.

Even if we have remained relatively unscathed within our own personal bubbles, the biblical exhortation to “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15) calls us to take on the suffering of others as our own.

So where might we find respite from the seemingly never-ending onslaught of loss? Where do we make room for celebration — as much a spiritual discipline as lament — while being honest about our reality, sensitive to those not ready to celebrate, and true to the path of grief we are still walking?

Sabbath may be the oasis that awaits us in the vast expanse of this desert of grief.

Much more than just a day off or a chunk of unplanned time, Sabbath is a formative reorienting of ourselves to God and to one another. It is an exercise in not only counting our blessings but also allowing ourselves to enjoy them.

We take time to intentionally center and revel in the good gifts we have been given: communion with God, connection with loved ones, the comfort and joy of delicious food, the restorative power of nature, the healing bliss of extra sleep.

When we practice Sabbath, we immerse ourselves in goodness and claim it

as our own.

In conversation with the Barna Group about mental and emotional health in times of crisis, Pete Scazzero suggested that rhythms such as Sabbath help us process grief.

They create limitations that allow for defined space.

“You need time to grieve, you need time to listen to God, you need time to feel, you need time to have fun,” he said.

This idea is reminiscent of Ecclesiastes 3, which reminds us that being human is a complex experience. Sometimes, we must draw boundaries that allow us to see the parts of ourselves that have been clouded by the chaotic swirl of crisis.

In this way, Sabbath offers a glimpse of clarity. It does not draw lines that magically exclude grief from our existence or block tragedy from our view, but reminds us that amid the grief there is also celebration.

Amid the chaos, there is also peace. Amid the exhaustion, there is also rest. Amid the mourning, there is also rejoicing.

However, Sabbath is not just a fancy term for finding simple joys and setting boundaries. In a reflection for the Foundry Community, Michaele Lavigne recognizes Sabbath as the refusal to live according to the myth that we must keep producing because the world — or at least our corner of it — depends on us.

In practicing Sabbath, we acknowledge our limited humanity by stopping, and we remember that there is more than this, more than us. In holy defiance of the gods of busyness and scarcity, we step into the freedom of Christ’s abundance.

The church might take this opportu-

nity to embody what it means to live a life of Sabbath — of meaningful intention focused on communion with God and others, and celebration of good even amid disaster.

Could we rethink our metrics of success and model Sabbath-minded patterns that prioritize delighting in good gifts, honoring boundaries and resisting the empires of habitual busyness and a more-is-better mindset?

Christopher Wilson, in a Chalice Press column, notes “the rhythm of [our] life before the pandemic may not be the rhythm [we] want to return to when the pandemic is over.”

What if the church led the way in a drastic shift toward Sabbath living stretching beyond the pandemic? Would we be more effective in helping others hold grief and celebration together, as Sabbath continually points us to the God who is present in both?

In Sabbath, we celebrate goodness. We celebrate God’s provision. We celebrate our dependence on someone bigger than us.

These celebrations might not take the forms we once would have expected: rousing church services, parties packed to overflowing, carefree festivities in which the only thing on our mind is the joyful occasion at hand.

Even our celebrations have been bitter-sweet, tinged with heaviness. But Sabbath reminds us there is more than grief. There is still goodness and hope.

In Sabbath, we claim the goodness and hope of Christ, and we celebrate. **NFJ**

—Elizabeth Franklin is a student at Truett Seminary and a worship leader in her church. This column, which first appeared at goodfaithmedia.org, is part of a collaboration between Good Faith Media and The Center for Church and Community Impact (C3I) at Baylor University.

Ronald Reagan (1981–1989): Part One

By Bruce Gourley

The words signaled a revolution decades in the making: “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” Heads nodded in agreement.

In the decade of the '50s, many listeners recalled, their government had been overrun with communists. But on this matter they had been wrong, though many still could not admit the truth.

Every bit as horrible, in the minds of many, the federal government since its founding and into the 1950s had not paid proper homage to God. Upon this point they were correct, the constitutional separation of church and state an affront to their sensibilities.

But they, the Christians that they were, in that transformative decade had partially erased that perceived black mark of history by inserting “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance, and adding “In God We Trust” to currency, as well as enshrining the latter words as the nation’s new motto.

MORAL MORASS

Even so, problems remained, the trouble beginning with Black Americans’ demands for equality and the Supreme Court bowing to their wishes in the 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling mandating public school integration. This affront of the federal government forcing racial mingling had stung white southerners — galvanizing righteous opposition, violence and even murder.

This is the 40th article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for Nurturing Faith Journal, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.

Yet the federal government’s intrusion into white lives, families and communities had not ended there. In the early 1960s, liberal justices sitting on the nation’s highest court had also ruled against government-sponsored prayer in public schools, a disgrace in a nation “under God.”

Equally confusing and upsetting, the same court in that decade of horrors had prohibited discrimination against minorities and women, while also mandating equal voting rights for Black Americans.

And who could forget the violence of that decades’ cultural and social revolution unleashed by the federal government? Not white violence against Black Americans, mind you, for such was justified for the preservation of white dominance. It was the Black riots in America’s cities that revealed the hateful and violent nature of disgruntled minorities not content with their subservient place in life.

As if that were not enough, the righteous and godly Vietnam War somehow dissolved into a confusing morass. Who could forget those hateful college students at liberal universities denouncing America’s war against godless communism?

Richard Nixon had tried to make things rights, white conservatives recalled. He stood with them in opposing equal rights and social programs for minorities, and in reigning in the federal government from intruding into their social and cultural dominance. He did the best he could in ending the Vietnam War, a losing cause for which liberals were to blame.

But then there was Watergate. What a shock that had been! For a godly man trying to make government godly ... well, it was unfortunate.

WHITEWASHING

From there matters had grown all the worse in the estimation of conservative white

evangelicals. The only thing Gerald Ford had done right was his pardon of Nixon. And then there was Jimmy Carter.

He was a southerner, for God’s sake! A Southern Baptist from the heart of Dixie in rural southwest Georgia. Yes, he was a devout Sunday School teacher who knew the Bible by heart. Yes, he was “born again,” his personal faith genuine, his witness of God’s salvation through Christ heartfelt.

Yet he read liberal theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr. And rather than limiting salvation to the afterlife, he advocated for social justice policies of racial inclusion and equality, an affront to proper white southerners, even if politically correct.

As if that were not enough, President Carter pledged his allegiance to the First Amendment’s separation of church and state, considered an unfortunate relic of history that white conservatives were trying to whitewash.

In defiance of southern politeness, Carter also had the gall to scold those who preferred the old days of unquestioned white supremacy, the breach of etiquette not sitting well in church pews and state houses of the rural South, or much of the rural North and West, for that matter.

For a short while traditional white evangelicals had held out hope that despite his many faults, born-again Carter might be the one. All he had to do was elevate a few prominent conservative pastors to positions of power in his White House, or at least be receptive to their concerns about racial equality, women’s rights, church-state separation, and liberal federal overreach.

But he refused their overtures, holding white conservative evangelicals at arm’s length. Not only did he avoid them, but the misguided evangelical president in their minds ignored America. He spent too much time pursuing world peace while the home-

Ronald Reagan's boyhood home in Dixon, Illinois



front economy tanked. And when the Iran hostage crisis demanded a firm hand, Carter failed to rise to the occasion.

Maybe Carter was a nice guy, but out of touch. His incompetent presidency became a symbol of the uselessness of a liberal federal government. On the other hand, newly-elected President Ronald Reagan was seen as different.

His 1981 inaugural address — framing the federal government as the problem — was a thrilling moment for white conservatives, southern evangelicals in particular. Here was a president who understood white Americans' problems.

YOUTHFUL FAITH

From his own experiences Reagan understood the soul, if not the personal faith, of conservative white evangelicals. Six decades earlier a little known minister, Pastor Ben Hill Cleaver of the First Christian Church of Dixon, Ill., had made a lasting influence in the life of a youthful Reagan.

Born in 1911, raised in church and baptized at the age of 11, Ronald Wilson Reagan absorbed white Christian values. Like most church youth, theology mattered little to Reagan who quietly absorbed the cultural, social and economic values voiced within the church and in conversations outside those walls.

“At many points the positions taken

by the First Christian Church of Reagan's youth coincided with the words, if not the beliefs of the latter-day Reagan,” wrote biographer Stephen Vaughan in an aptly-titled article, “The Moral Inheritance of a President: Reagan and the Dixon Disciples of Christ.”

Only vaguely religious, the values Reagan internalized from his childhood church reached back to the theocratic colonies and forward to a nation wrestling with its identity.

These centuries-long conservative white Protestant values evidenced in the politically conservative atmosphere of the 1920s included, in the words of Vaughn, “faith in Providence, association of America's mission with God's will, belief in progress, trust in the work ethic and admiration for those who achieved wealth, an uncomfatableness with literature and art that questioned the family or challenged notions of proper sexual behavior, presumption that poverty is an individual problem best left to charity rather than the state, sensitivity to problems involving alcohol and drugs, and reticence to use government to protect civil rights for minorities.”

In the prosperous 1920s, during an era of government-approved unfettered capitalism, many white Protestant churches, Reagan's included, followed the messaging of U.S. presidents Calvin Coolidge and

Herbert Hoover that was shaped by Christian advertising executive Bruce Barton.

Barton's contribution to American government and Christianity took the shape of a highly influential book that transformed a justice-oriented Jesus of the gospels into the world's greatest business executive. *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus* stripped from Jesus his moral teachings and concern for disadvantaged persons, replacing the void with a strong man whom his apostles, aspiring businessmen themselves, feared.

Barton's book represented the gospel of success and wealth Reagan heard from the pulpit of a church within a denomination that held businessmen in high esteem. But the pulpit was not the only influential voice Reagan absorbed.

SHAPING EXPERIENCES

His mother, Nelle Reagan, guided her son's religious upbringing, taking him to Sunday School and worship services.

“One thing I do know — all the hours in the old church in Dixon (which I didn't appreciate at the time) and all of Nelle's faith have come together in a kind of inheritance without which I'd be lost and helpless,” Reagan once confided to his longtime pastor.

Emphasizing the importance of his mother's faith, President Reagan rested his hand upon “Nelle's tattered Bible” during his swearing in ceremony in January 1981.

“I was raised to believe that God has a plan for everyone and that seemingly random twists of fate are all part of his plan,” Reagan later recalled. “From my mother, I learned the value of prayer, how to have dreams and believe I could make them come true.”

And dream of personal success Reagan did, albeit not in ways his mother could have anticipated.

Previewing his future performing career, young Reagan displayed an aptitude for public speaking, taking part in church youth pageants and services and leading youth discussions.

Attending Eureka College in Illinois, he played football, acted in school plays, and graduated with a Bachelors of Arts degree

in economics and sociology. But more than his degree, public speaking remained his passion. After college the future president landed a job as a radio sportscaster for the Chicago Cubs baseball team.

Looking beyond radio broadcasting, Reagan in 1937 at the still-young age of 26, and while in southern California for the Cubs spring training, tried out for an acting career and won a contract in Hollywood.

Success followed with the charismatic Reagan appearing in 53 films over the next two decades and serving as president of the Screen Actors Guild, in the latter capacity experiencing a coming of age.

RED SCARE

A growing Red Scare in post-World War II America signaled a national backlash to the liberal presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It began with opposition to Soviet communism, the Soviets formerly a pivotal ally in defeating Nazism.

No longer tolerable, communism represented an affront to God and traditional morality, values visibly under assault in Hollywood. Searching for domestic liberals they could label “communist,” congressional crusaders trained their ire on the movie industry.

Pressured to exclude suspected communists from employment, Hollywood executives cooperated with the House Un-American Activities Committee. As president of the Screen Actors Guild, Reagan testified before the committee in 1947. Agreeing that radicals should be expunged from Hollywood, Reagan’s acquiescence to McCarthyism reflected the earlier conservative influence of the Rev. Ben Cleaver.

Even so, church teachings of morality had their limits. One year after taking a conservative position on the issue of alleged domestic communism, Reagan ignored his former church’s view of the sacredness of marriage, in 1948 divorcing his first wife, actress Jane Wyman.

At the same time, Reagan’s Hollywood career faded, reflected in his inability to secure major movie roles. He transitioned to television, performing as the host of *General Electric Television Theater* on CBS from 1954-1962. The show featured Reagan, his



Wedding of Ronald and Nancy Reagan, 1952. Matron of honor Brenda Marshall (left) and best man William Holden (right) were the sole guests.

second wife Nancy and daughter Patti as the first “all-electric family.”

The family’s charms alongside their magic “electric servants” (appliances) transformed the B-grade actor into a television star. And while simultaneously living and acting suburban corporatism, Reagan arrived at yet another crossroads in his evolving ideological identity.

CROSSROADS

A liberal Democrat, Reagan’s father John Edward had been an ardent supporter of FDR and a New Deal government administrator. Following in his father’s political steps, into the 1950s Reagan remained a registered Democrat, campaigning and voting for Democratic presidential candidate Harry Truman in 1948.

On the other hand, Reagan as corporatist pitchman found himself drawn to the political convictions of his former pastor, Ben Cleaver. An opponent of the New Deal, in the 1930s Cleaver had warned Reagan that the American government could not spend its way into national prosperity.

Reinforcing this message, Nancy’s similarly conservative views also influenced Reagan, who in the 1950s supported Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Emboldened, in 1960 Reagan used his oratory skills in delivering some 200 speeches in support of failed Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon.

A formal break from his Democratic heritage followed in 1962 when Reagan changed his political affiliation to the Republican Party. Growing ever more conservative, Reagan threw his weight

behind the demagogic and racist Barry Goldwater, serving in 1964 as chairperson of California Republicans for Goldwater.

Charismatic, telegenic and well known through movies and television, Reagan late in the 1964 presidential campaign delivered a televised speech for Goldwater that became known by the title “A Time for Choosing.” With Goldwater’s campaign doomed to failure and at another juncture in his own career, Reagan used the occasion to burnish his personal political yearnings.

STUMPING

Speaking in a conversational style, Reagan staked out his opposition to the lingering liberal ideology of FDR’s New Deal, criticizing high taxes — the richest Americans shouldering a 70 percent federal tax rate — and government debt. He also condemned Democratic President Lyndon Johnson’s administration as elitist.

“This is the issue of this election,” Reagan declared. “Whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capitol can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves.”

Resorting to simplistic if misleading imagery and language that ordinary white Americans could understand, he spoke of a battle between “individual freedom” on one hand, and “the ant heap of totalitarianism” on the other, failing to acknowledge a middle ground.

He criticized Johnson’s Great Society programs as demanding “we accept a greater government activity in the affairs of the people.” The government, Reagan insisted, should not spend money trying to lift up poor, minority Americans.

He tossed out misleading numbers in arguing that government-funded social programs did not help the poor. He dismissed liberalism wholesale, declaring “the trouble with our liberal friends is not that they’re ignorant; it’s just that they know so much that isn’t so.”

Reagan criticized programs like Social Security and Medicare, castigated indecisiveness in the Vietnam War and a lack of will in the fight against communism, condemned as

useless foreign aid to more than 100 nations, proclaimed government bureaucracy as the “nearest thing to eternal life we’ll ever see on this earth,” and promised to root out socialism in government.

Conservative, unfettered capitalism is the remedy, Reagan told America. Unions do not help workers. Farmers do not want government interference, but prefer the forces of a truly free market.

In short, liberalism is a life of “chains and slavery,” Reagan declared, simultaneously dismissing the brutal legacy of Black slavery in American history while applying the same imagery of bondage to taxes and government.

Expanding the slavery analogy, Reagan in closing resorted to emotional rhetorical questions, evoking popular biblical and patriotic themes in calling for his listeners to make a decision.

“[S]hould Moses have told the children of Israel to live in slavery under the pharaohs? Should Christ have refused the cross? Should the patriots at Concord Bridge have thrown down their guns and refused to fire the shot heard ’round the world?”

“The martyrs of history were not fools, and our honored dead who gave their lives to stop the advance of the Nazis didn’t die in vain,” he insisted, failing to note that the American victors represented the triumph of liberal democracy over and against the conservative totalitarianism of Nazism.

“You and I have the courage to say to our enemies, ‘There is a price we will not pay. There is a point beyond which they must not advance,’” Reagan decreed, drawing an ideological line in the political sand.

RENDEZVOUS

From television screens across America, Reagan’s final words that day reverberated loudly: “You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We’ll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we’ll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.”

Reagan’s speech was, in the words of a *Washington Post* article, “the most successful political debut since William Jennings Bryan electrified the 1896 Democratic convention with his ‘Cross of Gold’ speech.”

Having declared his crusade against liberal governance on behalf of white America, Reagan set his sights on political office. A resident of California, in 1966 he ran for the governor of the Golden State on a vague platform of inefficient state government. He also openly opposed civil rights. Although dismissed as a political newcomer with no experience, the charismatic former actor easily won the election.

In office Governor Reagan evidenced a dislike for personal engagement in the day-to-day minutia of governing, delegating deskwork to others. More comfortable as a pitchman than an administrator, he focused on elaborating policy and casting vision.

Nor did Reagan always embrace the conservative agenda of his promises. Under his leadership from 1967-1975 California enacted the largest tax increase in the state’s history. On the other hand, the increased taxes alongside welfare reforms erased the state’s large budget deficit, fulfilling a pledge for fiscal responsibility.

Still aspiring for more, Reagan in 1968 made a cautious run for the presidency, finishing a distant third in the primaries, with his friend Richard Nixon attaining the White House. With more enthusiasm the Californian, having exited as the state’s governor, challenged Gerald Ford in the 1976 election, placing a close second in the Republican primary.

Established as a serious national politician, Reagan in the late 1970s observed as Carter’s presidency suffered from a lagging economy characterized by high interest rates and high unemployment. In addition, Reagan noted Carter’s failures to connect with racist white evangelical Christians.

Angered at Carter’s agenda of human equality but realizing the public backlash that overt racism would engender, conservative evangelicals, meanwhile, horned in on a relatively new social position for most: a hard line stance against abortion, a procedure legalized, with restrictions, in the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*.

Ironically, President Carter met them half way. Like conservative evangelicals, Carter opposed abortion. But unlike conservatives he acknowledged that repealing *Roe v. Wade* would disproportionately harm

poor minority women and families, whereas most white women would have the connections and resources to obtain abortions should they so desire.

Caught in the middle of the abortion debate, Carter refused conservative demands to oppose *Roe v. Wade*, instead signing legislation prohibiting the use of federal funding for abortion. In so doing he pleased neither the right nor the left, alienating conservatives while angering liberals.

RECEPTIVITY

In the states of the old Southern Confederacy and in opposition to a Southern evangelical president, a new religious coalition arose. From Eisenhower through Nixon, conservative white evangelicals, led by Billy Graham, had found receptivity in Republican presidential administrations.

Even so, the defenders of white Christian dominance, unable to thwart integration and civil rights legislation, suffered more setbacks than victories. Worse, since Nixon’s impeachment they had been shut out of the White House altogether.

Now, with Blacks, women, homosexuals and non-Christians gaining more and more rights, the time had come to get serious about reviving white Christian “family values.”

A racist and xenophobic organization, the Moral Majority was chartered as a political action committee in 1979. Denying the First Amendment separation of church and state and with \$10 million in the bank, the following year the organization set out to turn America into a white theocracy.

Led most visibly by Virginia pastor and televangelist Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority dangled their shekels before Republican candidates. They demanded promises: overturn *Roe v. Wade*, restore mandated prayer and forbid the teaching of evolution in public schools, and deny equal rights to Blacks, women, homosexuals and persons of non-Christian faiths.

White Christians, the Moral Majority insisted, should be free to discriminate against all others in spheres private and public. Capitalism — in their minds God’s economic system — should not be hindered by government regulation.



President Reagan, Nancy Reagan with Margaret Thatcher during their trip to the United Kingdom and their welcoming ceremony at Kensington Palace, London.

Domestically, taxes on the rich — with wealth being a sign of hard work and God's favor — needed to be as little as possible. Internationally, success against godless communism required a greater commitment from the federal government. Only then would America live up to its destiny as the greatest nation on earth.

It was as if Christian nationalists — advocates of white America's godly superiority and greatness above all other nations — were echoing Reagan's own platform, with the exception of evangelical language, of which a good public relations campaign could resolve.

Not active in church since his youth, Reagan leaned on the Rev. Donn Moomaw, a former UCLA football player and the pastor of Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, where Reagan sometimes attended, to tout him as a born again evangelical.

Leaving the nuances to surrogates, Reagan avoided addressing his personal faith. On the campaign trail he turned to vague conservative themes embodied from the Disciples Church of his youth.

"God has a purpose and destiny for our nation," he often declared before crowds of white evangelicals, but we must "act soon to change our present direction" in order to fulfill America's destiny.

Addressing conservative evangelical's theocratic yearnings, candidate Reagan tossed out a memorable one liner: "If we get the Federal Government out of the classroom, maybe we can get God back in."

A bit more effort, however, was required to walk back his prior support

of abortion as California's governor, but Reagan pledged to oppose the procedure if elected as president, contrasting himself with Carter's support of *Roe v. Wade*.

In the absence of a personal evangelical witness Reagan turned to powerful symbolism. Upon accepting the Republican Party's presidential nomination and with Christian nationalists in mind, he concluded his speech with the simple but intentional words, "God Bless America."

With the stagecraft well received, Reagan faced his most crucial test yet: closing the deal for the pivotal conservative evangelical vote from which Carter had benefited four years prior. A carefully calibrated affirmation of white supremacist "America" was in order.

POLITICAL SALVATION

On Aug. 3, 1980 the Republican presidential nominee launched his general election season campaign at the Neshoba County Fair in Mississippi, the heart of the old Southern Confederacy.

It seemed an odd choice. No presidential candidate, and perhaps no Californian, had ever made an appearance at the obscure county fair, but Reagan was on a mission.

The history and significance of the area were known by Reagan and the thousands who came to hear the candidate. A mere seven miles from the fair grounds was the town of Philadelphia, Miss., site of the widely publicized and grisly murders of civil rights workers in 1964 at the hands of white supremacist terrorists.

Evoking a past never past in a present

more politically sensitive, in code words the Californian addressed the crowd of white southerners.

"I still believe the answer to any problem lies with the people," Reagan declared. "I believe in states' rights and I believe in people doing as much as they can for themselves at the community level and at the private level."

"States rights," of course, was the imaginary pretext for the Southern Confederacy's war to preserve Black slavery and, after the Civil War, Black suppression.

"I believe we have distorted the balance of our government today by giving powers that were never intended to be given in the Constitution to that federal establishment," Reagan insisted, his words affirming white southerners' ongoing disdain of the federal government that had defeated the Confederacy on the battlefield of yesteryear, and more recently forced the South to allow Black people to vote unhindered.

Reagan's barely-veiled speech thrilled unreconstructed Confederates and chilled the hearts of Black and progressive Americans. Having affirmed his allegiance to white supremacy, Reagan soon won the hearts and minds of most white evangelical voters.

On Aug. 21, when speaking to a national evangelical conference in Dallas, the Republican candidate enraptured his audience by promising to protect white families from liberalism and secularism. In response, the Moral Majority ran millions of dollars of negative ads against Carter.

Over evangelical airwaves televangelists and radio preachers extolled Reagan. In church sanctuaries throughout the South and beyond many evangelical pastors implicitly or explicitly instructed their parishioners to vote for the Republican presidential candidate.

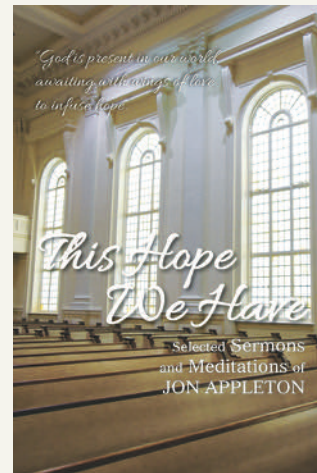
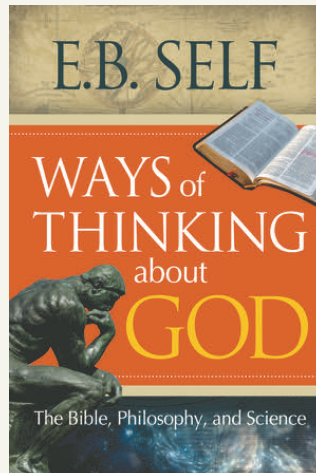
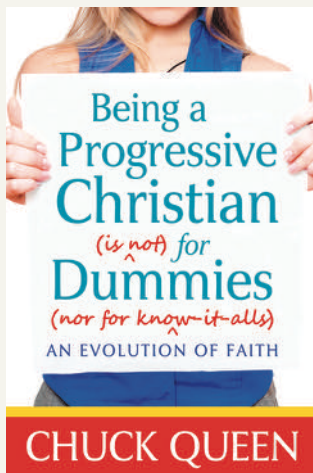
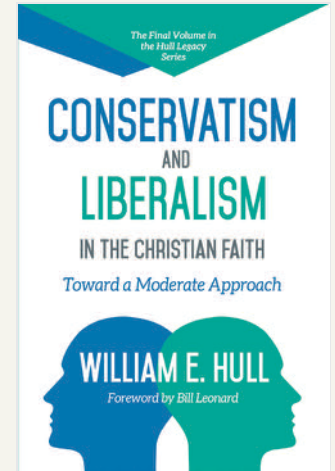
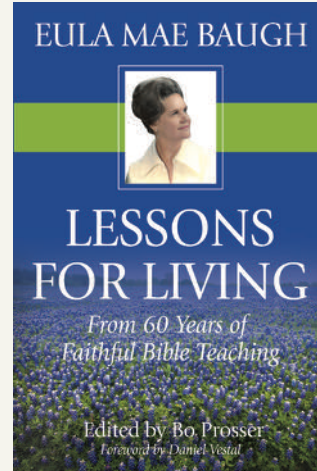
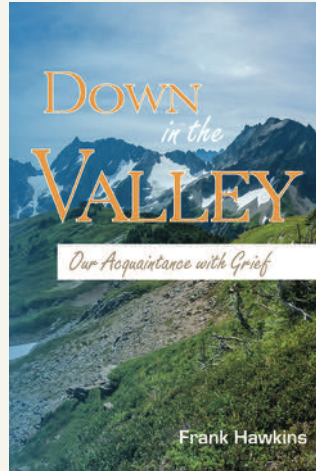
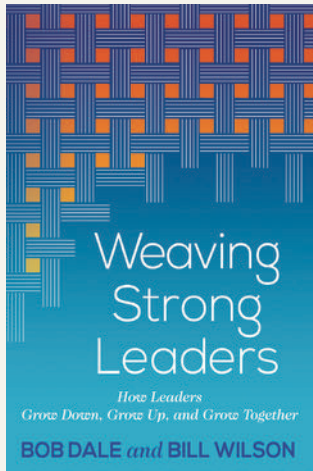
When the vote came in November, the dubiously religious Reagan garnered the overwhelming backing of white evangelicals, easily defeating America's only evangelical president. No longer did evangelical credentials matter.

Political salvation came not through piety, but a firm hand against the perceived enemies of Christianity. And the march toward a white theocracy had begun. **NFJ**

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What kind of super-spreader shall our churches be?

BY JON R. ROEBUCK

Some churches have done a notoriously bad job in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. When faced with the decision to suspend in-person worship, or at the very least require masks of those who do come to services, these church leaders acted in self-interest.

In doing so, they compromised the health and well-being of their communities, and damaged the Christian witness of their congregations. They could have been the light to the rest of the world by practicing safe protocols and being good neighbors.

Instead, many gathered in worship spaces, without requiring masks and proper distancing, and helped keep the virus going. Churches are foolish, not faithful, when flaunting protocols — and some people have died because of it.

Some church leaders have argued that in-person worship is critically important to the church, and certainly it is at the heart of what we do. But to insist on singing, preaching and praying without taking thought of our neighbors is simply selfish. It is putting our wants ahead of the common good.

Beyond the pandemic, however, there are other super-spreader tendencies of the church that get my attention. The racial unrest of the past year has certainly been felt, heard and seen by everyone in our nation. Whether we speak of Civil War monuments, unequal access to goods and services, hate crimes, police brutality, or disproportionate numbers of incarcerations, no rational person can deny the systemic racism that permeates our nation.

The church has the platform to address these issues and to decry racism. Yet, many

remain silent. By being silent, churches are complicit. Unwittingly, or perhaps knowingly, many churches have acted as super-spreaders in giving a wink and a nod to the marginalization of Black Americans.

Likewise, political rhetoric has been corrosive, caustic and damaging. Many people who claim the label “Christian” traded in the gospel narrative for nationalistic prose that sets aside decency, morality and kindness for the sake of promoting a fear-driven political agenda that marginalizes anyone not in lockstep with this right-wing ideology.

We have draped the cross with the American flag and declared that they are equal in terms of our allegiance. Many people have said “God and Country” so loud and so often that they sometimes say, “God is Country,” and never notice the difference.

The very ones who declare that our nation was founded on Christian values are the ones willing to trample on those values for the sake of winning at all costs. Rather than offering a clear message about the grace, dignity, and the acceptance of God’s coming kingdom, we have signaled to many that they are not welcome.

Many churches have been co-opted into super-spreaders of anti-Christian rhetoric and have become tone deaf to their own message.

What about the sanctity of human life? In their zeal to protect the unborn, many churches have affirmed and praised those who are willing to support their viewpoint, even to the extent of ignoring other ethical missteps or sinful behaviors exhibited by those in leadership.

I am not bothered by those who believe life begins at conception, and defend that position. I am bothered, however, by those

who stop their crusades the moment that child takes his or her first breath.

The sanctity of life should extend to every child, regardless of race, gender or country of origin. We can’t claim to value human life and deny healthcare to millions of impoverished children. We can’t claim to value human life and underfund public education.

We can’t claim to value human life and sit idly by while children are separated from their parents at the border. We can’t claim to value human life and not support local food banks or other organizations that meet important basic needs.

Life is precious and should be fiercely defended. Churches that don’t include life-long health and well-being initiatives become super-spreaders of narrow-mindedness.

The good news is that churches — composed of flesh-and-blood representatives of Jesus Christ — are divinely commissioned to be super-spreaders. We are called to spread hope, grace, kindness, love, compassion, forgiveness and acceptance.

We are called to spread welcome, understanding and dignity. Yet somewhere in the swirling storms of COVID-19, racism, politics, and other concerns, many churches and individual Christians have lost their bearings.

Now is a good time to reconsider who we are and to recapture the reasons why we exist. We don’t have to defend our faith; Christianity is strong enough to survive our insipid displays of loyalty.

We must, however, defend our hearts by never allowing them to be overtaken by falsehood, deceit, selfishness or any other darkness that betrays the very light that Christ died to place within us. **NFJ**

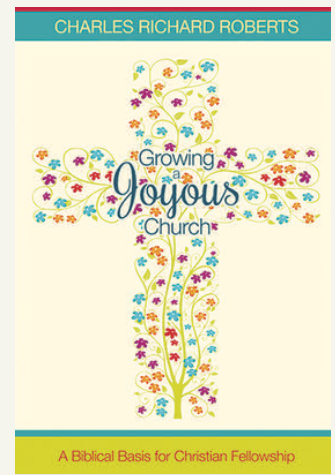
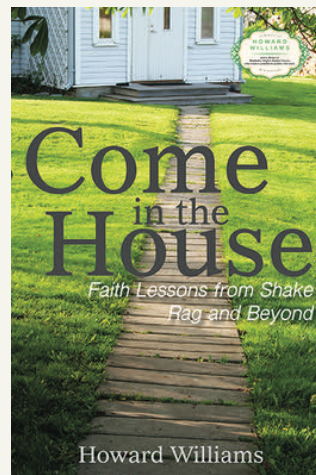
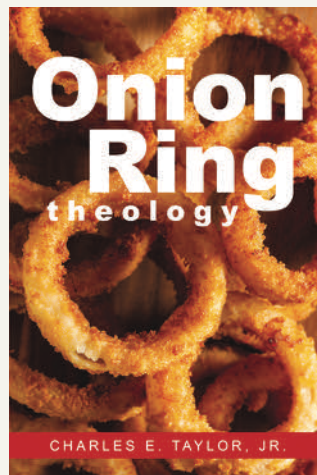
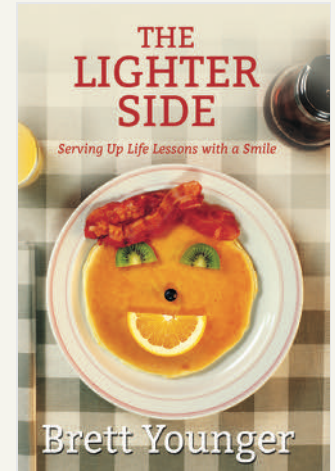
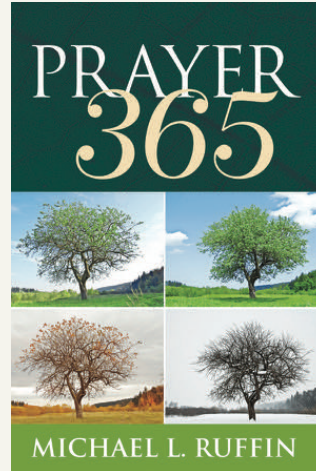
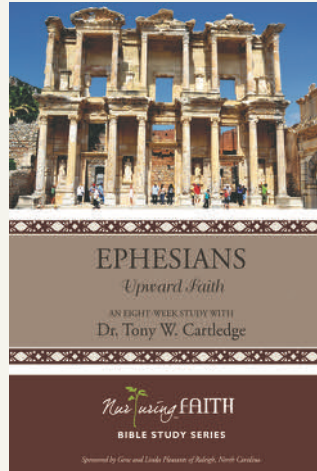
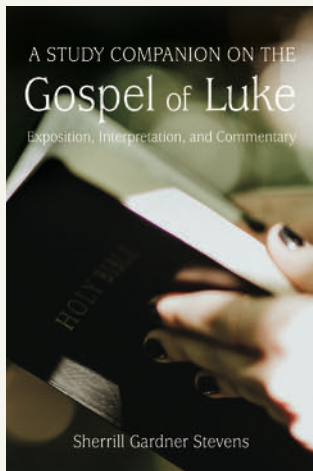
—Jon R. Roebuck is executive director of The Rev. Charlie Curb Center for Faith Leadership at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn.



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RESTORATIVE HOPE

Getting from ‘the way things are’ to ‘the way things ought to be’

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 third in a series of his articles exploring racial justice.

BY TERRELL CARTER

In the 19th century, scientific inquiry and “independently” produced data — accumulated through the study of physical and psychological differences between African Americans and whites — were deemed the best tools for determining the superiority of whites and inferiority of African Americans.

It did not matter that those conducting the tests and analyzing the data already held the common belief that Blacks were inferior to whites and therefore needed to be controlled. The scientific process was used to simply reaffirm what was already believed.

CRIMINALITY

Anything that could be considered a physical, social or psychological defect in one Black person began to be considered as a representation of what was present in the entire people group. Perceived Black criminality became the primary cultural defect that received the most focus.

It served as the way to set whites apart from Blacks, even though criminal behavior existed at similar levels within both groups. In the end, this strategy was extremely successful in changing the focus of the conversation.

Perceived criminality became the defining factor by which most of the Black life would be viewed, and white life would not be viewed. I hope the reader can understand the importance of this difference in focus.

If I can criminalize any of your behaviors, while not allowing anyone to focus on any of my behaviors, I have devised a way to tell a story about you and me that will allow me to build and retain power and to keep you under my thumb — without ever really having to fear that you will rise up against me or that someone else will attempt to help you.

ASSUMPTIONS

In *Police on a Pedestal: Responsible Policing in a Culture of Worship*, I tell multiple stories based on my many life experiences growing up as an African-American man in St. Louis, Mo., and living under the shadow of assumptions others had about my twin brother and me.

It was assumed that we were criminals-in-the-making, simply because of the color of our skin and the neighborhood we grew up in. However, neither of us has ever spent time in jail or prison, and we both have completed multiple degrees and are fathers and husbands.

The caveat is that we are not unique. Most of our family members have experienced these same types of accomplishments. In the book, I share stories from my experiences working as a police officer for the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department — and how that system of policing encouraged, and in some instances required, other officers and me to perceive and treat other African Americans differently from whites based on their skin color and the neighborhood in which they lived.

Also I share stories that relate how my personal faith was in ongoing conflict with my career choice, which eventually led to my resignation from the department.

And I explore how religious faith — or adherence to other belief systems that value all human life — can influence needed changes within law enforcement and the hesitation to question the actions of those who wear police uniforms.

SHEDDING LIGHT

I tell these stories in hope of shedding light on a system that typically seeks to protect itself first, and inevitably defines itself in relation to how it treats certain people. But, at the core, I seek to tell stories of hope — hope for reconciliation in relationships that have historically been antagonistic, the kind of restorative hope found in Psalm 85.

As a person of faith, I enjoy the psalms because of the candor and openness that come through many of them. Each of the multiple writers of the psalms brought their own personalities, temperaments, hopes and fears.

I appreciate the diverse emotions that come through the words of each unique writer: emotions based on what they, or a collective people, were experiencing at a unique time in history.

Often, the fact that they were writing from an emotional standpoint caused them to express a greater level of vulnerability and transparency about what they were feeling — a level of vulnerability and transparency that caused them to leave everything on the table as they communicated with a power they believed to be greater than themselves.

Psalm 85 is filled with vulnerability and transparency. The writer reminisces about a past when good things were happening in life, and simultaneously expresses hope for a better future for the writer and the nation to which they belonged.

We do not know the particular problem the writer and nation were facing at the time this psalm was written. But, apparently, things in their world were not going very well.



LOOKING BACK

Don't we tend to remember the past as being better than the present? I do not say that in a negative way, but when we face challenges in life there is a tendency to see our current problems or position in life as not being as good as what had previously been.

How often do we find ourselves saying, "If we could just get back to what we used to be!" — or, "Back in the day, things were so much better."

This is very relevant for me right now. My oldest child recently turned 21 years old, and I miss what the past used to be; I miss the little child.

When looking at pictures of him as a baby and a little boy, all I can think about is what used to be, forgetting about what is today and what can be for him tomorrow.

Whatever the problem addressed in Psalm 85, things were looking bleak in the writer's mind. Whatever the circumstances, the writer pleaded with the Creator to restore life to the way it used to be.

Such restoration recalled a time when the Creator's anger was short and forgiving, and pointed elsewhere. This would be the nation's only hope for a worthwhile future.

Their hope could only be found in

their Creator restoring them to a prior level of relationship that functioned through love and compassion.

HOPE & PEACE

This hope is exemplified in a key word that the psalmist uses multiple times in this passage. It is the word "peace," or shalom.

In general use, "shalom" can mean peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility. The word can be used idiomatically to mean both hello and goodbye. In the wider, bigger picture of being in relationship with one's Creator, however, shalom means so much more.

The psalmist is asking the Creator to restore things to the way they "ought to be" — that the Creator would allow those of the nation to return to a fruitful relationship with their Creator and each other, and that their world and life would be made right again.

The writer is hoping that things would return to the way they should be, not to the way they were.

The psalmist knew this return to normalcy could only happen if their Creator decided to make it happen or allowed it to happen. That is what the writer's hope

rests upon — that the Creator's love for the people would return life to normalcy.

The psalmist believes this will happen because this has been one of the hallmarks of their relationship with their Creator in the past.

In a sense, my writing on policing is my own Psalm 85. It is my attempt to acknowledge that, for multiple reasons, life for certain people is not all that it could be.

One specific reason is due to how this group is broadly perceived and treated based on faulty perceptions about their propensity for criminality.

As much as I personally believe in a Creator — and hope that belief will cause me to act in honorable ways toward all people — I readily acknowledge that not all people hold this same type of belief. *Police on a Pedestal* is my personal call to discover ways to help restore things to the way they "ought to be" instead of the way they are. **NFJ**

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

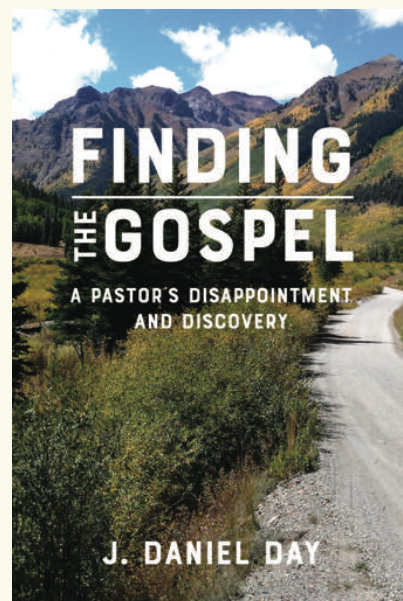
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AMERICAN IDOLS

Author identifies and explores ‘replacement religions’

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Studies show a growing percentage of Americans choosing to identify with no particular religious tradition. In some cases they are leaving behind prior affiliations.

Others have simply come out more publicly and admitted to being non-religious — finding less shame now in being counted among the “nones.”

But a question of interest to many is: If people are leaving organized religion, where are they going? What activities and priorities are assuming the roles of ultimate value?

“The religious impulse is easier to rebrand than to extinguish,” writes David Zahl, author of *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our Religion and What To Do About It* (Fortress Press, 2019).

Zahl, the Episcopalian founder of the Mockingbird website and podcast co-host, suggests that religious observance hasn’t disappeared but shifted.

Polls, he notes, “tell us that confidence in the religious narratives we’ve inherited has collapsed.” What they don’t tell us, however, “is that the marketplace in replacement religion is booming.”

THE R-WORD

Zahl acknowledges that religion has to be defined to be properly discussed. And too narrow of a definition supports the idea that religion is fading away.

“If you’re going with common conception — of robes and kneeling and the Man Upstairs, what we might call capital-R-Religion — then, yes, people are bailing in unprecedented numbers.”

But Zahl considers that definition too narrow — allowing for the common perception that the secular (which also needs to be defined) is winning out.

He draws on writer David Dark’s description of religion as “not merely that

which explains the inexplicable but the lens through which you sort the data of your days, rank your priorities, and focus your desires.”

However, Zahl sees “small-r religion” as more than a filter, but “the ladders we spend our days climbing toward a dream of wholeness.”

Zahl accepts some criticism of that broader definition but finds value in seeing religion as “that which we rely on not just for meaning or hope but *enoughness*.”

“Listen carefully and you’ll hear the word *enough* everywhere,” he writes, “especially when it comes to the anxiety, loneliness, exhaustion, and division that plague our moment to such tragic proportions.”

SECULOSITY

Zahl sees a close connection between “enoughness” and righteousness. The pursuit of either, he notes, puts one on a spiritual treadmill.

Noting the bad rap the term religion has earned — affirmed in the popular claim of being “spiritual, but not religious” — Zahl proposes a new term: *seculosity*.

“I’m using it as a catchall for religiosity that’s directed horizontally rather than vertically, at earthly rather than heavenly objects.”

The objects of “seculosity,” Zahl affirms, “aren’t somehow bad.” Rather his concern is that these good things can become toxic when depended on to satisfy a sense of enoughness and bring wholeness.

Zahl rolls through the book detailing these good but always lacking things: busyness, romance, parenting, technology, work, leisure, food and politics.

But there is another: “the seculosity of Jesusland.” Zahl confesses that “the same performancism and cult of productivity that dogs other areas of modern life dogs the church.”

JESUSLAND

Even church can become a “replacement religion,” asserts Zahl, noting how the same performance expectations and exercises often occur within that religious context.

“The tragic irony of Jesusland — a not-altogether-flattering catchall for the bastardized form of Protestant Christianity that dominates much of the spiritual landscape in the West — is that it often resembles its secular replacements more than the Real Thing,” he writes.

The antidote is what Christians have long confessed but often failed to fully embrace: the grace of God made known in Jesus Christ.

“It is no accident that the core of the Jesus story dovetails so well with the human dilemma of not-enoughness that propels our seculosity,” Zahl writes.

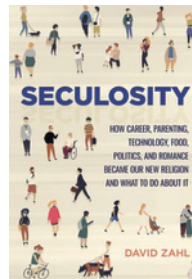
Zahl brings a needed perspective to those who draw solid lines between the religious and secular, and assign the first as fully holy and the latter as evil.

The doings of performing, producing and earning — inside and outside our religious practices — tend to create anxiety rather than ultimate satisfaction. It’s not that we’re investing time and energy in bad things, but that we expect too much from them.

Unmasking some of those — as Zahl does insightfully and often wittily — is helpful. And it might result in less parental virtue signaling — from honor roll bumper stickers to college acceptance brags — and fewer social media posts about one’s “soulmate.”

Zahl asserts “the more pressure we put on our relationships to prove transcendence, the less they will be able to deliver.”

Most importantly, such reordering of our lives might result in a fuller experience of divine grace. **NFJ**



FOUNDATIONAL LIES

False narratives compromise the Christian witness, says author

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Christian nationalism is not gospel-based Christianity. Yet its presence in Americanized Christianity — especially that which expresses itself as white evangelicalism — is probably too culturally and politically ingrained to be excised.

But that doesn't mean we should stop trying. And one of the best ways to address this misguided and misleading perversion of the Christian faith is to hear the voices of those who do not share in the privilege white nationalism offers.

Jonathan Walton is an area ministry director for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's New York/New Jersey region. His urban ministries, including fighting human trafficking, have been widely hailed.

Walton has a message the church — especially the predominantly white evangelical church — needs to hear. It is simply that we have built our houses on a foundation of untruths.

Walton identifies and analyses a dozen of these in *Twelve Lies That Hold America Captive and The Truth That Sets Us Free* (InterVarsity Press, 2019).

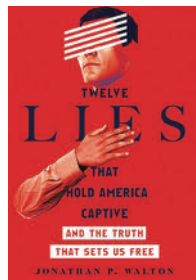
These lies are rooted in a romanticized version of American history and life common to many Anglo-Americans. Walton, an African American, points out that these understandings of America are not only false but also harmful.

Only by exposing such cultural myths and misunderstandings about how this nation was formed — and how its purported ideals remain unrealized — can the Christian church in America fulfill its God-given role.

White evangelicals seem particularly defensive about any criticism of America. Such ready defensiveness itself is a sign of

the dangers of nationalism — which blur the line between earthly kingdoms and the kingdom of God.

Many American Christians can see no distinction between healthy patriotism and dangerous nationalism. The latter, however, now permeates much of the political landscape in America — with white evangelicals as the leading advocates and enablers.



Therefore, much of what Walton raises will fall on deaf ears. But he, like others called to proclaim a gospel without human-assigned boundaries, has something to say to those who just might have ears to hear.

“I ask you to resist ... the urge to look away, and the opportunity to move on...,” he writes in the introduction. “Your salvation is at stake, and your evangelism is compromised if you claim to be a follower of Jesus while building walls of hostility and allowing them to govern your life.”

Romanticized versions of America's place in history and the world are easy to counter with historical evidence — but not easily received by those who have sworn allegiance to such claims. But, ironically, there is freedom in facing the realities of our national identity and spiritual calling.

The first lie that Walton identifies — that “we are a Christian nation” — drives much of the false narrative American evangelicals use in seeking government support for special privileges including sanctioned acts of discrimination.

It is one of those lies repeated so often that many assume it to be true — or simply find it advantageous to pretend so.

Other lies include: “We are a melting pot,” “All men are created equal,” “We are the most generous people in the world,” “America is the land of the free,” and “We are one nation.”

In each chapter Walton discusses “a dominant lie in our culture, how it is in opposition to the gospel, and how living within these false narratives compromises our Christian witness and leads to division and destruction.”

However, Walton is not in the business of simply wrecking, but repairing.

He offers stories “of what it looks like to pursue an ever-deepening union with God in love, in direct resistance to the idols that seek to remove Christ from our hearts.” Unmasked along the way is the well-constructed and fortified civil religion many Americans simply consider to be “Christianity.” Walton has a more fitting name for it — “White American Folk Religion.”

As Christians, he notes, our goal is not the pursuit of the “American dream” but a longing for the kingdom of God.

Walton provides discussion questions and a Bible study outline at the end of each chapter — for those who dare to tackle this long-present but rarely addressed pariah within American Christianity.

Yes, it's risky, but warranted. We cannot experience the truth that sets us free until we are willing to confess and confront the foundational lies on which we have built this house of misguided faith.

Because of efforts Nurturing Faith/Good Faith Media have put into the emerging Jesus Worldview Initiative, I was pleased that Walton titled his conclusion as “Leaving our nets to follow Jesus.”

He confesses: “[I]f we decide to follow the Jesus of scripture and live differently, we will stand out and be opposed... Family members, friends, our community, and American Christian culture will ask questions, and some will push back to varying degrees.”

The prevailing question, then, is whether we've decided to follow Jesus or not. [NFJ](#)

TOLSTOY'S CHALLENGE

Famous author's grappling is relevant for Christians today

BY LEROY SEAT

Count Lev Nikolayevich (Leo) Tolstoy, the famous Russian author, died in November 1910. Yet his writings over the last 30 years of his life pose relevant challenges to contemporary Christians.

Tolstoy was born in August 1828, about 125 miles south of Moscow, as the third son of a land-owning aristocrat. Before his 20th birthday he inherited an estate consisting of a huge manor house and property with nearly 500 serfs.

After spending his young manhood in profligacy, in 1851 he joined the Russian army. He was an artillery officer during the Crimean War — and part of the military forces that were the target of the English unit portrayed in Tennyson's well-known poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

Reacting negatively toward that war, Tolstoy left the army and, after traveling around Europe for a while, began founding schools for peasant children in Russia. During the 1850s, even while still a soldier, he began to write novellas.

In the next decade, Tolstoy became a full-fledged novelist. *War and Peace*, his first very long and complicated major novel, was published in 1869. It was followed by another lengthy novel, *Anna Karenina*, issued in 1878.

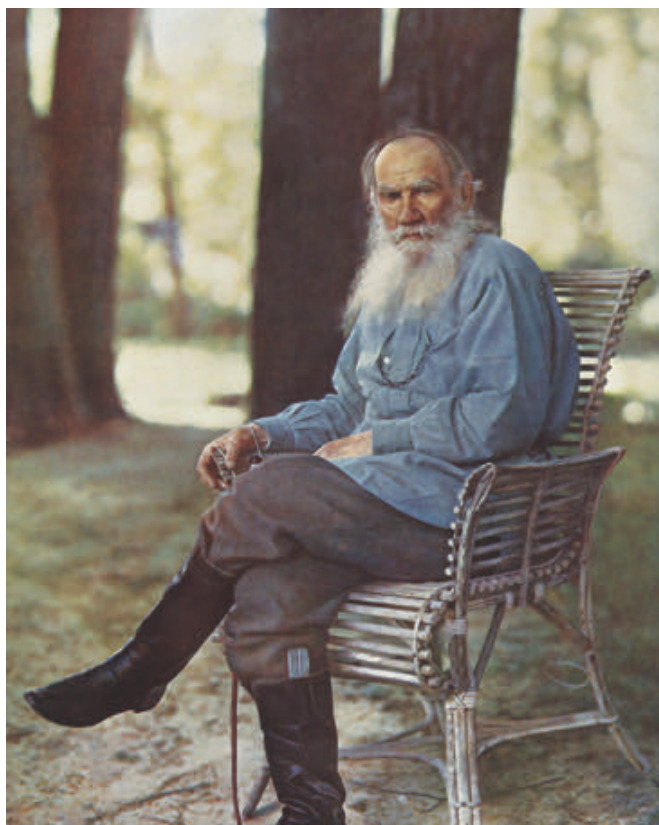
He wrote many novellas and literary works of various kinds, but his only other major novel was *Resurrection*, which was not published until 1899. Even with only three major works, and the third not widely read, Tolstoy is still recognized as one of the best novelists the world has ever known.

CHRIST OR CREED?

Although baptized as an infant and brought up in the Russian Orthodox Church, Tolstoy wrote that by the age of 18 he had "lost all belief" in what he had been taught. He told about his loss of faith in *Confession* (1882), the book he wrote in his early 50s in which he also told about becoming a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

So, for the last 30 years of his life, Tolstoy lived and wrote as a Christian believer — but not as a member of the Orthodox Church, which, in fact, excommunicated him in 1901.

Tolstoy's writings during those years were largely of a man who sought to follow the teachings of Jesus, especially as found in the Sermon on the Mount. Selections of his Christian writings are published in a 325-page book titled *The Gospel in Tolstoy* (2015), and it is a book well worth reading.



Leo Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana, 1908, the first color photo portrait in Russia

Particularly, Tolstoy's 1894 book *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (two selections of which are included in the anthology just mentioned) is important for understanding Tolstoy's Christian faith.

In the third chapter of the latter book, Tolstoy writes of "Christianity misunderstood by believers." In that powerful chapter, the Russian writer declares, "The Sermon on the Mount, or the Creed. One cannot believe in both. And Churchmen have chosen the latter."

He goes on to state:

The churches are placed in a dilemma: the Sermon on the Mount or the Nicene Creed — the one excludes the other. If a man sincerely believes in the Sermon on the Mount, the Nicene Creed must inevitably lose all meaning and significance for him, and the Church and its representatives together with it. If a man believes in the Nicene Creed, that is, in the Church, that is, in those who call themselves its representatives, the Sermon on the Mount becomes superfluous for him.

Those were strong words that, not surprising, are rejected by contemporary evangelicals and other Christians. For example, in a “5 Minutes in Church History” podcast in 2017, Stephen Nichols of Ligonier Ministries said Tolstoy’s book on the Kingdom “contains a very false but interesting idea” that would “get a lot of traction in the 20th century.”

Nichols adds that Tolstoy’s “false idea” was taken up by Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch, who argued that “the kingdom of God is on earth and that it is about social equality.”

NONVIOLENCE

With his emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount — and that as something to be put into practice, not just studied and discussed — Tolstoy sought to live by the words of Jesus as found there.

That led him to reject war and all uses of violence as well as to seek to live a simple life characterized by actual physical work and renunciation of a lifestyle of consumption and ostentation.

With those emphases he exerted considerable influence on Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He also influenced Nishida Tenko and Ittoen, a Japanese man and community that, unfortunately, is hardly known in the Western world.

In 2018, Fumiko Davis published an article in *Japan Forward*, titled “What Today’s Youth Can Learn From the Great Russian Writer Leo Tolstoy,” and she mentions Nishida (1872–1968) in her thoughtful article.

Liza Knapp’s book *Leo Tolstoy: A Very Short Introduction* (2019) is an excellent study of Tolstoy’s main themes and ideas. In the chapter titled “Tolstoy on war and on peace,” Knapp states that in his later years “Tolstoy embraced these truths: he condemned war, preached nonviolence, and rejected patriotism when it meant loving one’s fellow-countrymen to the detriment of others.”

Related to his rejection of war and violence, Tolstoy became a type of anarchist: “It would seem inevitable,” he wrote, “that we must repudiate one of the two, either Christianity with its love of God and one’s neighbor, or the State with its armies and wars.”

Those words were a part of his “Last Message to Mankind,” written in 1909, the year before his death. But that was certainly not a new idea for Tolstoy.

POLITICAL POWER

In *Church and State* (1882) Tolstoy had declared: “The sanctification of political power by Christianity is blasphemy; it is the negation of Christianity.”

Two years later he asserted in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*: “For a Christian the oath of allegiance to any government whatever — the very act which is regarded as the foundation of the existence of a state — is a direct renunciation of Christianity.”

In that latter writing, Tolstoy also declared that “no honest and serious-minded man of our day can help seeing the incompatibility of true Christianity — the doctrine of meekness, forgiveness of injuries, and love — with government, with its pomp, acts of violence, executions, and wars.”

He expressed similar convictions in a letter written in 1886: “Government is violence, Christianity is meekness, non-resistance, love. And, therefore, government cannot be Christian, and a man who wishes to be a Christian must not serve government.”

Tolstoy’s position was close to that of the original Anabaptists, whose foundational statement of beliefs, the Schleithem Confession of 1517, specified: “It is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate; a magistrate acts according to the rules of the world and uses force or orders force to be used.”

That rejection of direct political activity by the Anabaptists and much later by Tolstoy was based on their rejection of violence and their concomitant affirmation of pacifism.

UNHOLY MIX

Tolstoy’s stance is in stark contrast to that of today’s American “court evangelicals.” But it also remains a challenge even for Christians who are not so enamored with the allurements of political power.

The last four years have seen unprece-

dent conservative evangelical support and public praise of a U.S. president. Some of the leading preachers of our day — including Robert Jeffress (pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas), Jack Graham (pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church, also in Texas, and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention), and Franklin Graham, among many others — are referred to as “court evangelicals” by John Fea, a history professor at Messiah University, a school founded by the Brethren in Christ Church, an Anabaptist denomination.

Contemporary Christians of various denominations, and particularly those who have a special affinity for the Anabaptist tradition, resonate with Tolstoy’s rejection of the Russian state church of his day. These same Christians likely agree with Fea’s similar criticism of religious opportunists who pride themselves on their invitations to the Oval Office and positive recognition.

Just as Tolstoy castigated the “gross fraud called patriotism and love of one’s country” that leads to enmity between nations, current Christians are challenged by Tolstoy and his Anabaptist precursors to reject the nationalistic “Make America Great Again” slogan and to recognize the inherent worth of people of all countries.

“Christian nationalism” was unthinkable for Tolstoy — as it was for the early Anabaptists — and it remains a true oxymoron today in spite of the prominent clergy men and women who encourage that sort of unholy mixture of faith and politics.

Tolstoy’s religious and political views are not without some obvious problems, but they are worth serious consideration by all who identify as followers of Jesus Christ.

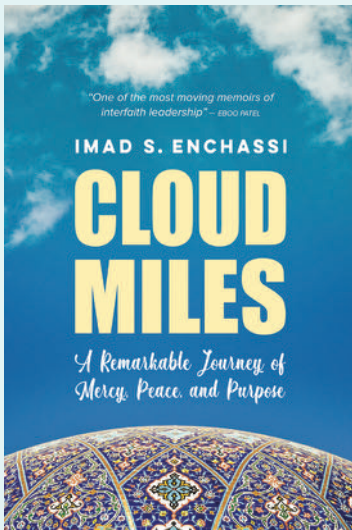
At the very least, they challenge us to take with utmost sincerity the teachings of Jesus as found in the Sermon on the Mount — and in the light of those teachings to examine our own way of living in this world.

How, practically, will we respond to that challenge? [NFJ](#)

—*Leroy Seat lives in Liberty, Mo, where he retired after decades as a Baptist missionary to Japan. He blogs at theviewfromthisseat.blogspot.com.*

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* * *

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—Dr. Charles Kimball, author of *Truth Over Fear: Combating the Lies about Islam*



Imam Imad Enchassi, Ph.D., is a senior imam at the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City, the Chair of Islamic Studies at Oklahoma City University, and a visiting professor at Phillips Theological Seminary and Saint Paul School of Theology.

Order *CLOUD MILES: A Remarkable Journey of Mercy, Peace, and Purpose* by Imad Enchassi at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore or (615) 627-7763.



For individual or group study!

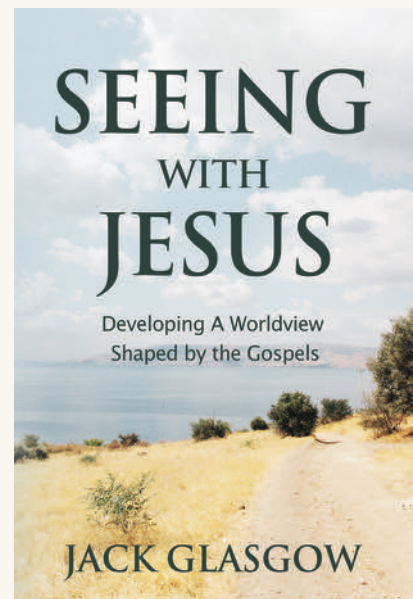
“Christians, congregations and the larger Christian community have the capacity to center their thoughts and actions around the thoughts and actions of Jesus. A gospel-informed, Jesus-centered faith is both imminently possible and urgently needed.”

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



“In *Seeing With Jesus*, Jack Glasgow masterfully breaks down into significant pieces practical but deeply spiritual guidance for living with a Jesus worldview... The study of verses you may think you’ve known is surprisingly revealing. There is meat in every sentence, and you will want to read this more than once.”

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



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

Street food redivivus

By Tony W. Cartledge

The rising popularity of food trucks during the past decade has brought a renewed interest in street food. This trend is found in places unaccustomed to big-city food carts peddling bagels, hot dogs or pizza — such as New York City, where you can walk through Times Square and smell the crust burning.

Food trucks allow for niche marketing, from Korean barbeque to Vietnamese pho, from cupcakes to ice cream, and from fish and chips to grilled cheese. Taqueria trucks are most popular where I live, but another one stays in business hawking health-food smoothies made from acai, explaining “It’s ah-sigh-ee, y’all.”

My introduction to street food came almost 50 years ago, when I was lucky enough to be appointed as a student summer missionary to Semarang, Indonesia. One of my responsibilities was to hang out with university students so they could practice their English.

Mid-summer, a student friend named Hadi invited me to lunch. After taking me on a harrowing ride through crowded streets on the back of his scooter, we arrived at a string of food stalls perched on the edge of a roadside canal.

We sat at an outdoor table and Hadi ordered a platter of local delicacies, all fried. Bound by the important custom of accepting hospitality, I was obligated to eat some of each and to act happy about it.

I soon learned the real meaning of “nose to tail” cooking. My first sample looked like cubed steak, but it turned out to be *goreng paru*: fried cow’s lung. Spicy.

The next piece was clearly brains, also beef. I had eaten pork brains scrambled with eggs as a growing boy in Georgia, but



An outdoor food stall from Pompeii’s “Regio V” area. Photo by Luigi Spina for Pompeii Archaeological Park/Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism.

these bore little resemblance.

We went on to eat crunchy chicken chitterlings (*usus goreng*), which were actually quite tasty, along with a few other items.

The most memorable dish looked and tasted like liver, but required no chewing. When I asked what it was, Hadi cheerfully replied “Fried chicken blood!”

We’ve long known that the ancients enjoyed a variety of street foods, and a beautiful illustration of that recently came to light when officials with Pompeii National Park announced the discovery of an open-air eatery in the former city of Pompeii, on the southwestern coast of Italy.

The prosperous city was destroyed in 79 CE when Mount Vesuvius erupted, sending waves of superheated gas that killed people and animals alike, then burying the city in a deep blanket of volcanic ash and pumice.

Because the destruction happened so quickly and preserved many structures so well, archaeologists have been able to uncover homes, temples and streets. They even recovered life-sized images of the volcano’s victims by pouring plaster into cavities left after bodies decayed beneath the solidified ash.

Many buildings in the city were brightly decorated, including the recently uncovered street food stall, known as a *thermopolium*, which was located at a popular intersection that included a fountain and another food stall. It’s one of 80 such stalls known from Pompeii, but is particularly well preserved.

The angular counter was adorned with fresco paintings of ducks hung up for slaughter in addition to a proud rooster, suggestive of fare that passersby could purchase along with hot drinks. A larger image of a Nereid nymph riding a stylized sea horse may have been related to the nearby fountain.

A painting of a fierce dog on a leash may have been a reminder for customers to keep their dogs away from the counter. The skeleton of a small adult dog was found just behind the stall, but it was more likely a pet than a potential hot plate.

The stand was built to hold earthenware pots where food could be cooked or kept warm by a fire beneath. A preliminary analysis of bones and food remnants in the pots turned up the evidence of ducks, pigs, goats, fish and snails, some of which had been cooked together.

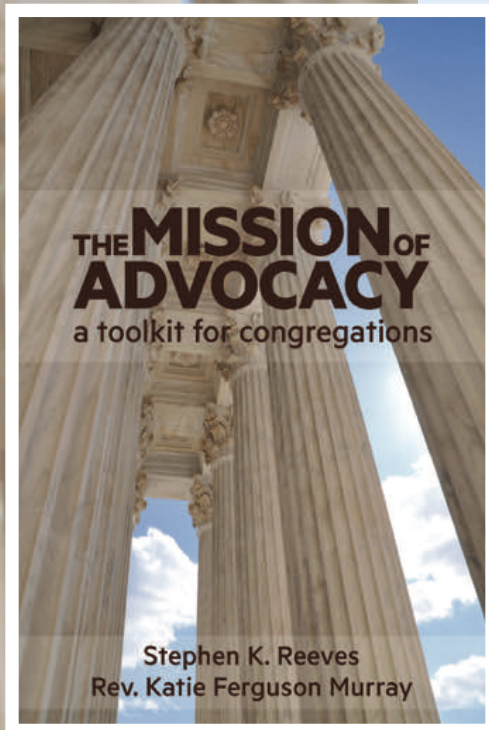
Ground fava beans from one jar suggest that it contained heated wine, to which fava beans were sometimes added to adjust the color and taste.

I love Mediterranean food, whether it comes from a restaurant or a street vendor. Wouldn’t it be great if the story should inspire a new “Pompeii Delights” food truck with similar paintings on the sides?

“I’ll try the roasted goat and duck soup combo, please, with a side of snails and a cup of that fine spiced wine.” **NFJ**

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Focusing on issues such as predatory lending, immigration and racial justice work, veteran advocates Stephen K. Reeves and Katie Ferguson Murray offer concrete suggestions to help ministers and laity recognize advocacy as a natural extension of church ministry.



Let faith rather than blame name the tune

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

BY JOHN D. PIERCE



It was in Ms. Beverly Postell's psychology class at Ringgold High School in northwest Georgia that I first learned the concept of "projection." This psychological defense mechanism was easy to understand.

The most common example was that of someone coming home from work, after being berated by his boss, and then kicking the dog or yelling at a loved one. It was an improper way of redirecting anger from the actual source to an innocent but convenient target.

Never could I have imagined, however, that projection would shape the white evangelical church and larger American society to such a significant degree more than four and a half decades later. But it has, and continues to do so.

Life, even when it's good, doesn't turn out exactly like we once idealized it. Rarely are expectations fully met.

Relationships break down; aging shows up sooner and in ways we never assumed; career and financial goals aren't always realized; and emotional losses mount in ways that may leave us feeling cheated.

The easier salve than lowering idealized expectations and seeking the joy amid the disappointment is to simply find someone to blame for whatever we feel is lacking in our lives. And there are those willing to help us identify some easy targets.

Women and Blacks were blamed for taking jobs from white men during my developing years. Now it's Mexicans and other immigrants — even though many work at jobs not highly desired, yet ones that help drive the economy.

Stereotypes about Muslims, LGBTQ

persons and others are thrown in the mix — along with silly accusations of creeping socialism or whatever else might excuse our fears and redirect responsibility from our shoulders to something or someone "out there."

Hunting easy-to-blame bogeymen is quite the popular projection sport.

Such projections allow for demeaning those who are unlike us — and wrongly justifying efforts to abuse or even eliminate them. They are perceived as threats to "my/our way of life." Therefore, their lives are devalued and considered expendable in an ongoing search for a sense of security and success.

The countering words of Phil. 2:4-5 seem to ring hollow for many American evangelicals today: "Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interest of others as well. You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus did."

The constant flow of hostile rhetoric on talk radio, cable television and factless social media fuels this ill-defined anger and misdirected resentment, and wrongly justifies the projection of blame.

Fear-driven anxiety — which often becomes hatred — grows while any traces of love, peace and empathy diminish.

For many Christians, the life and teachings of Jesus are willingly pushed aside — aiding a redefinition of "Christianity" as merely a political ideology of self-preservation that prefers bitterness, pettiness and projection to reflection, confession and compassion.

The goal is reduced to finding a risk-free, low-cost and comfortable way to live with a sense of security and importance — while still bearing the "Christian" label.

The wealth of available resources to counter this tragic shift — including factual information and multiple, clear biblical directives — gets rejected quickly. Otherwise, it would dismantle every well-constructed fort of self-interest and self-pity.

For many Christians, there is a comfortable discomfort to living in this continuing state of quick-to-blame escapism from life's realities and pleasures. Such living is deeply rooted in anxiety over any possible future that doesn't resemble a familiar past filled with social favoritism.

All light is snuffed out that might correct this self-defeating approach to life. Even that which is factually provable — if threatening to one's personal projection project — gets rejected as "fake."

Truth is considered a worthy sacrifice. It is traded with ease for anything that helps in placing the blame — for whatever emotional state one might be in — on someone or something else.

Grief and grievances get reinforced while goodness and growth are stunted.

This is precisely where we are at this moment — with masses of aggrieved white Christians reshaping our churches and impacting the nation. All the while they are pointing accusing fingers at scapegoated mirages.

They sing in unison, "Poor, poor, pitiful me," rather than "Take my life and let it be."

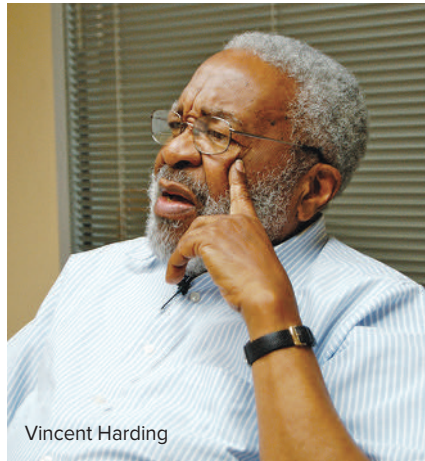
Self-victimization and falsely claimed persecution — which cast redirected blame onto easy, vulnerable targets — always result in failed faithfulness to the one who "did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life..." (Matt. 20:28)

It's time for a different, better tune. Who's willing to stand and sing? **NFJ**

Historic meeting modeled ‘loving respect and clear disagreement’

Editor’s note: At times the subject of various articles we’ve published over the past 20 years come to mind as having particular relevance. Therefore, this is the first in a series of occasional features based on earlier topics and writings.

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE**



taught at Iliff School of Theology in Denver from 1981–2004.

An Army veteran and a pacifist, Harding and his wife Rosemarie moved to Atlanta in 1960 on behalf of Mennonites to join the civil rights efforts. His close relationship with the Kings through the ensuing years led to his service as the first director of the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

He also was acquainted with Jordan, whose vision had led to the formation of the controversial interracial community known as Koinonia Farm in southwest Georgia. They first met in 1958, when Harding was part of a group from Chicago that traveled south to learn more about the conditions and growing movement.

“Clarence and Koinonia represented the same kind of commitment to Christian brotherhood and sisterhood,” said Harding, “and we would find a welcome place there.”

He recalled seeing the bullet holes above the bed where he slept at Koinonia, another reminder that justice comes at a price.

“As you can imagine, we had many wonderful conversations (with Jordan),” he recalled. “It was the beginning of a long relationship with Clarence and Koinonia.”

Earlier on that same trip, he and others

met King at his bedside in Montgomery.

“Martin had been stabbed by a deranged woman in Harlem while he was on a book-signing tour,” said Harding. “He had gone home to recover.”

Arriving at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church parsonage, Coretta Scott King told the five young men from Chicago — after checking with her husband — that “he’d be very glad to see you.”

Harding described the occasion as a “wonderful first connection” with King, who was in his pajamas and robe. He was particularly impressed by King’s “tremendous sense of humor.”

“He kept congratulating us on the great feat of being able to get through Mississippi alive.”

With a more serious tone as the young men were leaving the two-hour conversation, King focused in on Harding and his friend Ed Riddick.

“You guys are Mennonites; you know about this matter of nonviolence,” King said. “We need you. You ought to come down here and work with us sometime.”

STORY TO TELL

In 2012, the soft-spoken Harding was back in Atlanta to do research and teach students at Morehouse College from his unique, personal perspective. He was 81 at the time, and would die two years later.

Lyman-Barner set up my interview with Harding — in the Woodruff Library at Atlanta University Center — and brought along a videographer to record the conversation for Cotton Patch Productions.

In the early ’60s, shortly after their arrival in Atlanta, the Hardings were asked by King to assist in nonviolence training and to help identify white persons who were sympathetic to the freedom cause but might

In early 2012 Kirk Lyman-Barner of Americus, Ga., contacted me with the proverbial “offer you can’t refuse.”

Though both advocated strongly for civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr. and Clarence Jordan had met but one time — Kirk had just learned from Jordan’s son, Lenny. And that meeting, arranged by activist/historian Vincent Harding, a friend to both, had never been reported.

Since Jordan and King were both Baptists, Lyman-Barner asked if I wanted to interview Harding and record this historic event. (At that time this journal was known as *Baptists Today*.)

MUTUAL FRIENDS

Harding was an influential civil rights activist in his own right as well as a respected writer and historian. He penned King’s famous address titled “A Time to Break Silence,” in opposition to the Vietnam War and delivered at Riverside Church in New York City in 1967.

Later, among numerous books, he wrote a biography of King titled, *The Inconvenient Hero*.

Harding held a journalism degree from Columbia University and a doctorate in history from the University of Chicago. He

fear making contact with King or local organizers. Of particular interest at the time were desegregation efforts in Albany, Ga.

The Hardings accepted the charge, noting the struggle was “not just the cause of Black people, but the cause of justice and democracy — and, of course, the cause of the Christian way of life.”

While going into rural Georgia had its challenges, it also had a benefit.

“Whenever we were operating in South Georgia, we wanted to spend some time with Clarence at Koinonia,” said Harding. On one visit, Jordan expressed concern about the strategy of using boycotts against stores and institutions that would not open their doors to African Americans.

“As Clarence talked with Rose and me, he asked if there was any way in which we could arrange for him and Martin to talk together about his hesitations — growing, for one thing, out of his own experience there at Koinonia with boycott as a weapon.”

Local boycotts, in response to Koinonia’s interracial hospitality, forced community partners to turn to the federally protected mail order business to survive economically. To do the same to another business, believed Jordan, didn’t square with Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies.

“I knew Martin would be very glad to meet Clarence in light of Clarence’s own history,” said Harding. “Both of them were Baptists; they had much in common.”

Things were heating up in Albany when King arrived in December 1961. He didn’t have time to go to Koinonia but asked if Jordan might meet him in Albany.

Clarence and Koinonia partner Con Browne, an American Baptist minister, were welcomed to the home of W.G. Anderson, an Albany physician and civil rights leader, to meet with King.

The mutual affection was obvious, said Harding, describing both King and Jordan as “full of grace.”

THE CONVERSATION

There was little small talk, however, as “Clarence moved to the direct concern that he had,” said Harding. King listened intently and assured Jordan that he understood his concerns.



Clarence Jordan’s portrait hangs in the Koinonia Farm Store, near Americus and Plains, Ga., where visitors can buy pecans, candies and other items including Jordan’s books.

However, King felt that the use of nonviolent protests and boycotts was a right and effective strategy. On that, the two simply would not agree.

“They engaged each other with loving respect and clear disagreement,” said Harding. “For those things to go together is a great gift.”

While the two influential purveyors of Christian compassion and racial justice never met again, Koinonia opened its community often to those working in the civil rights movement, said Harding.

King and Jordan had both similarities and differences said their mutual friend. And their one meeting, Harding noted, provided a model for how to deal with disagreements when a larger goal is at stake.

“Both had developed a really impressive capacity to listen,” said Harding, “... and both enjoyed people.”

At the time of their meeting in late 1961, however, King’s leadership had made him a world-known figure. Jordan, on the other hand, was doing his writing, teaching and farming more quietly.

Common among southerners, both were storytellers, said Harding, though giving Jordan an edge in that skill. But southern roots and Baptist upbringings are not what he remembers most about the commonalities of his two friends.

“They both were men who took Jesus absolutely seriously,” said Harding. “That

was obviously one of the major grounds on which they could stand for their conversation. They both were convinced that the path of discipleship was their path, and that was the way they wanted to go.”

The noted historian said the disagreements over methodologies fit well within the great tradition of Christian disciples since the time of Christ. King and Jordan shared something bigger — a deep commitment to the equal value of all persons as children of God, and a willingness to die for that cause.

Their deaths came a year and half apart: King from an assassin’s bullet at age 39 in April 1968 and Jordan from a heart attack at age 57 in October 1969. And each bore enough light that their shared mission continues today.

STORY WITHOUT END

By design, historians are primarily focused on the past. Harding, however, said in 2012 that he avoided offering strictly history lessons for the Morehouse students in his classes.

He didn’t want them to assume the struggle is over, he said.

“I refer to what we were going through at that time as part of the ongoing, never-ceasing struggle for the expansion of democracy in America,” he said in our tableside interview.

Harding was determined to pass along more than historical facts.

“My deepest intention is not simply to pass on the story of that which took place before they were born,” he said, “but to encourage them to understand why they need to know that story in light of what they are planning for their own lives in the future.”

The history of the civil rights movement is not as ancient as some students seem to think, said Harding. “When it comes to building a democracy, we are still a developing nation.”

Harding’s words might serve us well in our current struggle for liberty and justice for all.

And the meeting of two Georgia-born Baptists in a hotel room in Albany, Ga., in late 1961 — in addition to the 2012 telling of the story by their mutual friend and fellow advocate for racial justice — is worth remembering and passing along. **NFJ**

EARTH AS HOME

Restoring the broken relationship between the environment and spirituality

Editor's note: Earth Day will be celebrated on Thursday, April 22, this year. Yet creation care is a daily act of Christian stewardship.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BRUCE GOURLEY

“Home is the base where everything begins ... Home means a future.”

Those words spoken by a grateful Habitat for Humanity homeowner could just as easily be applied to all of humanity: Earth is our one common home, where life begins and resides, and holds the future of all known life.

Appreciation of the built structure in which one's family shelters, sleeps, eats and otherwise lives is perhaps one of the most universal sentiments. A lack of such a protective and nurturing place, on the other hand, is grievous at best and potentially fatal.

Yet even more could be said of our one planetary home. From the air we breathe to the water we drink and the food we eat, life is not possible without our earth.

When our earth is damaged, we suffer. Should our earth be destroyed, humanity will cease to exist.

For most of human history our early ancestors lived close to the earth. Hunter-gatherers roamed upon the landscape. For sustenance they killed animals and harvested naturally occurring plant foods.

For hundreds of thousands of years they sheltered in the open or in caves — with tents emerging some 40,000 years ago.

Many early humans viewed their earthly home and all its inhabitants as the work of a Creator. The created world bonded together all of nature in a sacred, mutually beneficial and respectful relationship.



Three trees are reflected in the marsh water of Jekyll Island, Ga.

From this spiritual bond, in the words of Kiowa Indian and Pulitzer Prize-winning author N. Scott Momaday, indigenous peoples over time “developed a moral and conservationist relationship with nature.”

In the course of humanity's development, however, some human groups transitioned from indigenous — living in a natural fashion in relation to the land — to exploitative. Their relationship with nature became self-serving and extractive rather than mutually beneficial.

Western Christendom has focused on an otherworldly view of salvation — detrimental to the well-being of Earth's land and inhabitants — for much of its history. Largely dismissed was the sacredness of creation by fostering a worldview of nature enslaved to human whims.

In the name of God and economic profit, Euro-Americans by the 19th century had slaughtered or otherwise subjugated many native peoples, while poisoning, destroying or disrupting much of nature through industrialization and monoculture farming practices.

Only then did some Euro-Americans in the industrialized northeastern U.S. begin pondering the consequences of their actions.

Not typically coming from churches or other congregations, the early Euro-American prophets of conservation nonetheless voiced spirituality and aesthetics as reasons for valuing remaining natural landscapes and harboring native plants and wildlife.

Early advocates included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, philosophers and writers longing for peacefulness and serenity in the quietness and unhurried pace of nature.

Meanwhile, some sportsmen, becoming aware of diminished wildlife populations, began forming hunting and fishing clubs for the purpose of drafting laws for the protection of mammals, birds and fish. In the late 19th century, future president Theodore Roosevelt became a leading hunter-conservationist and later, as president, set aside many western lands as protected federal parks and monuments.

Other early conservationists focused on landscapes, including the ever-restless

John Muir in the late 19th century. Forsaking the harsh, conservative Christianity of his younger years and bewailing industrialization following an industrial accident that nearly left him blind, Muir migrated to the forests of the American West in search of new meaning for his life.

Synthesizing the teachings and activism of a growing conservation movement with the loving God of liberal Christianity, Muir infused nature with an emerging Euro-American spirituality.

Critical of Americans blinded by soulless industrialization and unbridled capitalism, Muir declared: “They can not pause long enough to go out into the wilderness where God has provided every sparrow enough to eat and to spare, and contemplate for even an hour the wonderful world that they live in.”

Of the beauty of nature he wrote: “The good Lord put those things here as a free gift that he who chooses may take with joy — and he who will not walk out of the smoke of the cities to see them has no right to them.”

To this day, Yosemite National Park in California stands as a legacy of Muir’s conservation work.

Nonetheless, environmental rapine in an industrialized America continued into the 1960s. Ecologist Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, an exposition of how man-made chemicals were poisoning much of life on Earth, finally convinced non-indigenous

Americans of the need to protect Earth.

Numerous chemical-induced fires in America’s polluted rivers further drove home Carson’s point.

In 1970 the first Earth Day rallies were held in cities across America, replete with speeches, performances and calls to political action on behalf of protecting the environment. Bowing to pressure, later that year President Richard Nixon and Congress created the Environmental Protection Agency.

American Christianity, however, largely remained dismissive of environmental concerns, criticizing the movement as focusing on creation rather than creator. Not until the 21st century did Christian conservation organizations become prominent, still clinging to the perceived creation-creator dichotomy.

In 2016 Peter Harris, leader of an evangelical Christian conservation organization, misleadingly dismissed the spiritual foundations of the relationship between Earth and humans. “Until recently,” he declared, “the conservation movement has been overwhelmingly secular.”

In reality, many thousands of years ago indigenous peoples recognized the spiritual dynamic between humanity and Earth. Native peoples in the U.S. have long intimately understood the sacredness of all of nature, including all life forms, and the sacred duty of caretaking the earth.

Today in America and the world, a

maturing environmental consciousness is evidenced in a worldwide effort to reduce pollution and mitigate climate change. In some instances large, pollution-emitting corporations and liberal activists are finding common ground.

In addition to persons of progressive faith, many conservative Christians now also embrace environmentalism under the rubric of “creation care.”

Meanwhile, the writings of Robin Wall Kimmerer, a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation and a biologist, have inspired many Americans, including Christians, to reimagine individual human relationships with Earth in a personal, intimate way.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Kimmerer speaks of human “estrangement from the rest of Creation,” a broken relationship between Earth and humanity.

Yet despite the brokenness, Earth remains humanity’s one common home, a home that needs love.

“Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate,” Kimmerer writes. “But when you feel that the Earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.”

Speaking of the wounded earth in spiritual imagery, she writes: “We need acts of restoration, not only for polluted waters and degraded lands, but also for our relationship to the world.”

“Scientists have made a dent in understanding how to put ecosystems back together,” Kimmerer adds, but spiritual awareness and understanding are necessary for mutual healing.

Her prescription for restoring the human relationship with all of creation is “to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit.”

Upon Earth all life began and all living beings subsist. The future of life, meanwhile, depends upon the human capacity for and commitment to the restoration of a mutually beneficial, healthy relationship between humanity and nature. **NFJ**



A bison cow and her calf cross Yellowstone River.

Questions Christians ask scientists

How do science and faith come together in your daily life?

Science and faith issues often seem remote and disconnected from everyday life. I have regularly encountered people who don't see why theories such as evolution and the big bang matter when there is so much political, religious and social strife, when a pandemic is raging, when the poor are getting poorer, when so many urgent issues press down hard on us all.

How does the age of the universe or the physical origin of life matter in a world crying out for peace and justice? In a certain narrow sense, they don't.

As I wrote in *Love and Quasars*: "Let scientists come up with whatever theory they like — if God ever loved us, God will love us still; if Jesus ever mattered, he will matter still; and if justice and reconciliation and peacemaking were ever our calling, they will be our calling still."

But Christianity is not only about peace and justice. Nor is it only about love. It is also about encountering God, who makes peace and justice possible, and who *is* love.

We share stories of such encounters with our Jewish neighbors; chief among them may be the one that tells of Moses meeting God at the burning bush, standing on holy ground in the wilderness of Sinai.

It was this divine encounter that made the deliverance of Israel possible. Such meetings with God are echoed in New Testament stories such as the Transfiguration, and out of them always come redemption and new life.

These encounters with God need not be spectacular. Do not let the luminosity of the burning bush and the Transfiguration distract you from the fact that meetings with God may be small and readily available. Doors to heaven may open anywhere.

Paul Wallace is the author of *Love and Quasars: An Astrophysicist Reconciles Faith and Science*, from Fortress Press.



For me, science opens just such a door and invites me to meet God. All the scientific work I have ever done — from nuclear physics to astronomy — points to an evolving creation so far beyond imagining that it had to be discovered; it could never have been invented.

Every time I have made a discovery, no matter how small or inconsequential, it has engendered in me a profound respect for creation, and therefore of the Creator. It has made me believe that, in living within our cosmos, we are living within a cathedral.

Science and faith, for me, are absolutely inseparable.

You don't have to be a professional scientist to experience what I'm talking about; you just have to open your eyes. Discoveries need not be publishable or even original to be significant, and they are definitely not reserved for professionals.

Nearly every day of the last several years I have looked outside my window and seen a white-breasted nuthatch. On the days I haven't seen one I've heard one — soft honks coming from the oaks in my backyard, or from the hickories surrounding

the observatory, or from the maples along the creek.

Many dozens of times over the last year I have stopped to watch them at the feeder outside my home office as they latch on in their funny upside-down way, select a seed, and return to their tree branch to crack and eat it or perhaps to cache it away in some tiny hiding place known only to them.

From two feet away I have seen them fan their tails and spread their wings and do a little twisty dance to ward off competitors at the feeder. Black and white and blue-gray with buffy flanks, they are handsome, formal-looking birds, and their quiet voices round them off perfectly. I know few birds more intimately than I know the white-breasted nuthatch.

Recently I was sitting in our kitchen and casually leafing through *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, the standard field guide. I opened it to the entry on the white-breasted nuthatch.

I noticed something I had not seen before: the species is sexually dimorphic. This is a scientific way of saying you can distinguish the sex of the bird by simple

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observation. The males and females look different from each other.

I was so stunned I nearly passed out. I love watching birds and I take pride in noting their behavior, their migration cycles, and looking closely at the birds themselves. Over time I have come to know details of many species, details that might elude the casual observer.

I can distinguish a purple finch from a house finch, a savannah sparrow from a song sparrow, a northern waterthrush from a Louisiana waterthrush, and so on. Many birders have skills that far outstrip my own, of course, but my point is I am not a novice when it comes to local bird life.

So when I discovered that white-breasted nuthatch males can easily be distinguished from white-breasted nuthatch females, I was floored. This is a bird I thought I knew!

Granted, it's not the most obvious difference; the bird's cap is much darker and more extensive in the male, and overall his colors are more vibrant. But I looked back over last year's photographs and found that, indeed, both males and females have

regularly visited our feeder, and I can now see clearly who is who. It was there all along, hidden in plain sight.

This business of the white-breasted nuthatch once again put me in awe of a Creator who offers more beauty and surprises on a daily basis than I could sort through in a lifetime. It made me feel humble, grateful, awed, and respectful of this world God so loves.

Creation is open to you also, just waiting for you to discover it. Go and observe, and, as you do, please remember that the simple, familiar activities of nature watching — observation and classification — are scientific. The fact that such observations and classifications have been made and documented by others makes them no less scientific.

When you look at the world, really look at it and engage it and think about it, you are doing science. Scientists are nothing more than people who have found a way to make a living doing this.

The Babylonian Talmud tells of the death of one Rabbi Elizier. His devoted students stood around his deathbed and

pleaded for him to share his life's wisdom so that they may lead fulfilling lives and enter the world to come.

The Rabbi said something about mutual respect, something about raising their future children, and concluded by saying: "When you pray, know before whom you stand."

The Rabbi's words, "Know before whom you stand," are found in synagogues throughout the world. In these holy places they are inscribed above the ark hat holds the Torah. They point to the essential stance we must have when we turn to meet God: humility, reverence, awe and gratitude.

If — as you turn to observe the world outside your window, or at your local park, or in the night sky — you will pray and know before whom you stand, your scientific observations will be rewarded not only with a small slice of knowledge and appreciation for creation, but also with an encounter with the Creator.

This, and nothing else, is what science and faith really have to do with one another. **NFJ**

LOVE AND QUASARS
AN ASTROPHYSICIST RECONCILES FAITH AND SCIENCE
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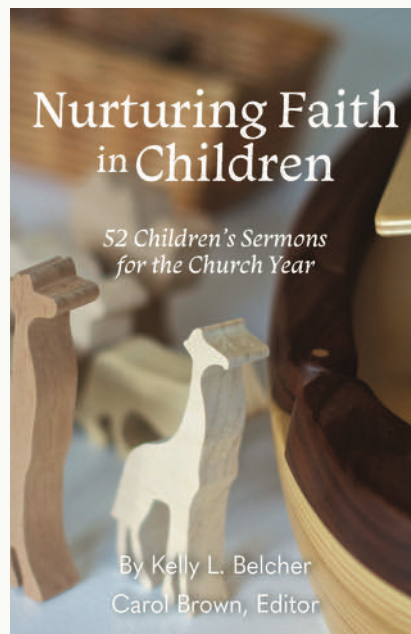


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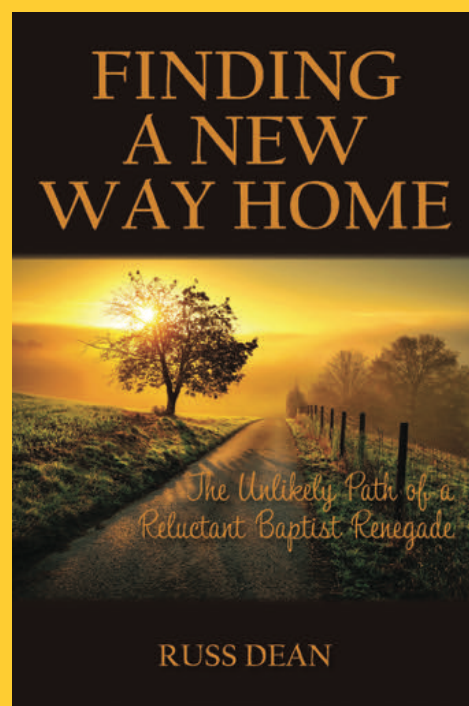
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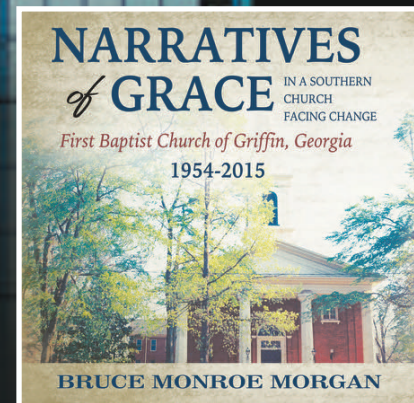
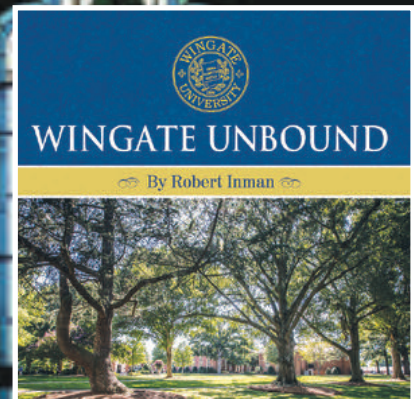
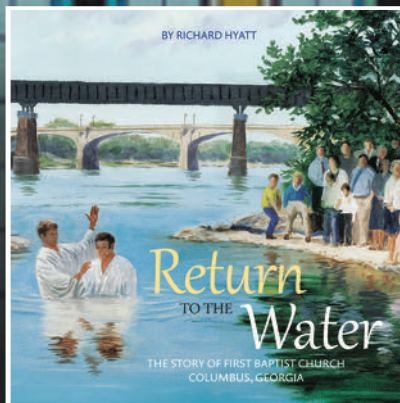
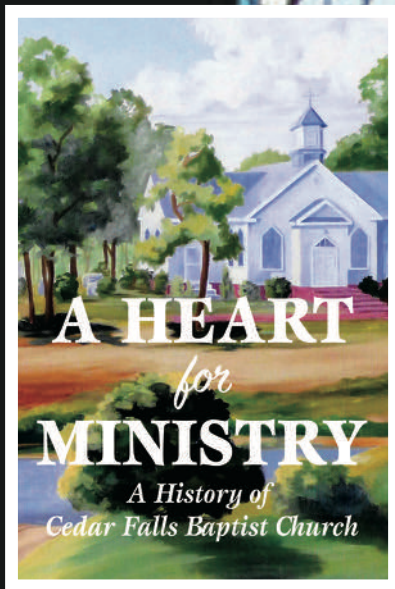
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