

MAY-JUNE 2021

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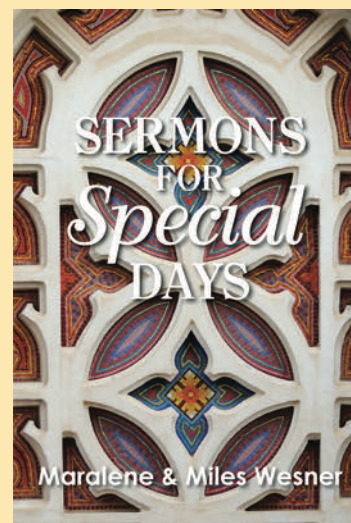
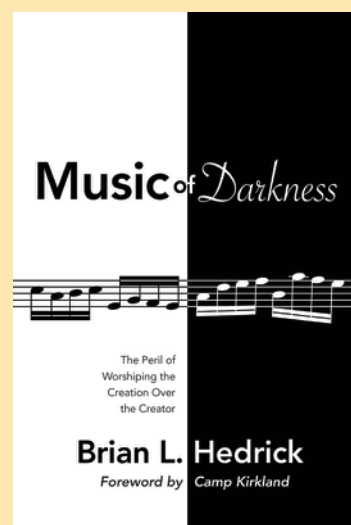
This is a book about “community.” Not “community” as defined by the census bureau and the chamber of commerce, but rather all the different types of community we live in. That includes family, friends, neighbors, churches, workplaces, towns, states, countries, races, and humankind. At different times we all live and interact in these communities—usually in several simultaneously. Author Jeff Hampton explores through personal writings how we all fit into and contribute (or not) to the communities to which we belong.

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**See page 21 for more information.**

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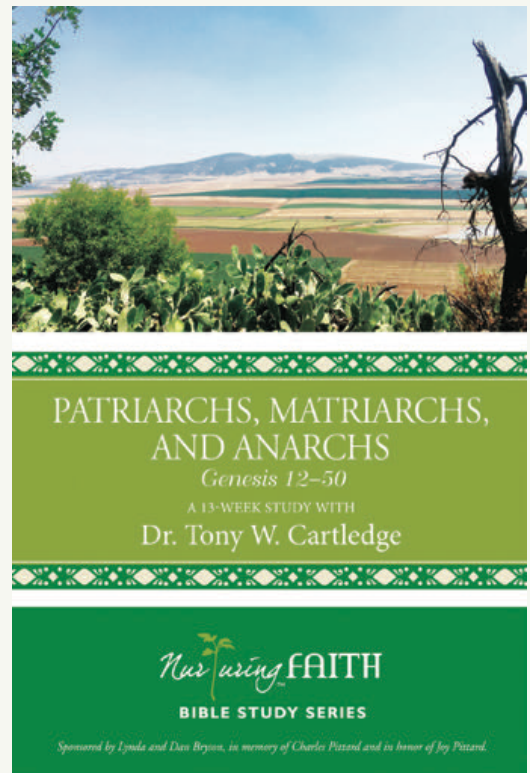
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*Nurturing Faith Journal* provides relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing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

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### DIGGIN' IT

In praise of the pig  
By Tony W. Cartledge

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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Amicalola Falls in North Georgia will be site of Good Faith Media's Fall Writers' Retreat. (See page 9.) The falls are near the southern end of the Appalachian Trail, where Gene Espy started his solo thru-hike in 1951. (See page 58.)

# Worth Repeating

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“Tell the truth. Don’t be a racist.  
Pay attention to the science.”

Pastor/activist William Barber when asked what should be learned from the pandemic (*NYT Magazine*)

“Lies and injustice go together;  
truth and justice do so as well.”

Mercer University ethics professor David Gushee  
(*Baptist News Global*)

“[Christian nationalism] takes Christian symbols,  
rhetoric and concepts, and weaves it into a political  
ideology that in its ideal form is idolatrous.”

Georgetown University professor Paul D. Miller (*Christianity Today*)

“We need fewer Christians learning apologetics to  
'defend the faith,' and more Christians learning how to  
genuinely apologize when they've harmed people.”

Kevin M. Nye, minister and author in Los Angeles (Twitter)

“Christianity must re-center itself on the teachings,  
example and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth.”

Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry, during a webinar hosted by the  
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

“Balancing forgiveness and justice is the most  
complex challenge of the Christian life.”

Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary (*USA Today*)

“God can get a message to a man through an angel,  
a donkey, a floating armless hand, a bush on fire, and  
a whale, but...would not use a woman, especially not  
from the pulpit.”

Sierra White on “complementarian logic” (Twitter)

“Historically, mass radicalization took time, but that’s  
not our reality anymore.”

Michael Jensen of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism  
and Responses to Terrorism (*Politico*)

“I grieve for her every day as if she is dead.”

An unnamed woman in Palm Beach, Fla., on her mother’s embrace of  
conspiracy theories (*Washington Post*)

“I listen to American Family Radio sometime every  
day. If you’re wondering where many evangelicals  
are getting conspiracy theories about election fraud,  
wonder no more.”

Sociologist Samuel Perry, co-author of *Taking America Back for God:  
Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Twitter)

“[P]opular opinion and American jurisprudence  
have moved in the direction of ensuring the rights  
of *all* Americans... The real question is why white  
evangelicals would find that troublesome?”

Randall Balmer, author of *Bad Religion: Race and the Rise of the  
Religious Right*, coming in August (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*)



## UNPACKING TRAUMA, UNEARTHING SELF

The “Discovering Wholeness” podcast, hosted by Kyndra Frazier, Gilian Drader, and Kyndall Rothaus, gathers each week to discuss trauma, spirituality, and how to remain grounded as we heal ourselves and walk alongside others who are also healing. Join us as we peel back the layers and discover our innate wholeness.



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# Abortion concerns better addressed beyond battle cry

By John D. Pierce

**D**efense of racial discrimination, as historian Randall Balmer has well documented, gave birth to what is now a decades-long alliance between fundamentalist Christian leaders and right-wing political operatives.

A major driving force over time, however, has been loudly voiced opposition to abortion — an issue that plays better in the public arena than the original one.

However, the two issues are not inseparable. The “pro-life” bellowing that brands Americanized Christianity today doesn’t achieve its stated goal and often excuses and enables matters of injustice.

We heard such in early February from freshman U.S. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia when stripped of her committee assignments for advancing threats of violence against her new colleagues.

She framed her defense — filled with untruths, an odd claim of being “allowed to believe” dangerous nonsense, and continuing aggression — in terms of her Christian faith commitments. Strongly stated opposition to abortion was given as the defining issue — although the charges she faced had nothing to do with her opposition to abortion.

“Our country has murdered 62 million people in the womb,” she said in a rambling Feb. 4 floor speech.

Such passion drives the so-called “pro-life” movement that often grants political cover for acts of discrimination and injustice toward more vulnerable populations as long as enough anti-abortion fervor is exhibited. Many preachers and politicians learned that unholy dance long ago and execute it to perfection.

So don’t expect congressional leaders whose anti-abortion battle cries ring out the

loudest to actually support legislation that would effectively reduce abortion rates.

While the accuracy of some statistics that show how abortion rates decline under particular presidential administrations is debatable, there is clear indication (usually at the state level) that abortions are effectively reduced with increased access to education, health care and birth control.

Yet those aligned with or politically obligated to the religious right overwhelmingly oppose any expansion of health care. And the very idea of easier access to birth control offends their puritanical sensitivities — because the last thing they want is the appearance of encouraging sex (as if it needs their encouragement).

Considering how much sex and race are at the core of religious fundamentalist concerns, this stand against the very stated goal of abortion opposition is revealing. There is something (in this case, sex) more important to them than actually reducing abortions.

Therefore, their religious/political opposition tends to be more emotional than rational. So we can always expect more emotion-filled charges of infanticide than an embrace of practical solutions.

Oddly, pro-life advocates seek the strong arm of government that they otherwise condemn as being too involved in their lives. But force, not fair and effective policies, is their desired tool. (You know, just “lock ’em up.”)

They target *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that protects a pregnant woman’s right to an abortion

without excessive government interference. Their false and often naïve assumption is that overturning this court decision would make abortion illegal in the U.S. and bring the practice to a halt.

In reality it would allow states to make their own laws as restrictive as they choose. And we know how that would play out — especially in very conservative states with large minority populations living in poverty.

Recently, a single-issue, “pro-life” voter voiced his desire to “make abortion harder.” But for whom?

Not for the pregnant college student in Mississippi who can fly to an outstanding health care facility in Boston where medical abortion would be permitted — but much, much harder for the poor woman in the Delta with little access to health care, education and options.

Whether talking about abortion or any other issue, it is critically important to identify and acknowledge the actual causes of one’s stated cause — and its broader social impact.

Only then can such valid concerns be addressed in effective ways — assuming that is the intended goal rather than pasting a polished veneer over something more deeply held, but less likely to be admitted publicly.

Advancing a truly pro-life agenda requires an honest, holistic and non-discriminatory approach that values humanity in all its forms. Rational, effective approaches to reducing abortions don’t require discrimination, intimidation and pretention.

Valuing human life calls for more than battle cries and political cover for those who seem to value only selective humans. Jesus taught and showed that to us as an example to follow — when we choose to follow him. **NFC**



# ON LEADERSHIP

A conversation with **Greg Jones**  
about navigating the future

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

On June 1, L. Gregory Jones becomes president of Belmont University in Nashville — coming from Duke Divinity School where he serves as dean. With Andrew Hogue of Baylor University, Jones recently authored *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Abingdon Press, 2021).

In the following conversation, Jones discusses how leadership — rooted in “the Christian virtue of hope” — is crucial to embracing and shaping a positive future.

**NFJ: Obviously, this was not just a “sit down and write a book” project. Rather, it grew out of many conversations. How did that occur, and why was that beneficial?**

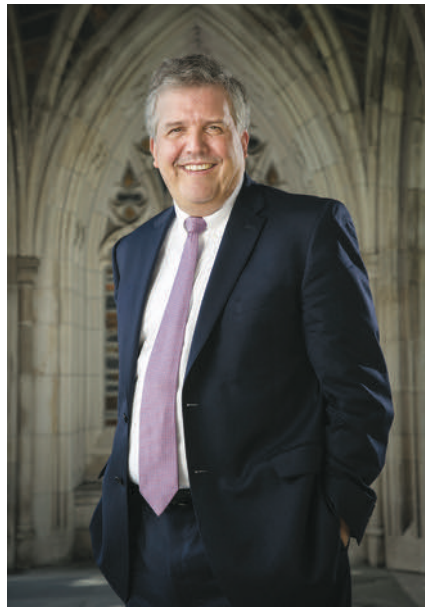
LGJ: I first started working on the idea because of frustrations with people who either didn’t want anything to change or wanted everything to change. As I began to think through the idea of “traditioned innovation,” I discovered that I needed to listen and learn from a lot of other people.

It crosses disciplines, involves a range of topics, and cuts across cultures. So I wanted to take time to distill the relevant ideas by reading widely and engaging people in conversation, especially my friend Andy Hogue.

And the book is much stronger than my original idea as a result.

**NFJ: So “traditioned innovation” isn’t an oxymoron? What do you mean by that?**

LGJ: Roger Martin once wrote in *Harvard Business Review* that the best leaders (he was focused on business leaders) tend to think “opposably” rather than “oppositionally.”



*“Innovation is most faithful when it is linked to lively traditions, and our engagement with the past is most faithful when it is focused on an innovative future in which the Holy Spirit is ‘making all things new.’”*

By “opposably” he meant holding things together in creative tension rather than assuming they are opposites.

Traditioned innovation fits that beautifully. Only God creates out of nothing. The rest of us are always adapting from the past — hopefully for the sake of a more faithful and innovative future.

We need to avoid the either/or dichotomy, and recognize that innovation is most faithful when it is linked to lively traditions (and “traditioning”) — and our engage-

ment with the past is most faithful when it is focused on an innovative future in which the Holy Spirit is “making all things new.”

**NFJ: You write: “Sustaining a belief in God appears to face long odds.” Why did you reach that conclusion, and how does that set the stage for what emerging leadership needs to look like?**

LGJ: We live in a time when many people have become cynical because of the persistence of sin and evil, the brokenness of institutions, and systemic failures. Christians (and other faiths) are implicated in all of these problems.

These problems lead to a cynicism where people don’t expect much from the future, and find belief in God implausible. We need to rediscover the liveliness of Christians living “for” our faith rather than being defined by what we are “against.”

Emerging leadership needs to be leaning into a future that is faithfully in continuity with the past and yet creatively innovative, trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit to bring newness while conforming us to Christ, the One in whom Creation came to be.

**NFJ: You use “navigating” or “navigate” in the title and throughout the book. What does that term suggest about expected leadership challenges and execution?**

LGJ: A key finding from a survey Duke Corporate Education did with international CEOs about eight years ago was that the CEOs said, “knowledge is less reliable, and the future is less predictable.”

That has stayed with me, and that was well before all of the disruptions of the last year that have disoriented many of us in new ways.



We are navigating in turbulent times. It is important to stay focused on “true north” (our orientation to God), and yet we will need to be nimble and adapt to changes and challenges as we move into the future.

The familiar line, “We don’t know the future, but we do know who holds the future,” gives us a clear orientation and reason for hope, and yet we need to see ourselves as navigators.

That requires character and skill, and also involves collaboration with a lot of other people.

**NFJ: Considering all the division and diversions to be faced, why do you hold to the belief that there can be a hopeful future? And what might that future look like?**

LGJ: I am hopeful not because of who we are, but because of who God is as revealed in Jesus Christ. That is the key difference between Christian hope and secular optimism.

This isn’t the first time people of faith have faced crises and division and diversions. We see those in the Bible as well as through history.

Think of Jeremiah and the siege of Jerusalem, or the stories in the Book of Acts, or what Paul narrates in 1 Corinthians or in Galatians.

Yet when we listen for a “word from the Lord,” and center ourselves in Christ, we find the possibility for miracles to break forth from the Spirit. For me, the primary reason for hope is Easter, and the source of our power to heal divisions is Pentecost.

If Jesus isn’t raised from the dead, and if the Holy Spirit isn’t loose in the world,

then I share Paul’s conviction that our faith is in vain.

But because of Easter hope and Pentecostal power, we can lean into a profoundly hopeful future and engage in creative experimentation in ministry.

**NFJ: How do Christian leaders address the major “branding” problem with much of Americanized Christianity today — without contributing to the division that so many churches and church-related organizations face?**

LGJ: This is an enormous issue because of the failures of Christians as well as denominational divisions and fracturing. I suggest that we focus on Easter hope and Pentecostal power — the unifying force ought to be a conviction that God continues to be at work in the world.

That gives a context for “meaningful disagreements” about important matters, rather than divisive shouting without any shared convictions. Of course, there are many people who are religious who don’t share the focus on Easter and Pentecost, but I think that is a crucial place to center ourselves.

**NFJ: You write that optimism isn’t resilient or sufficient enough for overcoming all the despair and distrust to be faced. Then, what will it take? How does a leader balance being positive, yet realistic?**

LGJ: This is why the Christian virtue of hope is so crucial. It combines optimism and pessimism by holding them in creative tension.

I sometimes say that I am discouraged by all of the ways humans, including me, fail and harm one another when we trust

ourselves—or claim to have decisive insight into God’s wisdom on our own.

Yet I am incredibly excited when I see what Christians who practice traditioned innovation are enabled to do by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is why I say we should “begin with the end,” because it is hope that inspires and orients us to learn from the past in life-giving ways.

**NFJ: You acknowledge that self-identifying Christian organizations have a harder time critiquing themselves than most secular organizations. Why is that the case, and how do we get over it?**

LGJ: Somewhere along the way Christian organizations began thinking of ourselves in secular terms, even more secular than most secular organizations. And so we have masked our bureaucracy with religious language, rather than infusing our organizations with Christian wisdom.

Ironically, these days many business leaders and writers are discovering the importance of Christian insights but re-casting them in more generic terms.

We have the deeper wisdom to draw on, but we have been ignoring it and thus ignoring our own best potential insights.

**NFJ: You advocate for a changed mindset rather than a quick-fix formula. What kind of process will that require?**

LGJ: We need to think of Christian life and Christian leadership as an ongoing journey of learning, improvising and experimenting — that includes what Carol Dweck calls “a growth mindset.”



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is honored to bring you Rev. Starlette Thomas’ new podcast  
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John Wesley called it “going on to perfection,” drawing on Matthew 5. The more we learn from our traditions, the more creative we will be in the future.

What, for example, would be the equivalent in our time of Jeremiah hearing a word from the Lord to “buy a plot of land” when Jerusalem is under siege? Or of the early Christians founding the first hospitals in the history of the world?

**NFJ: This sentence caught my attention: “We love to hate the institutions we need.” What can you say to those who lead, and likely find their livelihoods, in institutions often in decline?**

LGJ: Institutions aren’t optional. The question is whether we will have healthy ones or unhealthy ones.

Hating institutions tends to make matters worse, rather than focusing on creative thinking and living to provide healthier institutions. If we use more organic metaphors—as Jesus did—than the mechanistic ones we have become used to, we can find that there is no necessity of decline.

Perhaps the institution you lead needs

pruning rather than just to think about survival. How might pruning lead to new growth through creativity and traditioned innovation?

**NFJ: What have leaders paid attention to in the past that needs less attention now, and what needs more focus and energy?**

LGJ: In short, we have paid too much attention to maintaining the status quo of being “established” in American culture, and we need more focus and energy on what my colleague Kavin Rowe calls “Christianity’s Surprise.”

Christianity was surprising in the early church because of a set of convictions and practices rooted in Easter hope and Pentecostal power that transformed the Greco-Roman world. The same can happen in our time.

**NFJ: In these “wild seas” of change, how might leaders help those who fear or deny such changes to face them in honest and constructive ways?**

LGJ: I find both a sense of humor and a rich reservoir of stories, including biblical stories, can infuse a more imaginative

approach than a fear-based approach.

I use the “back to Egypt” image from Numbers 13 and 14, the story of Gideon, and stories from the Gospels and Acts to help people see possibilities for trusting God in surprising ways — not just for others, but also for ourselves.

And I remind people, including myself, that some version or another of “be not afraid” is the most frequent phrase in the Bible.

**NFJ: How do you suggest using this book most effectively by those who want to navigate well and flourish in the future?**

LGJ: The book is designed to stimulate the imagination and stir conversation with others. We hope that readers will be less focused on learning on their own and more likely to engage in conversation with others.

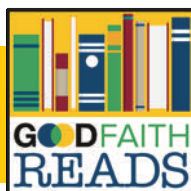
After all, navigating is a team sport, as is practicing traditioned innovation. The Holy Spirit tends to work most fruitfully in and through us when we are coming together in our prayer and discernment, in our thinking and feeling, and most importantly in our discipleship. **NFJ**

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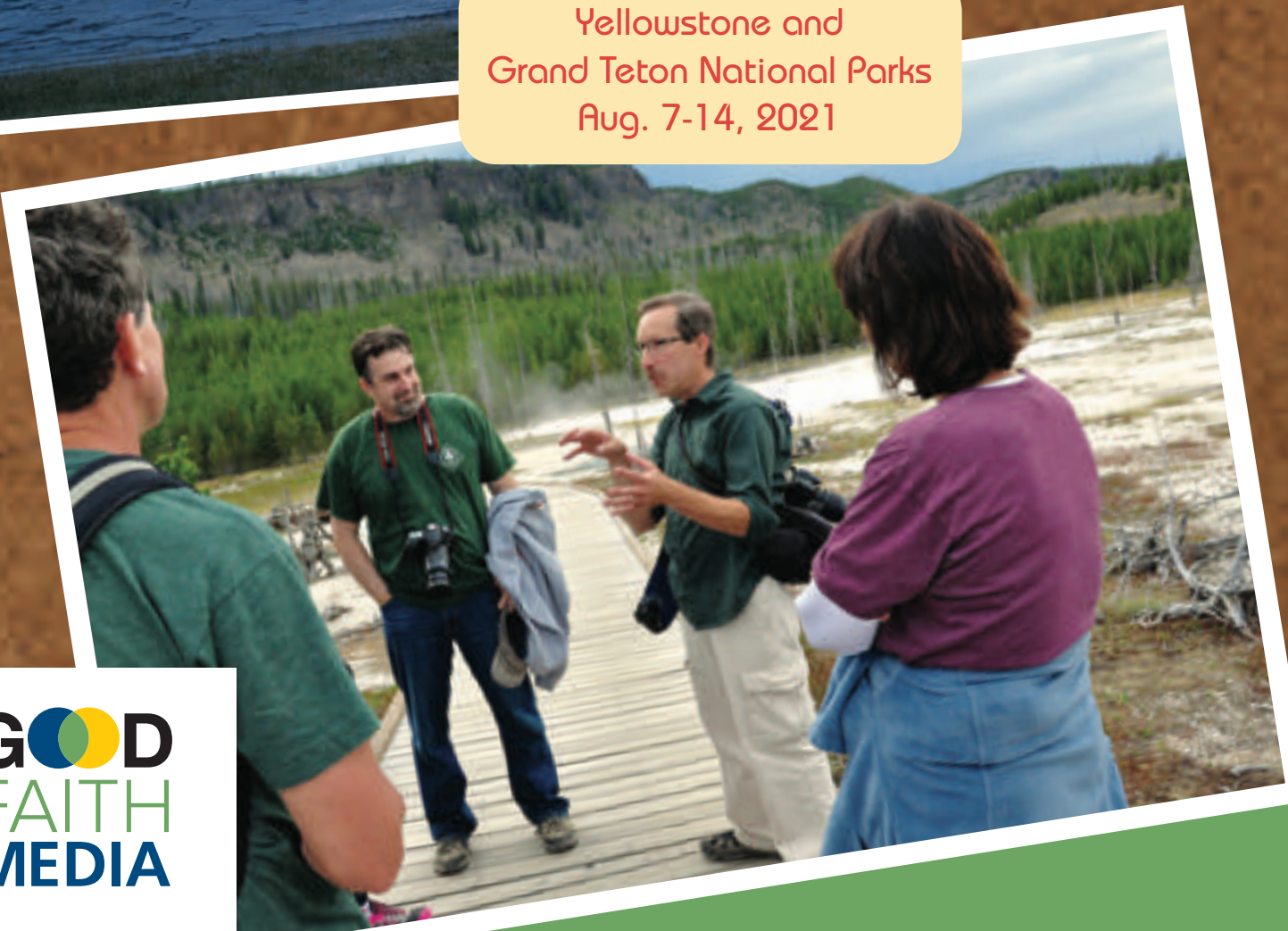
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# Another group of heroes amid the pandemic

BY LARRY HOVIS

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began its disruptive and destructive march around the world, we have rightly praised the heroes in our midst — including health care workers, first responders, mail carriers, delivery drivers and grocery store workers.

These folks are certainly worthy of our praise and thanks. Another group of heroes I'd like to lift up is pastors.

Pastoral ministry was a high-stress vocation long before most of us had ever heard of “coronavirus.” Data found at [pastoralcareinc.com/statistics](http://pastoralcareinc.com/statistics) are shocking. But let me illustrate with three stories.



## UNEXPECTED REALIZATION

I served as a pastor for 17 years before becoming a denominational executive. After being in my current role about a year, I was at home one evening when the phone rang. For the first time in almost two decades, I didn't flinch.

The phone ringing at home didn't affect me at a visceral level. As I reflected on that moment, I realized that, while a pastor, there was never a moment, even in the sanctuary of my home, when I was not on duty and could fully relax. I was always poised for a church-related interruption, often framed as an emergency only I could address.

In addition to the constant call to tend to the “care of souls” (some of whom are very difficult to care for!), there was also the weight of caring for the institution.

Facilities with deferred maintenance, unbalanced budgets, conflict between and with staff, inefficient governance systems,

membership recruitment and parishioners who never seem to be satisfied all combined to threaten institutional sustainability.

Although the churches I served had all been there long before me, I often felt responsible for their future.

## NO ESCAPE

Once, when I was a pastor, I attended a conference led by a former pastor who worked at a large medical center. He talked about how the cardiac surgeons at his hospital literally held the lives of their patients in their hands. What a burden!

But he added that when those surgeons left for a weekend at their mountain house, or on vacation to an even more exotic place, no one from the hospital had their phone numbers. Any emergency would be handled by a colleague at the medical center.

In contrast, he said, pastors are never off duty. Their days off and holidays are frequently interrupted, and it's not unusual to be called back early from a family vacation.

## NEW UNDERSTANDING

A few years ago, I called someone who had recently made the shift from associate to senior pastor in the same church. I asked how he was doing and how his work had changed.

“I find myself doing a lot of repenting,” he said. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“When I was associate, I often judged the pastor,” he confessed. “It didn't seem fair that he was paid more than me. I often wondered what he did all day long. I didn't think he worked as hard as me. I was sure I could do a better job.”

He continued: “Now after only a short time in his shoes, I know differently. Not only is there the pressure of producing a fresh message several times a week, but there are so many other pressures as well. No one else in ministry, from my

perspective, has as hard a job as the senior pastor. The pay is definitely not enough!”

I'm not suggesting that all pastors are martyrs, or that pastors don't sometimes bring additional troubles on themselves. There are some lazy pastors, to be sure. Some pastors are spiritually and emotionally immature.

Some folks who are in pastoral positions are not suited for that work. I am the last person to give a free pass to pastors who misbehave or under-perform. But these pastors are the exception, not the rule.

## HOW TO HELP

So what can we do to help pastors who find that their vocations, while always challenging, have been made much more difficult by the pandemic?

First, the best gift we can give pastors is to cultivate greater health in congregations. We can re-discover the priesthood of all believers. We can turn down the heat and realize that most issues are penultimate, not ultimate. We can give them the benefits of the doubt and extend grace to all, including our pastors.

Second, we can help pastors reframe their calling, not to save the church but to serve the church. The church has only one savior, and he's not the pastor.

I would never diminish the attention being showered on certain professions due to the unprecedented pressures imposed by the pandemic. They deserve every bit of this praise and more.

But I would add clergy to the list, especially our pastors. Their job has always been challenging, and the difficulties have been amplified in recent times. They are heroes too. May we give them the respect and thanks they deserve. **NFJ**

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

# Pastor-in-Residence/ Study Leave Program

Are you a mid- to late-career pastor in North Carolina who desires a short-term leave/sabbatical from the daily practice and activity of ministry? CBF North Carolina's Helping Pastors Thrive program provides a study leave program for extended reflection on your life, your pastoral identity and the long arc of your ministry. Experienced pastors who have served without intentional time away often feel constrained, weary and depleted, wondering if they can remain vital, creative and feeling good about their later years as spiritual leaders. This Pastor-in-Residence program provides the short-term leave for pastors that many churches are not equipped or financially able to do.

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For more information or to start an application,  
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*Note: Residencies are contingent upon campus regulations and plans related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Updates concerning viability of a given term and on-campus regulations will be shared when available.*

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

## Lessons from volunteering at a vaccine site

**BY MATT WINTERS**

The wind was raw while I served as a parking coordinator at a COVID-19 vaccine clinic in Luray, Va.

Crammed into the local VFW post were some 25 tables, 30 volunteers and 800 doses of vaccine.

**A**n eclectic group of volunteers from various agencies merged to bless the community, not just with vaccine inoculation but with hope, encouragement, relief and grace.

Among the cars and in the near freezing temperature, I watched the hub of activity from afar. This perspective allowed me to reflect on how these moments at a vaccine clinic can inform the practice of Christian life.

First, in my role as parking coordinator, I spoke to each family as they pulled into the VFW post. I anticipated directing them to a parking spot while confirming their appointment times.

Many arrived early, fearing the vaccine would run out. Some feared not being able to get into the building due to physical limitations. A few said that without the vaccine, they doubted they would survive to see the summer. I reminded each family that we had a good team of people to take care of them.

For the families needing a nurse to come to the car, the nurse came outside. For those needing wheelchairs, we helped them into the building. For those who needed to remember that they weren't alone, I reminded them that we were here with them.

Many seniors said this was one of



the few times they had been around other people in almost a year. I joked with them and told short stories of encouragement.

As the families left, smiles were on their faces. Windows would roll down and words of thanks would burst forth from those whose spirits had been lifted.

Our team addressed the fears and anxieties of the moment. We gave them a voice and met a need. We watched life return, along with hope, smiles, joy and praise.

Second, the clinic organizational staff did a masterful job of placing volunteers in the right places. They didn't need me handling needles. So they sent me as far away from medical care as possible. But I saw the nurses caring for their patients.

Registration attendants exhibited patience as they collected data. Other team members guided individuals and personalized the experience in order to keep the clinic peaceful. What an amazing picture to see people live out their gifts in such meaningful ways.

Volunteers served in the ways they were asked. One would have thought we were all from the same agency and had worked together for years. But we had come together just that day. How vital it remains for churches to employ the body of Christ

to serve in ways each member is gifted.

Third, churches are often too willing to do all the work themselves without seeking partners with similar goals. One of the beautiful dynamics at the clinic was the assortment of nurses from various doctors' offices who came to help.

With common goals, the community came together. At the clinic on this one day, volunteers from churches, civic groups, doctors' offices, hospitals, etc. all showed up to accomplish vaccinations.

Obviously, this task was larger than any one agency could accomplish, but what a reminder that there are lots of like-minded and like-hearted people who strive to accomplish many of the same goals reflected in our own mission statements.

When we extend hands of fellowship and partnership, we may find the tasks of ministry more easily accomplished than when we rely solely on ourselves.

Fourth, virtual worship and social media fill a void but don't replace hands-on ministry. To look people in the eye and give them a word of encouragement made my day.

For some, the conversation lasted longer as they unloaded their angst. Walking with others inside and helping to solve problems created opportunities to remind everyone they were loved.

I see that clinic as a great expression of love to frail hearts. The raised vaccinated arms and claps of celebration filled me with joy and reminded me that what we do really matters — as well as how we do it. **NEJ**

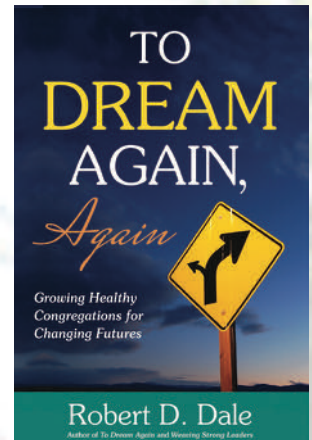
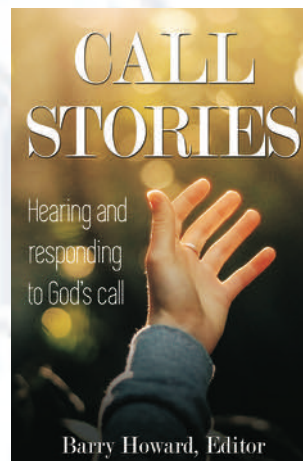
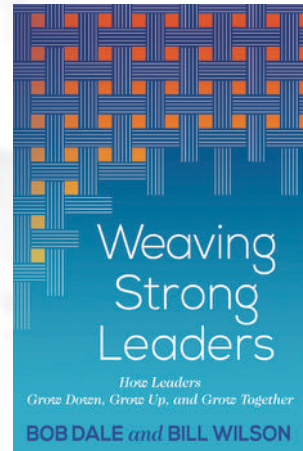
*—Matt Winters is pastor of Harrisonburg Baptist Church in Harrisonburg, Va.*





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# Reverberations of Pentecost

By R. Mitch Randall

The global church commemorates the Day of Pentecost on Sunday, May 23, this year. Christians around the world gather in their local congregations or virtually to celebrate the day when the Holy Spirit descended on the first-century church in a very powerful way.

Luke recalls the events in Acts 2, using vivid language to describe the significance of the moment. The author recounts that “suddenly from heaven, there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and filled the house where they were sitting” (v. 2).

The importance of this moment should not be lost on those waiting for a modern-day movement of the Holy Spirit. Luke’s timing of this instance comes directly after Jesus’ ascension. Therefore, the disciples had to be wondering what was next for the movement he started.

We find them behind a door, once again, just as they were on Easter morning. However, instead of the resurrected Lord blowing his spirit into the nostrils of the disciples, the Advocate he promised came rushing into their lives, empowering them with boldness and clarity as never before.

Luke goes on to describe the fire from which the disciples began to speak. The Holy Spirit set their tongues ablaze, igniting them to proclaim the Good News with a renewed spark. They delivered the gospel in different languages, “as the Spirit gave them ability.”

The gospel and the church were going global.

Theologian John Franke, in his book, *Missional Theology: An Introduction*, writes: “The implication (of Pentecost) is that no single language or culture is to be viewed as the sole conduit of the gospel message.”

Franke makes an important point for modern-day Jesus-followers waiting and watching for the movement of the Holy Spirit. For too long, the church has

attempted to control the movement of the Spirit through theological and practical parameters. We treated the Spirit as though she were an ancient artifact to be observed and analyzed, hoping we could re-create the first-century experiment.

This mindset has limited our ability to follow and engage the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a dead artifact solely belonging to the church; she is a living being moving through history and using every tool at her disposal to bring love, hope and justice to the world.

Franke describes the importance of this notion: “Christians do not insist that new followers learn the biblical languages; they have made the Bible available to people in different cultures by translating it into their languages.” In other words, the gospel and the church adapted to cultural circumstances.

In our modern era, the church would be wise to once again watch for the movement of the Holy Spirit as she uses unorthodox means to share the Good News. While the Spirit continues to use the church in traditional ways such as evangelism, discipleship and missions, she also is using other modes to bring about love, hope and justice.

For example, the marches we witnessed break out across the country last summer calling for racial justice felt very much like the movement of the Spirit. Granted, there were moments when it did not — such as vandalism and violence — but the peaceful marches and vocal proclamations of love, equality and justice echoed the gospel.

Another example is witnessed in the response to the pandemic. While the Spirit moved mightily among the churches that engaged in important and life-changing

ministry, we cannot deny watching the Spirit move through frontline workers.

Some of the most important work has occurred in emergency rooms, ICU corridors and nursing homes. In many of these instances, frontline workers have been the hands and feet of Jesus.

A final example can be seen in the work of the United Nations Paris Agreement. One of the most significant issues of our lifetime is climate change. As the church has been slow to address the topic, scientists and environmental activists have sounded more like Old Testament prophets. The Spirit’s movement among this community is important for the sake of God’s creation.

The point of these examples is to illustrate that the reverberations of Pentecost continue today as the Holy Spirit uses creative and surprising ways to further the mission of Jesus.

Jesus was the perfect example of loving religious traditions while engaging people in their own cultures and circumstances. He did not ask people to conform to a certain way but liberated them from the constraints of sin and sinful systems.

As we gather, virtually or in person, with fellow sojourners this Pentecost Sunday, let us remember that the Holy Spirit continues to move like a mighty rushing wind bringing fire and transformation. The Spirit remains a pivotal presence in the life of the church, but let’s not limit her to the four walls within congregations.

The God of Creation, the Son of Salvation and the Spirit of Presence are global beings able to use every resource at their disposal to bring love, hope and justice to the world. [NFJ](#)

—Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.



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# Living the Trinity-shaped love of God

By John R. Franke

**O**n the Sunday after Pentecost, Christian churches that follow the Western liturgical calendar observe Trinity Sunday. The date this year is May 30.

The doctrine of the Trinity holds a central place in the historical development of the Christian faith. Indeed, it has become one of the most basic Christian responses to the question, Who is God?

The one God is triune — Father, Son and Spirit, to cite the traditional designations for the trinitarian persons.

This confession of the Trinity is so central to a classic expression of orthodoxy that many hold it to be a *sine qua non* of the Christian faith — a belief that is essential or necessary for a coherent confession of that faith.

In keeping with this conviction, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed take their basic shape from the Trinity. Each is divided into three articles that correspond to the three persons of the Trinity.

This threefold credal pattern gave rise to a Trinitarian structure in the study and teaching of theology that became normative in the history of the church and largely continues to the present day.

As we look forward to Trinity Sunday this year, I would suggest three aspects of this teaching that seem particularly important in our present circumstances.

**First, the Trinity teaches us that God is love.** God is not an isolated being, but rather lives from all eternity in an interactive relationship characterized by the giving, receiving and sharing of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Together these three are one God by virtue of their interdependent relationality. This reminds us that because love is essen-

tial to the being and life of God, we must always love each other.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8).

If we do not love, we cannot be faithful to the gospel. So central is this commitment that Jesus commands we love even our enemies: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43-44).

This teaching flows from the Trinitarian love of God.

**Second, difference and otherness are part of the divine life.** While Father, Son and Holy Spirit together are one God, their unity is not an outgrowth of sameness.

Rather, they are one in the very midst of their difference. This is a core understanding of the Trinity. The three persons together are one God, but they are not the same.

The Father is not the Son or the Spirit. The Son is not the Father or the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Father or the Son. They are different in the midst of their unity or oneness.

While the history of the church has emphasized the oneness of the three, their difference is an equally important aspect of their being and life. This reminds us that the diversity and plurality we see in the world and its inhabitants are not the result of some tragic mistake or human failure.



It is not a problem to overcome. Rather, it is the very intention of God who exists from eternity in difference and otherness. In the words of African theologian Lamin Sanneh, “For all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design.”

**Third, the love that God lives and experiences in the fellowship of the divine life is not an assimilating love.** That is to say, the love of God does not seek to make that which is different the same.

Instead, God lives in harmonious companionship with the other through the active relations of self-sacrificing, self-giving love. This reminds us that our response to difference should not be an attempt to impose our views, outlooks and commitments on others in an attempt to make them see things our way.

Such an approach is known as colonization and is contrary to the Trinitarian love of God we are to emulate in the world. The followers of Jesus are not to impose his teachings on others.

Instead, we boldly, humbly and patiently teach and live them out in the midst of the world always being ready to share the hope we have through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3:15).

In the words of Pope John Paul II, “The church proposes; she imposes nothing.” The invitation to follow Jesus is never coercive.

Lord Jesus Christ, enable us to live the Trinity-shaped love of God in and for the world. **NFJ**

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

# WITHOUT CEASING

## Poetry as love letters to the Divine

BY JESSICA MCDUGALD

Poetry is my first love; my copy of Pablo Neruda's *The Captain's Verses* is too marked-up to read. I use Mary Oliver like a Band-Aid, covering the places in me that hurt with her changing seasons and tall grass.

If I could go back in time and speak with anyone, you'd find Charles Bukowski and me together in some smoky and poorly lit bar discussing depravity at length.

I can find the best poem to read for any situation and hand it off to you like a prescription: "Take this and call me if you don't feel better by morning."

If reading poetry is my first love, then writing poetry is my native tongue. Writing poetry is how I figure out what I mean, how I sort out what I feel.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote that we should "write hard and clear about what hurts," and there's never been a goal on which I have focused more intently.

Perhaps it is no surprise that the way I speak to God is through poetry. In fact, I am not fully convinced that *all* poetry is not prayer — albeit sometimes crude and accidental prayer.

Poetry requires the poet to slow down and pick the most potent words and images for the poem with prayerful diligence. It requires one's very best work: What is more fitting for God?

Just as with prayer, there are no rules for poems: They don't have to rhyme, there's no law about meter, and you don't even have to use punctuation if you don't feel like it. And like prayer, the best poems aren't forced but are a spilling-over of passion, a laying-bare of one's most vulnerable thoughts.

Nothing says "continuously in prayer" like the margins of staff meeting notes filled with scribbled lines of poetry. Nothing asks

you to examine yourself before God like editing a poem breathed by your heart. Nothing is more akin to confession than gathering up the pages you spent capturing exactly how it felt to mess up big time and handing them directly to God.

There is precedence for this, you know. The Bible is filled with poetry. The entire book of Lamentations is made up of poem after poem about grief and sorrow.

The Psalms, which we memorize and recite, are ancient Hebrew poetry and lyric. Some of our earliest theologians and most important faith leaders wrote poetry to and about God: St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Thomas Aquinas, just for starters. They knew that writing poetry is a deeply spiritual act.

Last year, when just beginning to understand what "shelter in place" really meant, I stumbled across the practice of rewriting the Psalms with the beatings of my own heart. I began with Psalm 23.

### The Mother

The Lord is my quiet place; I can take a deep breath.

She lets me be still; she doesn't need anything from me.

She restores my serenity, stitching my pieces back together

with patient fingers, softly humming a song I was born knowing.

Even when I think I can order my own chaos,

she is with me, watching with a grin, offering a soft

landing place and a cup of peppermint tea when it doesn't work out.



She smells like October's fire, like May's honeysuckle,  
like the very top of my daughter's head on the day I was born  
into motherhood and many are the nights  
I have sat  
with her as she combed through my tangles, leaving  
my hair streaked with her golden Divinity.  
She gives good gifts and encourages me to enjoy them; she reminds me to take care of myself,  
even when that requires me to roll up my sleeves.  
Surely I will feel her steady hand on my back  
all the days of my life; I will sit beneath her warm quilt my whole life long.

Other poems I've written as prayer are not as soft and cozy. Some require more grit to truly encapsulate the truth of the moment. As children of God we are free to write those poems, no matter how raw or grating.

In every case, when I've finally finished a poem, what I have is something honest and heartfelt to offer God: *This is why I trust you to carry me through life, God. This is what you mean to me. This is my love letter to you, my very best.*

I believe God delights in our love-poems the same way we fawn over the pictures our daughters and sons scribble for us. Imagine finding your meager love letters proudly displayed on the Divine's refrigerator.

What an incredible God we serve! May we never be afraid to use our art to express our love for the Maker. **NFJ**

—Jessica McDougald of Raleigh, N.C.,  
is an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Intern  
with Good Faith Media.

# Running in church

By Brett Younger

My mother’s rules were clear: no chewing gum in church, no giggling in church, no running in church. I have not chewed gum in years, and when I laugh it does not sound like giggling. But I have been thinking about the prohibition on running.

When the pandemic began, the gym I frequented infrequently closed. I had been a member for three years, moseying on a treadmill while flipping back and forth between ESPN and CNN. When they locked the doors, I tried jogging outside, but New York is cold and wet in March. I am glad that people in Brooklyn wear masks, but I cannot wear a mask, run, and breathe simultaneously.

I needed a place to jog out of the weather. I needed a big empty room where I would not have to wear a mask. I needed a sanctuary.

Parents have good reasons for telling their children not to run in church. Sanctuaries are holy places given to silence and reflection, but sanctuaries are also perfect places for old people to run. The aisles wind around in a way that encourages slow people to move slowly. I started looking for religious justifications for running in church.

Jeremiah 5:1 is pro-jogging: “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem.”

Song of Solomon 1:4 suggests couples jogging: “Draw me after you. Let us run.”

Ecclesiastes 9:11 is encouraging to runners at my level: “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift.”

St. Paul loves jogging: “I have finished

the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

Paul encourages the Galatian church (5:7): “You were running well.”

In Pentecostal churches, worshippers run up and down the aisles. Running in the sanctuary is a way of celebrating the Spirit’s presence.

Some people find sanctuary in running, but I was reluctant to be found running in the sanctuary. For the last year I have been surreptitiously praying, reflecting and running in church. “Run” is not the right word. I “trot,” “lope” and “saunter.” It is a contemplative stroll.

I run down the aisles at the speed of a

slip out. When I am caught and asked, “What are you doing?” I try to choose the most respectable response: “Working on a sermon,” “Praying,” or “Trying not to get bigger.”

Early on, I swore a few staff members to secrecy, but as the pandemic has worn on, I have gotten more open about jogging in the sanctuary. Sometimes I pray, but other times I listen to podcasts (*Dolly Parton’s America* is highly recommended). I sing songs that are not sung in worship—”Born to Run,” “Runaround Sue,” and “Running on Empty.” Recently the organist has begun providing accompaniment.

In the last year, I have prayed more while jogging in the sanctuary than while standing at the pulpit. Since the pandemic started, I have run more than 700 miles in our sanctuary. (I believe this is the most of any minister in the long history of Plymouth Church. Take that, Henry Ward Beecher!)

I have assumed that at some point I will go back to the gym, but now I am not so sure. Thinking and praying in church is better than flipping back and forth between ESPN and CNN.

Not everyone would be okay with their minister running in the sanctuary, but I think God is fine with it. Maybe God thinks we should sweat when we pray and that it ought to take our breath away.

Real runners talk about meeting God when they run. At the 1924 Olympics, Eric Liddell of *Chariots of Fire* fame said, “When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.” When I run, I hear God giggling. **NFJ**

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



Plymouth Church Sanctuary and Jogging Track

contestant on *The Price is Right*. Sometimes I jog a labyrinth—around the main floor, up the stairs, around the balcony, and up to the second balcony where no one has been allowed for a hundred years. I reflect on the stained glass windows. I pray for people when I pass the pews where they sat before the pandemic.

At first I only ran when no one else was in the building—sneaking in on Saturdays and evenings after 5 o’clock. Our sanctuary has been mostly empty the last year, but on the rare occasion when someone wanders into the sanctuary while I am jogging, I



The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by **Tony Cartledge** in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures.

A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without “dumbing down” the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.

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



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

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A Wise Request

Aug. 22, 2021

1 Kings 8:1-43

A Solemn Dedication

*Troublesome Teachings*

Aug. 29, 2021

Mark 7:1-23

Something Rotten

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 2, 2021

1 John 4:7-21

## To Follow Jesus, 'Abide in Christ'

Have you ever been in love? Deeply, madly, head-over-heels in love? Enamored to the point that you couldn't stop talking about how much you adored the other person, or how good it felt to be loved, or all the ways you wanted to express your feelings?

The first thing that comes to mind might be romantic love, but we can also have deeply loving relationships with our children, falling in love with those squirming bundles that the nurse brings from the delivery room. We can love our parents deeply, or our friends.

If you have loved like that, count yourself lucky. You're even luckier if you've managed to maintain a level of that enthusiasm long after the initial infatuation has passed.

The author of 1 John is one who couldn't stop talking about love, especially the love of God for humankind and the love God's people are called to share with others. He spoke of other things in his meandering epistle, including the importance of doing what is right. This chapter begins with a warning against the false teachers who denied Christ's incarnation and were soft on sin (4:1-6), but then circles back to that favorite subject. With the

*Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11)*

possible exception of 1 Corinthians 13, there is no profounder discussion of love in all of scripture than in 1 John 4:7-21.

### Knowing God's love . . . (vv. 7-12)

John has previously reminded his readers that they are called to accept God's love and share it with others (2:7-11, 3:11-18). In vv. 7-12, he puts more flesh on the bones of his challenge.

An important thing to understand about Christian love—or any love worth the name—is that love is a choice, not just a feeling. We don't get to choose our feelings, but we choose whether to love, and who to love. Jesus taught us to love even our enemies, something we would never do on the basis of our feelings alone. It has to be a choice, however hard.

Marriages sometimes fail because idealistic couples have based their relationship too heavily on the way they feel around each other, feelings largely induced by brain chemicals such as dopamine and oxytocin. When their mates don't arouse the same neurochemical buzz as in their courtship, they may look elsewhere for someone with whom they have more "chemistry." Love that lasts is not based on feelings alone: it grows from choosing every day to honor our commitments and to love the other.

The writer understands that love works in two directions: he addresses

his readers as people who are "beloved" by God. He then urges them to practice love toward others: we receive, and we give.

Why? "Because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (v. 7). Love does not consist of sentimental attachments, superficial romanticism, or self-oriented sensuality. The central, distinguishing mark of God's children is the kind of self-sacrificing love God revealed in Jesus. 📌

Those who do not love cannot claim to know God, John says, because "God is love" (v. 8). We should note that is not intended as a definition of God. The statement "God is love" cannot be turned around to say "love is God" — neither the Greek syntax nor logic allow it. 📌

The phrase "God is love" is descriptive, not definitive. We know God through acts of divine love, but God's essence is not limited to love. Earlier, John had said "God is light" (1:5), but we wouldn't think of saying "light is God." Both statements describe important aspects of God's character, but neither defines God's being.

Christians are called to love as God loves. They have come to know such love, John tells us, because God sent Jesus, God's "unique Son," into the world (v. 9a). The word *monogenē*, "only begotten" in the KJV, is less concerned with birth than with uniqueness. It conveys the meaning "only one of his kind." There is no one else like Jesus. There is no love greater than the choice-making, self-giving *agape* love we see in Jesus. We celebrate that love in old hymns such as "No One Ever

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Cared for Me Like Jesus” and newer praise songs like “My Jesus.” Perhaps you can think of other songs that celebrate God’s amazing love.

God sent Jesus into the world “so that we might live through Him” (v. 9b). This statement is not just about living forever: the common notion of seeking baptism as an insurance policy against hellfire would have been completely alien to the author. The life we have through the love of Christ is not just “pie in the sky bye and by,” but life to the full, life in abundance, life that is lived as God intended for it to be lived.

In v. 10, John repeats the thought, but with the added reminder that we did not earn or even seek God’s love. God loved us first (a thought made explicit in v. 19) and sent Jesus to make that love manifest, to cover our sins and lead us into the loving fellowship that is found only in God.

Again, John uses the word “beloved” to introduce a challenge. The gift of God’s love brings with it the imperative of loving others (v. 11). Those who have truly experienced God’s love cannot help but to pass that love along: it has become a part of their nature. Those who do not love testify in their actions and attitudes that they don’t truly know God after all. 📖

No one has seen God, John said (v. 12). We can’t show people God’s picture or send them a link to a Yahweh channel on youtube.com. We can’t get anyone a tangible audience with God as if meeting the president or the pope. We show people God by showing them love: God’s generous, selfless, abiding, freely given love. 📖

### Showing God’s love . . . (vv. 13-21)

The way we love is the prime evidence of whether we truly live in fellowship with God. 📖 As in 3:24, John points to

the abiding presence of the Spirit as a continual promise to those who believe (v. 13). 📖

Yet more assurance is found in the life of Jesus: “We have seen and do testify,” John said, “that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world” (v. 14). That divine initiative calls for faith and promises assurance: “God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God” (v. 15).

John’s insistence on confessing Jesus as the Son was aimed at those who denied that the human Jesus could also be the Son of God. The context, though, reminds us that confession implies much more than right belief. To confess Jesus as the Son of God is to experience God’s love and pass it on to others. Love and belief go hand in hand: “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us” (v. 16a). Those who know God live in love, which strengthens their confidence in God (v. 16b).

As we abide or remain in fellowship with God, “love has been perfected in us” (v. 17a), John says. This does not mean we ever love perfectly: a better translation would be “has become complete.” Knowing and sharing the love of God gives us confidence to face the future, even a day of judgment (v. 17b).

“There is no fear in love,” John said, but “perfect love drives out fear” (v. 18a). If we believe God has sent the Son to cover our sins, if we consistently receive and share God’s love, we have no need to fear punishment.

“We love,” John says, “because he first loved us” (v. 19). Imagine a child who loves her parents dearly. Would she love them as deeply if they had neglected or mistreated her? Of course not: she loves her parents because they first loved her. They changed her diapers and rocked her to sleep.

They fed and clothed her, held her and played with her. They sent her off to school with tears in their eyes and supported her as she grew.

She loves them – and she learned how to love others – because they first loved her.

Just so, John insists, we love because God first loved us. And when love rules, fear departs.

If fellowship with God was based on achieving perfection, we would all fail, and have reason to fear. If our relationship with God is in word only and not in deed, we have reason to fear. If we realize that our faith is a lie because it has no feet and no hands that reach out to others, we have reason to fear.

John typically draws sharp dichotomies, and here he sees no middle ground between love and hate: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (v. 20).

In other words, we’re not allowed to not care, John says. To ignore another’s need is to deny love. As far as John is concerned, that amounts to hate.

In other words, whether we aggressively wish someone ill or passively allow them to suffer, the end result is the same. Their needs are not met. We have not shown love or given evidence that God abides in us. “The commandment we have from him is this,” John says: “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (v. 21). 📖

But we do not have to live in fear. We don’t have to be hypocrites or liars. We can love because God first loved us, and we must love because God expects it. Where love abounds, fear can’t be found. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 9, 2021

1 John 5:1-6

## To Follow Jesus, Work with Faith

**D**o you feel successful? Through the years, whether in sports or in marriage or in your chosen profession, how often have you known victory? How much success have you enjoyed?

When I played football in high school, we always had winning seasons. When we played basketball, however, we nearly always came up short. On the bus ride home after away games, our theme song was Ray Charles' "It's Crying Time Again."

We have all tasted victory, even as we have all known defeat. When it comes to success in our Christian living, it's often a case of self-defeat.

Today's text assures believers that we don't experience victory in life by vanquishing others, but by loving them. The author believed that faith and love are the keys to success. ↓

### Victory through faith (vv. 1, 4-5)

The word "victory" naturally leads us to think of team sports, where coaches try to instill confidence in their players with mantras such as "You gotta believe!" Winning teams are made of players who believe in themselves, in their teammates, and in their coaches.

*Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:5)*

The author of John was far removed from the concept of sports as we know it, but he understood that the most important victory in life comes through putting our trust in Jesus as the Son of God.

Some members had split from the churches John knew because they had been led to believe that Jesus was not the Son of God, but a human messenger on whom the spiritual Christ had dwelt for a short period of time. John would have nothing of it. He insisted that all who believe that Jesus is the Christ have been "born of God," and that "everyone who loves the parent also loves his child" (v. 1).

As he has done before, John circles back to the theme of love as the proof of our relationship with God, for love and faith go hand in hand in Christian teaching. ↓ Following Christ's command, we demonstrate our love for God by loving others (vv. 2-3a). Choosing to love can be hard, but is not too hard for those who believe, because "whatever has been born of God conquers the world" (v. 3b).

Emphasizing the connection, John circles back to the importance of belief: "This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith" (v. 4). The one who overcomes is the one who believes that Jesus is truly the Son of God (v. 5), not just an ordinary man who was briefly visited by a spiritual Christ sent from an unknowable spirit-god, as some claimed. In typical fashion, the author uses the present

tense, indicating an ongoing and active belief.

As 1 John continually warned against those who failed to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, we can also recognize variant views about who Jesus is. Many people, Jewish and otherwise, believe Jesus was a good rabbi who got carried away with himself. Muslims believe that Jesus (called *Issa* in the Quran) was a prophet, but not a savior. Secular humanists recognize Jesus as a good man and an important teacher, but little more.

John insists that those who would gain victory over the world must believe that Jesus is more than a preacher or prophet: he is the Christ, the Son of God.

If we believe that Jesus was a good man and an inspiring teacher, he may influence our lives, but if we truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God, he will *change* our lives.

In English, we typically think of belief as "intellectual assent." We're more likely to use "faith" for the idea of trusting to the point of commitment. Greek uses a single verb (*pisteuo*) to incorporate the concepts of both "belief" and "faith."

John is not just saying that anyone who gives intellectual assent to the notion that Jesus is God's son will gain this victory. He is talking about something more important. He speaks of a belief that leads to faith, a conviction that leads to commitment. That kind of belief puts Christ in the center of our lives, at the top of our priority list. ↓

If we truly believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, then he will become the stack pole around which

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other things fit, the organizing principle of our lives. When we center our lives on Christ and channel Christ's love, we have victory.

We may have trouble believing John's assertion that the command to love others "is not burdensome." Really? Love *my* neighbors? But the more we experience and share Christ's love, the easier it becomes to love. When we put our faith to work, Christ will help us overcome.

In his classic book *Christ and Time*, Oscar Cullmann compared the Christian life and struggle to the time between D-Day and V-Day in World War II. With the success of the Normandy invasion on D-Day, victory for the allies was assured in the European theater. That did not mean the war was over, however. V-Day had not yet arrived, but those who fought between D-Day and V-Day were confident that victory was inevitable.

The author of the Fourth Gospel quoted Jesus as saying "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (16:33). Jesus has prevailed. We may struggle still, but victory is around the corner.

### Victory through love (vv. 2-3)

When we put feet to our faith and love into our actions, it helps to know that we are not in this struggle alone. As team athletes rely on each other to succeed, members of the faith community can offer help to one another, knowing that we all are "children of God" called to obey God's commandments by loving one another.

The most successful coaches, especially in sports such as basketball, are those who are best at building team chemistry, teaching their players to love each other and play unselfishly so that team success is more important

than personal success.

Booker T. Washington understood the power of love. After being freed from slavery on a Virginia plantation, Washington worked hard to get an education and to encourage other Black Americans. He became the first teacher and principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, one of the earliest schools for Black students in the country.

In his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, Washington wrote that one of the most onerous aspects of life as a slave was being forced to wear rough flax shirts, which were common in the part of Virginia where he lived. Slaves' clothing was made from the roughest and cheapest parts of the flax. Washington said that putting on such a scratchy shirt for the first time was "almost equal to the feeling that one would experience if he had a dozen or more chestnut burrs, or a hundred small pin-points, in contact with his flesh."

But Washington did not suffer alone. On several occasions, he wrote, his older brother John would take Booker's new flax shirt and wear it until the rough edges and sharp points were worn smooth, absorbing the pain in his younger brother's behalf. Even in slavery, there was victory, and it was won through love. 🇺

It may be hard for us to grasp this concept because our own love can be so limited, but the love of God is expansive. If God's love pours into our lives, it will also find its way back out. Those who love God will also love God's children (v. 2).

Let's think about that for a moment, remembering that we don't get to pick who God's other children are. I have two younger brothers. I did not ask for them. My parents did not consult with me. They did not say "Would you like a brother?" Or, "Would you like this

one?" I love them, but it wasn't up to me to choose them.

It is the same way in God's family. We don't get to choose who gets in. If we did, we would tend to select people who are like us, who are socially acceptable and easy to get along with. We'd be unlikely to choose adults who don't look like us or youth who don't behave or children who can't sit still. But that's not the way it is. Love compels us to stretch beyond our comfort zone and reach out to people who don't look like us, smell like us, sing like us, or even speak the same language as us. 🇺

Every act of love is a victory, and every bit of ourselves that we give away is one more step toward the light, one more blow against the darkness of the world in which we live.

"For the love of God is this," John wrote, "that we obey his commandments" (v. 3a). And what is his command? That we love one another. Period.

If we try to fulfill that command on our own, we are likely to be defeated. There's just not that much love in us. But if we truly believe in Jesus as the Son of God, if Christ's love flows through us, then obedience to his commands become a natural outgrowth of who we are as God's children – children who are not only loving, but also victorious.

Are there people in our church or community that we find hard to love? If we try looking at them through Jesus' eyes, does that make a difference?

If we could find through faith in Christ the ability to love all people as Jesus loved, we'd find our own lives exponentially enriched even as we became the presence of Christ to others. Seeing the world through Jesus' eyes leads to the victory of love, and we don't need cheerleaders to tell us that's a cause worth celebrating. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 16, 2021

1 John 5:7-13

## To Follow Jesus, Believe in Life

Who do you believe? In the past few years we have seen a remarkable assault on the basic concept of truth. In one notable example, while defending a patently false claim about attendance at Donald Trump's inauguration, spokesperson Kellyanne Conway used the self-contradictory term "alternate facts."

The trend blossomed as people with influential social media platforms, both in and out of government, sought to persuade others that their claims of an alternate reality were true.

Some news services have sought to remain objective while others are openly partisan. Some focus on fact-checking while others give air time to conspiracy theories that cast doubt on the dangers of COVID-19 and the legitimacy of carefully run elections while hyping the specter of a "deep state" run by cannibalistic pedophiles.

The notion of "alternate facts" would be laughable if it were not so dangerous. Individuals can and do harbor different perspectives and hold different beliefs. But, as often noted, we don't get to make up our own facts.

We are not the first to confront the issue of misleading claims, of

*And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. (1 John 5:11)*

course. Spurious teachings and deceptive propaganda are as old as human society.

So why bring this up? What we believe with regard to science or politics or economic strategies is important, but there is something more important to consider. What do we believe about *life* – both this life and the life to come?

Today's text is a testimony about testimonies: a witness to beliefs of the greatest consequence. When it comes to the deepest questions of life, what is the truth ... and who do we believe?

### Three powerful witnesses (vv. 6-8)

Throughout the letter we call 1 John, the author has insisted that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the one through whom believers can find life abundant and eternal. In the first chapter, he relied on his own testimony, describing himself and others as eyewitnesses to the person and work of Jesus. 🇺🇸

In intervening chapters, he argued for love as the preeminent witness of Christ's presence in the lives of believers. Here in the final chapter, John turns to three other witnesses to the identity and power of Christ: the Spirit, the water, and the blood.

What does he mean by this odd trio? Jesus came, John says, "by water and blood." We may associate both water and blood with the act of childbirth, and the writer would not have

denied Jesus' humanity, but that is almost certainly not his intent here.

"The water" is a more natural reference to Jesus' baptism, when his public ministry began. Competing teachers, possibly including some who had left the church, taught that "the Christ" had come upon Jesus at his baptism, but departed before the bloody crucifixion.

That is why John insists that Jesus came by "the water and the blood" (v. 6) – the human Jesus and the divine Christ were one and the same from beginning to end. The water of baptism and the blood of the cross were both witnesses to the life and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 🇺🇸

Further testimony is given by the Spirit, which was made manifest at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:10) and throughout his earthly ministry as Jesus taught with authority, wrought works of power, died with purpose, and rose in glory.

Jesus promised his followers that he would send the Spirit to testify of him, guide believers into the truth, and empower them for ministry (John 15:26, 16:13; Acts 1:8). The inrushing presence of the Spirit revealed to Jewish believers at Pentecost (Acts 2) and to Gentile followers in Caesarea (Acts 10) was not just a historical memory, but the promise of a lived experience.

Thus, John wrote, "There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree" (vv. 7-8). 🇺🇸 The word for "testify" is in the present tense, indicating ongoing action. The memory of water and blood, along with the continuing witness of the Spirit, agreed together

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that the Jesus who lived and died and rose again was also the Christ, the Son of God.

### The greatest witness (vv. 9-10)

As noted above, we must often rely on the testimony of other people, even though we know that humans are fallible and sometimes their testimony is unreliable. The author was particularly concerned about the false testimony of those who denied that Jesus was the Christ. If we can believe the testimony of humans, John wrote, then certainly we can believe the testimony of God, who can always be trusted (v. 9).

While the Spirit, the water, and the blood all testify to Jesus, behind all three stands the sovereign authority of God, whose testimony is like a keystone in the arch of witnesses to the heart of the gospel, the identity of Jesus' self-sacrificial work with God in fullness.

We recall the opening words of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In John 1:1 the "Word" is an obvious reference to Christ. God's primary and most eloquent testimony to the world came through the incarnate Jesus.

Earlier, John spoke of how believers abide in God, and how the Spirit and love of God abides in them as a testimony (2:24-28; 3:9). Now he emphasizes that "Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts" (v. 10a).

The Greek text has "in them," rather than "in their hearts," but the fuller translation matches our idiomatic way of speaking.

The author is not writing to non-believers with a logical apologetic designed to "prove" his case. Rather, he is writing to people who already believe. Those who have put

their trust in God don't need empirical arguments: they have the testimony of God's presence in their lives through the Spirit, as Jesus promised.

Those who do not believe can deny the divine testimony, but that doesn't make it less true. The author was consistently critical of opponents who denied the divinity of Jesus as the Christ. Their teachings were not just misleading; their refusal to believe the divine testimony was tantamount to calling God a liar (v. 10b).

### Testimony of life (vv. 11-13)

The errant teaching of those who denied Christ's divinity was not a minor doctrinal quibble, but serious business: denying God's own witness has eternal consequences. Thus, the author reprised his conviction that "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (vv. 11-12).

This testimony reminds us that eternal life is a gift of God. It did not originate with us or result from our own efforts. While humans may strive to live as long as possible on the earth, and some may go so far as to have their bodies or brains cryogenically frozen in hopes of being revived at a later date, eternal life is not something we can attain by our own efforts. If we are to have the hope of life that extends beyond this world, that hope must rest in God.

Secondly, John insists, "this life is in his Son." Our eternal hope is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is God's Son and therefore divine. Those who believe God's testimony and put their trust in Christ "have the Son," and thus have (eternal) life. Those who reject Jesus as God's Son do not have life, because they don't have Christ.

For the author, it was as simple as that.

With v. 13, John concludes his argument and begins drawing his letter to a close. With language reminiscent of John 20:31 and 1 John 1:4, 2:12-14, John reminds readers of his purpose in writing: he wants them to believe the truth and thus have a hope that others cannot know. "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." 📖

The ancient "fall story" of Genesis 3 is based on the premise that the serpent's words led Eve to doubt the testimony of God regarding which fruit should be eaten. The seed of doubt grew into the fruit of rebellion. John does not want his readers to be led astray by the tempting words of false teachers who question the identity of Jesus as the Son of God or the life made possible through Christ's redeeming work. He does not want them to doubt either Jesus' deity or their own salvation. Thus, he writes "so that you may *know* that you have eternal life." 📖

The word translated as "know" could also be rendered as "be sure." It is a strong word. In the face of misguided teaching that would lead them astray, John writes to assure believers that their salvation is secure.

A second verb is also significant: "so that you may know that you *have* eternal life." John did not think of eternal life as a future hope, but as a present possession. The life that true believers have in Christ is qualitatively different: the promise of eternal life puts our present life in a different perspective, enabling us to love, to risk, and to sacrifice for others in a way that those who are focused on self-survival cannot do. 📖


We can *know* that we *have* eternal life, John says. Can you imagine any promise more amazing than that? **NFJ**


# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 23, 2021

Psalm 104:24-34

## To Follow Jesus, Receive the Spirit

If your church is holding in-person services by this Sunday, you may notice red paraments on the pulpit in celebration of Pentecost Sunday, when the color red commemorates the flames associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit as recounted in the second chapter of Acts. 

While Acts 2 and 10 describe special events regarding the inflow of God's spirit, both the Old and New Testaments speak of God's spirit as a gift to humankind. 

Today's text, from Psalm 104:24-34, offers poetic insight into the ancient Hebrew understanding of God's spirit.

### The God who creates (vv. 24-26)

It is helpful, in overview, to read Psalms 103 and 104 together. They appear side by side for a reason: both psalms begin and end with the call to praise: "Bless the LORD, O my soul." While Psalm 103 commemorates God's mighty acts of salvation, Psalm 104 celebrates God's initial and ongoing acts of creation.

Psalm 104 is awash in metaphor, not unlike other imaginative attempts to describe creation in Genesis 1 and 2, Job 38-42, and Psalm 8.

*And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. (1 John 5:11)*


The psalm suggests a progression not unlike the familiar story found in Genesis 1: God creates the heavens first (vv. 2-4); then the earth and sea (vv. 5-9); followed by animals, plants, and people (vv. 10-26). Other elements of creation are scattered throughout (springs, vv. 10-13; the mountains, v. 18; the moon and sun, v. 19; even darkness, v. 20).

In Gen. 1:1-2:4a, God appears distant and creates by speaking alone, but here God is portrayed in much more personal or anthropomorphic terms, as in the second creation story, found in Gen. 2:4b-25. The psalmist describes God as being "clothed" with honor and majesty, and "wrapped in light" (vv. 1b-2a). God stretches out the heavens as a tent and sets beams for the heavenly abode above the cosmic waters (vv. 2b-3a). God uses the clouds as a chariot and rides on the wings of the wind (v. 3b).

Like a wise builder, God made the foundations of the earth firm, then covered its surface with water before setting the sea's boundaries (vv. 5-9).

Everything needed for life is attributed to divine causation: God makes springs to flow; causes grass to grow; and provides plants that humans can use to make bread, wine, and oil (vv. 14-15).


In beautiful, lyrical fashion, the psalmist credits God with putting the moon in place to order the annual calendar, even as the sun's light and the

darkness of night set the daily rhythm of life (vv. 19-20). 

Creatures of the land (including humans) and the vegetation that supports them are featured in vv. 10-23.

Today's text, starting at v. 24, begins with an expression of awe at God's magnificent work and the incomparable wisdom required to create such an amazing world and fill it with living creatures (v. 24).

The poet then shifts to the sea, noting that it is also teeming with life, from "creeping things innumerable" to "living things both small and great" (v. 25). Humans are there, too, albeit in ships, along with "Leviathan that you formed to sport in it" (v. 26).

Leviathan has a mixed reputation in scripture. In some texts, Leviathan is a fearful seven-headed sea serpent, a symbol of the forces of chaos that God had to overcome in creation. 

Here, however, Leviathan is portrayed simply as a great sea creature, a part of God's good creation, that plays in the sea. Ancient mariners would have seen the occasional whale, which may have contributed to stories of Leviathan.

### The God who provides (vv. 27-30)

With vv. 27-30 the psalmist turns from the theme of creation to provision: the same God who has created all things also sustains them.

"These all look to you to give them their food in due season" (v. 27) refers not only to the sea creatures of vv. 25-26, but also to all animal life, including humans, who gather the bounty of good things that come from God's hand (v. 28).

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This does not discount the work that humans do in tilling the ground, sowing seed, and caring for the plants as they grow (v. 23), but the ancients understood that crops needed rain in order to thrive. They believed that rain was the product of heaven's benevolence, and drought the result of divine displeasure. 🇺🇸

God provides more than rain for daily sustenance, however. The psalmist believed that life itself is due to God's favor, for the breath that enlivens all living creatures comes from God. "When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust," the psalmist declared, but "When you send forth your spirit, they are created ..." (vv. 29b-30a, NRSV).

With this reference to God's spirit, we have the text's closest connection to Pentecost. The Hebrew term translated as both "breath" and "spirit" in vv. 29-30 is *ruach* (ending with a hard "h" sound, as in "loch"). The same word can be translated as breath, spirit, or wind.

In this context, it is the breath of life. The sending forth of God's spirit creates life and renews creation: the word for "they are created" is the passive form of the same word used in Genesis 1 for God's creative activity.

In contrast, when God "gathers their breath" (a literal translation), living things die and return to "their dust," a reminder of their pre-created state.

The imagery recalls the creation story in Gen. 2:4b-25, in which God is also described in near-human form, actively creating: "then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). A different word for "breath" is used there, but the concept is the same.

The continuation of that story also

testifies that death involves a return to the ground, "for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19).

The psalmist saw God's spirit as the source of life, but the Hebrews also believed people could be blessed with the Spirit in exceptional ways, gaining a special closeness to God or unusual abilities. When Israel was in need and God called out strong leaders such as Othniel or Gideon to deliver and lead them, it was said that "the spirit of the LORD" (*ruach-Yahweh*) came upon them (Judg. 3:10, 6:34).

When Samuel anointed young David as the next king of Israel, the "spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward," even as "the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul" (1 Sam. 16:13-14).

When prophets spoke in God's behalf, it was believed that "the spirit of the LORD" inspired them (1 Kgs. 22:24, Ezek. 11:5, Mic. 3:8). When Isaiah spoke of a coming servant of the Lord in language that would later be applied to Christ, he emphasized that "the spirit of the LORD" would be upon him (Isa. 11:2, 61:1).

In all of these texts, the word is the same as in Ps. 104:29-30, but it implies more than life-giving breath. God's spirit can also provide wisdom, discernment, leadership, or surprising power.

### The God who empowers (vv. 31-35)

Reflecting on the creative, sustaining, life-giving power of God brings the psalmist to celebrate God's enduring power over creation (vv. 31-32). It also inspires a pledge that he will sing praise for as long as he possesses God's life-giving spirit: "I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being" (v. 33).

While v. 34 continues the poet's joyful acclamation, the first half of v. 35 comes as a bitter surprise, so jarring that the committee responsible for the lectionary chose to skip over it for the day's reading. Finding a text difficult is no reason for ignoring it, however, so we press on.

At the very end of his paean of praise to God, just before the closing benediction, the psalmist injects: "Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more" (v. 35a).

The malediction may be surprising, but is not entirely out of place. The poet is so high on God's creative and caring power that he wants to see God praised by all means possible, including his own meditations (v. 34).

The poet believed that those whom God has blessed with the spirit of life owe to God thanksgiving and praise. Indeed, he is so overcome with gratitude that the thought of people rejecting God's way leaves him thinking that such persons don't deserve to have God's life-giving spirit. Thus, he prays, "let the wicked be no more."

This may seem extreme, but we remember that the psalmist writes in poetic language. It is a negative way of emphasizing his positive message that God, as creator and sustainer of all life, is worthy of perpetual honor and praise.

We are unlikely to join the psalmist in wishing that all sinners would cease to exist, and not just for fear that we and our family and friends could be numbered among them.

Even so, we could profit from joining the psalmist in his meditation upon God's amazing and ongoing gifts to humankind. If we believe that God is responsible for the wonders of the natural world and for all life – including ours – then we certainly have cause to join the psalmist in praising God for as long as we live. 🇺🇸

How often do we remember? [NFIJ](#)

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 30, 2021

Isaiah 6:1-13

## A Strange Call

**T**hink back: can you remember a time when your mother called you to come in for dinner or to help with the dishes? Later in life, has one of your children called, needing your help in some area? At some point, have you received a call from an employer about a potential position?

Calls come in other forms, too. God calls each of us to live honorable lives and to love others as Christ loved us. Sometimes we may sense a particular call. You may have felt called to a ministry of volunteering in soup kitchens or food pantries, of visiting retirement homes, or tutoring children after school.

You may feel called to share your faith through teaching Sunday School, or to share your energy and knowledge on various church teams or committees.

All of us are called in some sense, but few have had an experience like that of young Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose story provides our text for this week. ↓

## A death and a vision (vv. 1-4)

Isaiah dated his call to “the year that King Uzziah died,” somewhere around 740 BCE. Uzziah, also known as Azariah, had become king during a period of relative peace, and he had led the kingdom of Judah for 40 years. ↓

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” (Isa. 6:8)*

Late in life, a serious skin disease that the Deuteronomist attributed to God’s displeasure forced Uzziah to live in isolation and surrender the throne to his son Jotham (2 Kgs. 15:5). Still, many would have mourned when the old king died.

In that memorable year, a devout young man with the imposing name “Isaiah” (meaning “Yahweh is salvation”) had a life-changing encounter with God. ↓

Isaiah’s first-person account reports that he felt transported to the main sanctuary room of the temple, before the smaller Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Two golden cherubim crowned the Ark, with their wings stretched toward each other. The Ark, a powerful talisman containing the Ten Commandments, was a tangible link to God: the Hebrews imagined that God’s presence was somehow manifest above the Ark. ↓

Isaiah’s powerful vision would surely have sent him into a sensory overload of awe-inspiring sight, sound, smell, and touch. The experience would doubtless have been frightening, for the ancients believed no one could see God and live (Gen. 32:30; Exod. 33:20; Deut. 4:33, 5:24, 26; Judg. 6:22, 13:22).

Isaiah described Yahweh as sitting on a “high and lofty” throne, clothed in such majesty that “the hem of his robe” filled the temple (v. 1). The prophet may have averted his eyes, for

he says nothing about God’s appearance other than the lowest part of the divine apparel, then quickly shifts to the heavenly attendants.

Impressive seraphs (or *seraphim*, the Hebrew plural) hovered about the throne, he said. “Seraph” means “burning one,” which may suggest a shining appearance or reflect the fiery imagery associated with the presence of God (Ezek. 1:27). ↓

The living seraphim of Isaiah’s vision recall the golden cherubim mounted on the ark. Cherubim typically were animal in form, though sometimes with human faces, and were usually represented in ancient iconography with two wings. ↓

The seraphim in Isaiah’s vision, however, had six wings: two for humility (covering the face), two for modesty (covering the “feet,” a Hebrew euphemism for genitals), and two for mobility (“with two they flew”).

The seraphs were apparently somewhat human in form or at least spoke in voices understandable to humans, for Isaiah declares that they joined in an antiphonal chorus declaring the magnitude of divine holiness and the extent of God’s pervasive glory (v. 3). “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” ↓

The seraphs’ singing was not the sweet, harp-playing music we tend to associate with heaven, but a vocal blast louder than an unfettered rock band. Their voices caused the heavy temple doors to shake in their pivots, Isaiah said, even as an impressive outpouring of smoke filled the sanctuary (v. 4).

Isaiah’s vision was a rare experience, but the text suggests that the

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prophet had put himself in the right position and prepared himself for an encounter with God. He may have been praying when the vision occurred. Can you think of intentional actions we might take to help us appreciate the majesty and holiness of God?

### A call and response (vv. 5-7)

The spectacular vision of Yahweh enthroned and the ear-blasting, door-shaking declaration of God's glorious holiness washed over Isaiah like a sonic tsunami, leaving him supremely aware of his smallness and unworthiness to witness such an impressive scene.

Even the great Isaiah could be frightened, for he cried "Woe is me! I am lost!" Isaiah's response may reflect the fear of imminent death as a result of seeing God, but he seems as concerned with what he has done as with what he has seen. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips," he said, "yet my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!" (v. 5).

Here was holiness, and Isaiah knew it when he saw it. He could not imagine that a sinful human could exist for long in the presence of such flaming purity. The sense of uncleanness associated with Isaiah's lips represents the entire person, rather than verbal transgressions alone. Isaiah's statement reflects his commonality with a people who had persistently rebelled against God.

Isaiah may have thought his life was over, but the vision did not kill him. He was correct in assuming that his sinfulness could not stand in the presence of divine purity, but incinerating the sinner was not God's only option.


A seraph flew toward Isaiah, bearing a live coal from the altar in a set of tongs, touching it to Isaiah's lips as the focal point of his confessed sin.

The fiery ritual was not torture, as we might expect, but the touch of salvation. As if the blazing ember had burned away Isaiah's past offenses, the seraph declared "your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out" (v. 7).

The thought of having a burning coal aimed at our mouths may sound horrifying, but we should not let the symbolism be lost on us. Can there be true confession without some measure of pain?

### A commission and a question (vv. 8-13)

Only after the ritual of cleansing did Isaiah hear the voice of God, who spoke as if expecting one of the heavenly attendants to respond: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (v. 8a).


Like Abraham (Gen. 22:1, 11), Jacob (Gen. 46:2), Moses (Exod. 3:4) and Samuel (1 Sam. 3:4, 6) before him, Isaiah first responded "Here I am." Unlike the others, however, God had not called Isaiah by name: he volunteered. "Send me!" (v. 9b). 

Isaiah's assignment would be more difficult than he could have imagined, for God's instructions seemed confusing, even paradoxical. Isaiah was to tell the people to listen without comprehending and to look without understanding (v. 9). He was to proclaim God's prophetic word of judgment to the Hebrews, but in a way that would cause them to harden their hearts and stop up their ears rather than repenting and finding forgiveness (v. 10).

*But why?* Such a command appears to make no sense. Didn't God want Israel to be saved? Why should Isaiah preach in such a way as to turn God's chosen ones away? Isaiah could not miss the inconsistency of the message. His plaintive "How long, O Lord?" (v. 11a) was not about timetables, but a cry

of protest.

God's response offered only a glimmer of hope. Isaiah was to preach until the land was laid waste by Israel's enemies, a divine punishment for centuries of rebellion. Such destruction would come during Isaiah's lifetime, as the Assyrian king Sennacherib defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel and scattered its inhabitants. The Assyrians then pushed into Judah, destroying nearly all of its fortified cities, laying siege to Jerusalem, and forcing the king to pay tribute.

Proclaiming such a message may still seem strange to us, but it appears that the verdict had already been given: the Hebrews' collective transgressions had earned them a prison sentence to be fulfilled in a future time of exile. Isaiah's preaching was to make abundantly clear what was about to happen and why it would happen, with no plea-bargaining allowed and the only hope being a remnant reminder, a stump or memorial containing a "holy seed" (v. 13). 

Such preaching may seem totally counterproductive to us, but it could have been an intentional rhetorical strategy. If Isaiah's audience was stubbornly refusing to hear his call for change, the prophet's insistence that God didn't want them to hear and understand might goad the people into listening more closely and responding with repentance.

Our land, no less than Isaiah's, is occupied by "a people of unclean lips," and not just because of trashy language. Even when it seems hopeless, God calls us to live as lights that shine into the darkness of this world, and to call other persons out of the gloom. The echoes of God's call to Isaiah will reverberate for as long as there are people in need of God's love: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

And will it be me? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

June 6, 2021

1 Samuel 8:1-22

## An Uncertain Demand

Only the most extreme anarchists would argue that a country does not need some sort of centralized government – but even they usually belong to groups that have recognized leaders!

Whether we think of clubs, corporations, or countries, good leaders are essential for growth and health.

We may grow tired of what seems to be a never-ending cycle of campaigns and elections, but we recognize the importance of good leaders, and we celebrate our ability to participate in their selection.

Today's text takes us back to Israel's first foray into kingship. Abraham's descendants had known many different leaders. During a period of transition and uncertainty, tribal leaders feared the future and concluded that the people needed something new: a king "like the other nations."

What did the people hope to accomplish? How would it turn out? And, can we learn anything from their experience?

We'll discuss these and other questions over the next several weeks, as we devote 10 lessons to texts from the narratives of 1–2 Samuel. The stories may seem "long ago and far away," but they raise timeless issues that can speak to us. 🇺🇸

*But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us . . ." (1 Sam. 8:19)*

### The elders' desire (8:1-6a)

The Bible portrays a situation in which the 12 tribes of Israel lived in a covenant arrangement with God. Samuel understood this to mean the Israelites should have no king other than God, whose divine leadership was mediated through inspired leaders known as judges: we might call it a "theocracy." 🇺🇸

Samuel was the last of the judges. He also served as Israel's singular priest, and was regarded as a prophet. Though he rarely left the territory of Benjamin and Judah, Samuel is described as having been highly respected as a spiritual leader by all the tribes.

But who would lead when Samuel died? Samuel had appointed his sons as judges in Beersheba, but they proved to be grifters, taking bribes and proving themselves unworthy of the elevated names Samuel had given them. 🇺🇸

As Samuel grew old, a group of tribal leaders came to him with an observation and a request: "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations" (v. 5).

The elders' request seemed eminently reasonable. The tribes were scattered across a large area, bound only by a loose federation. There was no central government, no standing army, no system in place to protect the borders. Meanwhile, the Philistines to the west and the Ammonites to the east

had strong leaders who commanded well-equipped armies.

If Israel was to survive, the elders believed, they would need a strong leader with the authority to conscript an army, levy taxes to support it, and lead the nation's forces against its enemies.

Human reason pointed toward choosing a strong monarch, but "the thing displeased Samuel" (v. 6a). He was committed to the theocratic ideal that Israel should be ruled by Yahweh alone, with judges or prophets mediating God's instructions and a faithful priesthood as the guardian of the law.

In Samuel's mind, God had proven quite capable of calling out divinely inspired judges in times of national emergency. Had not Samuel himself proved to be an effective leader as prophet, priest, and judge? Had not God responded to Samuel's prayer and delivered Israel from the Philistines in the battle of Mizpah (1 Samuel 7)? The old priest regarded the elders' request as a personal rejection.

### The prophet's warning (vv. 6b-18)

The story suggests that Samuel broke off the interview without giving an answer, retiring to take his concerns to God in prayer (v. 6b). Samuel might have expected God to be equally upset and to unleash some sort of punishment on the upstart elders, but the response is more complicated than that.

According to the narrator, God recognized that the people had rejected the ideal of divine leadership for the earthly model of kingship, but God did not give up on them. As Samuel prayed, God comforted the vexed prophet: "they have not rejected you, but they

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have rejected me from being king over them” (v. 7).

The Israelites had a long history of rebellion, God reminded him, from the days they emerged from Egypt to the present, forsaking Yahweh for other gods and forsaking God’s chosen leaders for their own ideas.

Knowing the elders’ determination to choose a different path, God instructed Samuel to “listen to their voice” and give them a king – but not without a severe warning of what it would cost them in freedom, in property, and in people (v. 9).

Samuel’s warning overlooked the positives and emphasized only the most negative practical aspects of kingship. 📌 Young men would be taken from their chores at home and trained for the military. Other sons would be assigned to work in the king’s fields or to manufacture weapons, armor, and chariot equipment for the army (vv. 11-12).

Daughters, likewise, would be conscripted to work in support of the king’s palace as “perfumers, cooks, and bakers” (v. 13). 📌 No doubt there would have been limits as to how many children could be drafted and to the length of their service – conscripts for temple construction would later work in month-long rotating shifts (1 Kgs. 5:13-14) – but Samuel had no interest in tempering the warning: his emphasis was on what the king would take.

The king’s acquisitions would go beyond human capital to include tangible property: Samuel insisted that the king would confiscate “the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards” for royal use in support of his “courtiers” (v. 14). 📌

Furthermore, Samuel claimed that the king would also require a flat tax of 10 percent from the agrarian population’s produce, specifically grain and wine (v. 15), to support the administra-

tion.

Stretching the specifics for maximum effect, Samuel added a warning that male and female servants, in addition to “the best of your cattle and donkeys,” would be taken from landowners and put to work serving the government (v. 16).

As if a tax on grain and wine were not enough, Samuel promised that a tenth of all the food-producing cattle and flocks would be taken, concluding “and you shall be his slaves” (v. 17). The final phrase, literally “you shall be servants for him,” was a reminder that the king would demand obedience and the people would have to answer to him. 📌

Having painted such a disheartening picture, Samuel saw no good future: “you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day” (v. 18). 📌

### The people’s choice (vv. 19-22)

In so many words, Samuel was issuing an advance “I told you so,” and warning the elders that there would be no sympathy for them when life under a king made them regret their choice and come crying to God.

Perhaps Samuel hoped they would change their minds, but the elders were not dissuaded (v. 19). Despite the cost, they were determined to have a king “so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles” (v. 20).

The Israelites were quite aware that neighboring nations profited from having a centralized government under an inspiring military leader who led his own troops into battle. Having a king made perfect sense to them.

Samuel could see only the negative side of kingship, but the elders focused

on what they saw as positives. Samuel saw Israel’s demand for a king as sinful rejection of God’s way, while the people saw it as a realistic need for changing times. 📌

The narrator, writing many years after the people had experienced both good and bad kings, could see both sides. As he tells it, the most notable aspect of the story is the surprising grace, flexibility, and generosity of God.

When the people rejected “Plan A,” God did not write them off, but remained faithful and assented to “Plan B.”

God knew that a king who followed God’s way could be an effective leader who would bless the nation – but a wicked or ineffectual king could pose a grave danger.

There was potential for good or bad – as there had been all along. God chose not to give up on the Israelites. Like a loving parent who works hard to relate to his or her children on their own level, God was willing to meet the people of Israel where they were and to work with them in whatever way was possible.

Can modern believers learn from this ancient story? We know that we are prone to fall short of God’s ideal for us. We are prone to trust our way over God’s way. Yet, God does not cast us aside or give up hope that we may yet prove faithful.

God blesses us with grace and new opportunities to grow in faithfulness.

Samuel did not know, as we do, that one day God would go to even greater lengths to meet humankind on our own plane of existence. Through the incarnation of Christ, God came to us, loved us, redeemed us, and taught us what it means to live in the one kingdom that ultimately matters: the kingdom of God.

And there’s nothing negative about that. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 13, 2021

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

## An Unexpected King

**H**ave you ever been on a club or church committee whose chair was an ineffectual leader? Or suppose it's the CEO of a company who proves to be inept – or the president of the country. What do you do?


Committee chairs often rotate, company boards can fire the CEO, and regular elections can put a new president in the White House. Making leadership changes is often quite messy, but it can be done.

What do you do, however, if the lousy leader is a king? Kings don't answer to anyone, and they don't have term limits.


Such was the problem facing the aged priest Samuel in today's text. He was convinced that Saul, Israel's first king, was an abysmal failure. He was sorry that he had chosen him, and was convinced that God also regretted the choice.

What to do?

### A problem for Saul (15:34-35)

Last week's lesson explored how the elders of Israel asked for a king, and why Samuel opposed the idea. God instructed Samuel to grant the people's request, but not before warning them of the consequences of their actions. 

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

Three different accounts recall Saul's elevation to the kingship. Samuel acknowledged the new king as Israel's political leader, but promised to keep an eye on him. 

It turned out to be a jaundiced eye.

Samuel had given Israel a king who was destined to fail, in large part because Samuel would not hesitate to chastise him in public, undermining his leadership.

The narrator, wanting to reinforce the covenant stipulation that God would bless obedience but curse the unfaithful, chose to highlight Saul's failures while minimizing his successes.

He could not overlook some significant accomplishments for Saul: 1 Sam. 11:1-11 describes a resounding victory over the Ammonites, for example, and a short summary in 1 Sam. 14:47-48 says Saul "did valiantly" in striking against the Ammonites, the Edomites, the people of Zobah, and the Philistines: "wherever he turned he routed them." When David composed an elegy for Saul after his death, he credited Saul with enriching the nation, presumably through plundering others he had defeated (2 Sam. 1:24).


The writer, however, is more interested in Saul's deficiencies. In the story describing how Saul was first anointed by Samuel, an accompanying servant appears more astute than Saul (1 Samuel 9:1-10:13). After Samuel chose Saul

by lot and proclaimed him king, some refused to support him, a foreshadowing of disrespect (1 Sam. 10:27).

Samuel once told Saul not to go into battle before he came to offer sacrifices, but Samuel delayed so long in coming that the soldiers started deserting. In desperation, Saul offered the sacrifice himself, earning a tongue-lashing from the old priest, who said God had rejected him and would choose "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:8-15).

The final straw fell when Samuel told Saul that God wanted him to attack and exterminate the Amalekites, a tribal people who had previously troubled the Israelites. Saul won a resounding victory, but left many Amalekites alive, including the king. Samuel raged at Saul again (1 Sam. 15:22-23), refused to accept Saul's plea for forgiveness, and insisted that God would tear the kingdom away and give it to "a neighbor of yours, who is better than you" (1 Sam. 15:28).

One might be tempted to think that Samuel, who opposed the notion of kingship from the start, would have found some satisfaction in the king's disappointing performance. The text insists, however, that Samuel grieved over Saul, using an intensive form of the verb "to mourn" (15:35a).

While Samuel expressed sorrow over Saul, the narrator insists that Yahweh also regretted having chosen him: "And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (15:35b, NRSV). 

### A new job for Samuel (16:1-5)

Saul failed and Samuel wailed, but life must go on – a lesson that all people who face loss or disappointment must

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learn. Verses 1-3 describe a pointed conversation between God and the priestly prophet.

With a sharp admonishment, Yahweh told Samuel to stop crying over Saul and travel to Bethlehem, where God would point out a certain son of Jesse – presumably a “man after God’s own heart” – so Samuel could anoint him as the next king (16:10).

For Samuel, however, there was a problem: Saul was still alive and well – and probably steaming over the public berating that Samuel had given him. While Saul’s popular support lay among the northern tribes, Bethlehem was in the territory of Judah, where the populace was more suspicious of the king.

Samuel feared that if Saul heard of his trip to Bethlehem, the king might think he was fomenting rebellion, and have him killed. To ease Samuel’s fear, Yahweh told him to take a young heifer along. If anyone questioned his motives, he could insist that God had sent him to offer a sacrifice: no one could argue with that (16:2).

Samuel obeyed, and as he approached Bethlehem, the local elders were just as suspicious of him as Saul might have been. Perhaps they feared that Samuel had come to spy on them and report unfriendly activities to Saul. Thus, the first question of his “welcoming committee” was “Do you come peaceably?” (16:3-4).

With his excuse for travel standing calmly at the end of a short halter, Samuel insisted that he had simply come to offer a sacrifice. He invited all of the elders to go and ritually consecrate themselves, then return to share the sacrificial meal with him. 📌

Whether the elders returned or not, we do not know; they disappear from the story. Only Jesse and his sons remain, and Samuel consecrated them personally (16:5).

### A new king for Israel (16:6-13)

The narrator takes clear delight in the unfolding drama of how David was chosen as the next king. As Jesse brought his sons forward, oldest first, Samuel appeared to have thought his job was done. Eliab, whose name means “My God is Father,” was so impressive that Samuel surmised “Surely the LORD’S anointed is now before the LORD” (16:6).

Perhaps Eliab was physically impressive – but that had not helped Saul, who was notably tall (1 Sam. 10:23-24). God judged by different standards. “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature,” the Lord said to Samuel, “because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (16:7).

Eliab was not chosen, despite his firstborn status and his impressive appearance. Nor was the next son, Abinadab, or the next one, Shammah. Samuel watched Jesse parade no less than seven sons before him without so much as a holy nudge to indicate God’s choice (16:8-10).

Knowing that he had followed God’s instructions to the letter, Samuel pressed Jesse, asking if he had brought *all* of his sons to the sacrifice. When Jesse admitted that he had left his youngest son David to care for the sheep, the angry prophet instructed him to send for him, and refused to let anyone sit down while they waited for his arrival (16:11). 📌

As Samuel, Jesse, and his sons await David’s arrival, the reader also waits. While skillfully building suspense, the narrator also leads us to imagine that David might be inordinately small or ugly, since God had insisted that outer appearances didn’t matter. We are surprised, then, when David appears and the storyteller gushes

at how handsome he is.

David’s complexion was ruddy, the author tells us, suggesting that he had fair skin that allowed one to see a blush in his cheeks. The author adds that David had beautiful eyes, and was handsome (literally, “a good appearance,” 16:12a).

The young man’s appearance was only a bonus, however. There was something special *inside* of David that only God could see, and soon Samuel sensed God’s direction: “This is the one: arise and anoint him!” (16:12b).

We may imagine how Samuel drew out a polished ram’s horn filled with olive oil mixed with aromatic spices, and then poured it over David’s head so that it ran through his dark curly hair, cascaded down his face, and puddled in the folds of his tunic. 📌

As the anointing oil brought a shine to David’s face, the text suggests an inner glow was emerging in David’s heart: “The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David,” the narrator says, “*from that day forward*” (v. 13). Years would pass before David would become king, indeed, but God’s Spirit would be with him every step of the way.

We learned in 1 Sam. 13:14 that God intended to choose a new king after God’s own heart. Later, Paul insisted that David fit the bill (Acts 13:22). 📌

Think for a bit about the implications of that phrase. What do you think it means to be a person “after God’s own heart”?

Kings and other leaders are not the only people called to live as God desires.

As we read this story through the lens of the New Testament, we recall Jesus’ straightforward insistence that believers are called to love God, and to love others as Christ loved us.

That’s what it means to be a person after God’s own heart, a productive citizen in the kingdom of God, whatever our station. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 20, 2021

1 Samuel 17:1-58

## A Bold Beating

Can you think of any Old Testament account more widely known than the story of David and Goliath? We learn it as children – often inaccurately – with colorful pictures of David as a child going against his monumental adversary.

Like the Hebrews, we love stories in which an unexpected hero emerges to defeat a superior power. We cheer when Luke Skywalker eludes the Empire’s defenses to destroy the Death Star. We weep when persevering Frodo the humble Hobbit defeats the mighty Sauron by casting the One Ring into the Cracks of Doom. And we love it when the young shepherd David brings down Goliath with a well-placed sling stone. 📖

### A fearsome Philistine (vv. 1-11)

The story introduces us to David, as if for the first time. 📖 It is set in the valley of Elah, which runs west to east from the coastal plain to the highlands. The conflict occurred about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem, between the hilltop towns of Socoh and Azekah. 📖

The Philistine troops apparently had overrun the western fortress of Azekah and set their sights on Socoh, just 14 miles west of Bethlehem. Before

*David said, “The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.” So Saul said to David, “Go, and may the LORD be with you!” (1 Sam. 17:37)*

they reached Socoh, however, Saul’s army came down and intercepted them near a place called Ephes-dammim, leading to a standoff.

The army camps faced each other, with the Israelites on the north ridge and the Philistines on the south. They must have been evenly matched, for although they would array in formation on either side of the valley each day, neither would make the first move onto the vulnerable valley floor.

The Philistines chose to engage in psychological warfare by sending out their most imposing champion to challenge Israel’s best fighter to one-on-one combat, a practice not unknown in ancient conflicts. 📖

The Philistine warrior is named only in vv. 4 and 23, where he is called Goliath (*golyāt*), from Gath. Elsewhere, he is called “the Philistine” only. 📖

The narrator expresses a fascination with Goliath’s large girth and the gigantic size of his various armaments. Indeed, he spends more time describing the champion’s armor than he does on the entire battle (vv. 4-7, 48-49).

The Hebrew text claims that Goliath was nearly 10 feet tall (six cubits and a span), though the Greek version ascribes a more likely height of about 6 feet 9 inches (four cubits and a span). That uncommon height would have been exceptional in ancient times. 📖

Despite his size advantage, Goliath

took few chances. He was armored heavily from head to toe with a helmet, scale armor, and bronze greaves that together would have weighed more than a hundred pounds. An assistant stood before him holding a large shield. Goliath had a bronze javelin (or possibly a scimitar) strapped to his back, and a spear in his hand with a shaft “like a weaver’s beam.” The iron spearhead alone weighed 15 pounds, according to the story.

Does that sound formidable? The ploy apparently worked, for the Israelites “were dismayed and greatly afraid” (v. 12). No one dared to challenge Goliath, not even Saul, who was known for being head and shoulders taller than any man in Israel – a king who had been sought “to go before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam. 8:20).

### A fearless farmer (vv. 12-37)

With v. 12 we are again introduced to David as the son of Jesse of Bethlehem, the youngest of eight sons. His three oldest brothers had been called out to supplement Saul’s small professional army, and it was David’s job to alternate between tending the family sheep and carrying provisions to his brothers (vv. 12-16).

Forty days into the stalemate, Jesse assigned David to take bread and cheese to his brothers and their commanding officer, and to return with word of his brothers’ welfare (vv. 17-18).

The errand would involve a journey of at least 14 hilly miles, some of it contested territory. Would Jesse have sent a child on such an errand? David may have been the youngest

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of his brothers, but he was clearly a responsible young adult.

When David arrived, the armies were in formation, but not fighting, with Goliath alone daring a rival to come forward (vv. 20-23). Some of the troops told David that Saul had promised rich rewards for anyone who could kill the fearsome foe: a monetary prize, the right to marry one of his daughters, and freedom (probably from taxation or conscription) for his family (vv. 24-25).

David was intrigued by the potential reward, but mainly shocked that no one would challenge the enemy champion: “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (v. 26).

David’s brother Eliab berated him for his braggadocio, accusing David of having bad intentions: “I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle” (v. 28b).<sup>U</sup> David was undeterred, and continued to speak “in the same way,” expressing dismay that no one had challenged Goliath.

Those were fighting words, and David’s fault-finding soon reached Saul, who called for him. David did not back down, but maintained his position, insisting that he would be happy to fight the frightening Philistine (vv. 31-32).

Saul demurred, noting that David was “just a boy,” while Goliath had trained as a warrior from his youth (v. 33). The word translated “boy” is *na’ar*, which could be used to describe a male from infancy up through marriageable age. Saul clearly contrasted David’s youthfulness with the Philistine’s maturity, but David was no child. He insisted that he had killed both lions and bears who had threatened his father’s sheep, “and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God” (v. 36).

Note what was different about David: he appears to be the only one in Israel’s camp who believed that God could help. While the others may have acknowledged Yahweh as a national deity or symbol, David believed in a *living God* who would fight for Israel.

David’s bravado was convincing enough that Saul allowed him to volunteer: “Go, and may the LORD be with you!” (v. 37).

### A fight to the finish (vv. 38-58)

Saul offered the use of his armor, but David declined – not because he couldn’t wear it, but because he was unaccustomed to it. And, David had no intention of fighting Goliath in close quarters: he was not infantry, but artillery. He had already seen Goliath’s weak spot, and would not need armor to exploit it. All he needed was ammunition for his sling (vv. 38-40).<sup>U</sup>

Goliath may have trained in hand-to-hand combat, but David had spent much of his life using a sling to repel predators and protect his sheep: and slings were deadly. While the storyteller had built suspense while painting Goliath as nearly invulnerable, he had hinted at a potential weakness: under the heavy armor, Goliath could not have moved quickly, and his face was unprotected.

As David approached Goliath, the two engaged in a battle of words. Taking note of David’s youth and shepherd’s staff, the Philistine apparently took offense that they would send a novice against him “with sticks.”

“Come to me,” he said, “and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field” (vv. 42-43). Goliath cursed David by his gods, and David answered in kind.

“You come to me with sword and spear and javelin,” he shouted, “but I come to you in the name of the

LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied” (v. 45). David declared his intention to decapitate the Philistine and lead a rout resulting in the Philistines becoming carrion for scavengers, “so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give you into our hand” (vv. 46-47).

We know the rest of the story. Running toward the slow-reacting giant, David loosed a stone that blasted the Philistine between the eyes, knocking him down and leaving him either dead or unconscious. He then took Goliath’s sword and cut off his head, demoralizing the Philistines, who fled before the Israelites, leaving many dead in their wake (vv. 48-54).<sup>U</sup>

The story closes with a second interview with the king, in which Saul surprisingly does not know David and has to be introduced to him again (vv. 55-58).

The story of David’s confident and courageous victory reminds us that we all face obstacles that may seem giant-sized, but we don’t face them alone. Only David trusted in a living God who could work through his skill in order to overcome: he had more trouble in convincing his discouraged compatriots than he did in defeating the opponent.

The trials we face come in many forms, for life can be rife with difficulties. We don’t need slingstones to overcome, but we do need courageous faith and confidence in the abilities God has given us. What appear as obstacles may in fact be opportunities for growth.

We can choose to be fearful, or we can choose to trust and keep on going. If we don’t believe in a *living God* who cares about us, then what are we about? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 27, 2021

2 Samuel 1:1-27

## A Strategic Lament

Are you the sort of person who reads the obituaries in the newspaper, if only to make sure you're not among them? Obituaries are generally fairly dry accounts, summarizing one's life all-too-briefly, often giving more attention to "survivors" left behind than to the person who departed.

If emotions are mentioned, it is usually limited to a statement of how much the person loved his or her family, and how much they will be missed. With the advent of COVID-19 and the demands of isolation, however, some families have used the obituary for expressing anger at the way their loved ones died.

"She died alone, accompanied only by the sound of a ventilator, with no one to comfort her," wrote one grieving family. "It shouldn't have to be this way."

Others have used obituaries to blame their loved one's death on the unwillingness of others, including the former president, to take the disease seriously.

Today's lesson includes a heartfelt elegy for King Saul. It was written by a man Saul had often tried to kill, but who remained loyal just the same. ↓

*How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished! (2 Sam. 1:27)*

### When bad news arrives ... (vv. 1-16)

The lectionary text for today skips vv. 2-15, but the story is incomplete without them, so we'll consider the entire text. As 2 Samuel begins, we realize that it is so tightly bound to the end of 1 Samuel that the first word, in Hebrew, is "and" – "And it happened that, after Saul's death, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained in Ziklag for two days" (v. 1, my translation). ↓

This bit of background reminds the reader why the arrival of a messenger bearing news of Saul's death put David in a very awkward situation for a man who would be king over all Israel. ↓

David was living in Ziklag because Saul had grown paranoid, and had sought on several occasions to kill him as an unwanted rival. To avoid Saul's assassination attempts, David had ostensibly allied himself with Israel's archenemy, the Philistines (1 Samuel 27).

Achish had called up David and his 600 fighting men to join the Philistine forces in fighting Israel, but the other Philistine lords did not trust David, so he and his men were sent back to Ziklag (1 Sam. 29:1-11). ↓

During their absence, however, a band of Amalekites had plundered the city and captured the women and children. David and his men, though weary from their journey, pursued and defeated the Amalekites, rescuing their families and goods before returning to

Ziklag (1 Samuel 30).

First Samuel, then, ends with a triumphant victory for David, even as Saul dies in a bitter defeat on the slopes of Mount Gilboa (ch. 31).

This necessary background helps us to appreciate David's delicate position when a certain Amalekite approached, claiming to have "escaped from the camp of Israel." This would imply that he had fought on Israel's behalf, and his torn clothes and dirt-strewn appearance bore the expected marks of ritual grief (vv. 2-3). ↓

As the Amalekite told his tale (vv. 4-10), we note several differences from the account of Saul's death in 1 Samuel 31. The man mentions the deaths of Saul and Jonathan only, for example, while 1 Samuel 31 records the death of three royal sons. The armor bearer who refused to kill Saul in 1 Samuel 31 does not appear in the Amalekite's tale.

Also, 1 Samuel 31 suggests that Saul fought from the mountain crags, where only the Philistine archers could reach him. In 2 Samuel 1, however, the Amalekite insisted that the Philistine chariots and horsemen were bearing down on Saul. Chariots could not have traversed the mountain paths where 1 Samuel 31 says Saul had chosen to make his last stand.

The first story insists that Saul feared capture and had fallen upon his own sword when his man-at-arms refused to slay him. The Amalekite, however, claims that Saul was wounded, leaning on his spear and enduring convulsions (or perhaps, dizziness). At Saul's plaintive request, the Amalekite claimed, he took pity on the doomed man and put him out of

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his misery. Not wanting Saul's crown and royal armband to fall into Philistine hands, he had brought them to David (vv. 6-10).

While this may suggest nothing more than a variant tradition, the author may have intended for us to suspect that the messenger was lying – that he was no mercenary fighting for Israel, but a battlefield scavenger who hoped that David would reward him for dispatching Saul and bringing the royal insignia. As an Amalekite, he was automatically suspect.

David had nothing else to go on but the Amalekite's word, and he granted him an unexpected reward: a quick execution for having harmed "the LORD's anointed" (vv. 13-16), something he himself had studiously avoided (1 Sam. 24:6-7, 26:11).

David's actions also had a strategic purpose. As someone known and loved in both Judah and Israel, but currently allied with the Philistines, he was in a delicate position. If he was to have any future as a leader, it was crucial that he emphasize his own innocence in Saul's death and his displeasure with it, lest others think of him as being complicit in the king's fall.

All of us meet unexpected obstacles from time to time. David proved to be a quick thinker who was skilled at making the best of a bad situation. Can you think of a time when you were able to convert an apparent impediment to your advantage?

### **When it's time for grief ... (vv. 17-27)**

David's grief for the loss of Saul and Jonathan appears genuine, born of his deep love and friendship with Jonathan, and his respect for King Saul. When he heard the news, his first reaction was to tear his clothes, weep openly, and begin a period of fasting as he mourned their

deaths (vv. 11-12).

We should never run from sorrow or fear our tears. Some of us may feel that we've had more than our share of loss, but all of us must face sorrow: it is a part of life. David was unashamed to grieve the death of his liege and the loss of his closest friend. If we try to "be strong" or "keep a stiff upper lip" and stifle our grief, it won't go away. Unresolved grief can manifest itself in any number of stress-related illnesses, in impatience with others, in broken relationships.

Grief should not be unending, and the sort of self-pity that leads some to wallow in their grief is unhealthy, but good grief allows us to work through loss and move on to what is next.

In the midst of his own sadness, David strategically used the occasion for his political advantage by writing and publicizing a plaintive, heart-rending lament. 📖 He then ordered that "The Song of the Bow" (v. 18, perhaps a popular title of the song, or the tune) should be taught throughout Judah, the large tribal area that was his homeland. 📖

Samuel had anointed David as the future king years before (1 Sam. 16:1-13), so he would have had a sense of royal destiny. He understood, however, that he could not expect God to do everything for him: he would have to be wise in his actions and speech. Saul's death opened a door of opportunity for David, but he knew it was important that the populace should know that he grieved and honored both the former king and his heir.

David may have sensed that he would be the next king, but he did not wish to appear eager for the job, or to give the appearance that he sought the position.

The lament consists of two unequal stanzas that are bracketed by the recur-

ring refrain, "How the mighty have fallen!" The first section speaks to the loss of Saul and Jonathan together (vv. 20-24): the "glory" of Israel lies slain upon the high places, he says. 📖

"Tell it not in Gath ... proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon" is a fruitless wish that the Philistine women would not learn of Saul's death and dance in the streets of those major Philistine cities.

In v. 21, David utters a mournful curse against the mountain of Gilboa, where Saul died, calling for it to become barren of rain and fertility. He recalls Saul and Jonathan as valiant soldiers who would have killed their share of Philistines and not have surrendered without a fight (vv. 22-24).

The second stanza mourns Jonathan alone (vv. 25b-26), voicing David's distress over the death of Jonathan, not just as a champion, but as a dear friend. "Greatly beloved were you to me," David laments, "your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (v. 26, see "The Hardest Question" online for further comment).

The thrice-repeated refrain (vv. 19, 25a, 27) may have been voiced by the congregation if the lament was read or sung in a public setting, allowing them to participate in the community expression of grief. 📖

David's genuine expression of sorrow reminds us of the importance of integrity. While some may have questioned David's motives, few could question his grief.

The text also reminds us of how God may work with us to bring something good even from tragic situations. The Israelites' defeat and Saul's death were national disasters, but they set the stage for David's rise as God's chosen leader over a renewed nation. Saul was dead, but David was also the Lord's anointed. **NFJ**

# Stan Lott was stalwart educator, really good person

BY WALTER “BUDDY” SHURDEN

Not many movies have such memorable scenes as *Scent of a Woman*, starring Al Pacino and Chris O'Donnell. There's the one where *blind* Pacino races a Ferrari convertible down the streets of New York City.

In another, with Gabrielle Anwar, Pacino, after getting his coordinates from his friend Charlie, tangos with such incredible flare and unmitigated confidence. But my favorite scene comes at the end.

Pacino walks into a crowded assembly at a prestigious boys' school. With his driver's assistance, he makes his way down the aisle and up on the rostrum where he takes a seat by his young friend, Charlie.

Accused because he would not snitch on his schoolmates at the Baird School, Charlie is in a humiliating trial before the entire student body and faculty. Pacino interrupts the proceedings to utter a stirring defense:

I'm not a judge or jury. But I can tell you this: [Charlie] won't sell anybody out to buy his future. And that, my friends, is called integrity! That's called courage! Now that's the stuff leaders should be made of. Now I have come to the crossroads in my life. I always knew what the right path was. Without exception, I knew. But I never took it. You know why? It was too damn hard. Now here's Charlie. He's come to the crossroads. He has chosen a path. It's the right path. It's a path made of principle — that leads to character. Let him continue on his journey.

After suffering some hideous dementia, my friend Stan Lott's beautiful, muscular brain shut down on Friday, Feb. 5. He leaves us as one consumed with integrity.

Possessing one of the most principled



spines I ever knew, Stan would never sell you out. He was one of the few male priests I ever had. And God knows we all need two or three priests like that in life.

He would never let you sell others out either. He helped lead the fight against Baptist fundamentalism in Louisiana. Fundamentalism, he thought, both distorted Baptist ideals and defamed Baptist leaders. He came off the bench, refusing to sit on the sidelines. He could not be muffled. He was fearless.

But Stan was as kind as he was principled. When I posted on Facebook about Stan's death, one wrote back: "He was as kind as he was distinguished, as affable as he was intelligent."

Another said, "What a stand-up gentleman ... and a superb professor, example, leader, friend and encourager." And yet another, "He was a skilled academic leader and an honorable man of principle."

I first met Stan at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 1958, beginning a friendship that lasted more than 60 years. Together we earned our B.D. and Th.D. degrees, Stan writing his dissertation on "The Significance of Man in Karl Barth's Theology." Later he earned a second doctorate, one in higher education, from the University of Georgia.

Stan served for 13 years as a popular professor of religion and sociology at Tift College in Georgia. Then for 16 years he was the innovative vice president of academic

affairs at Louisiana College, his alma mater, and an ardent defender of faculty freedoms.

He served as president of Chowan College in North Carolina for the last seven years of his career, before he and Johnnye Jo, his devoted and talented wife, returned to central Louisiana in retirement.

Stan rooted his life in churches in Georgia, Louisiana and North Carolina. He sang in the choir and served on every major committee, including chair of the deacons, at the Immanuel Baptist Church in Alexandria, La. By the way he lived, he hardwired Baptist higher education to local Baptist churches.

It is the stuff of eulogies, but true: Stan was courageous and compassionate; he was skilled and smart; he was distinguished and deeply unpretentious. And he loved to laugh.

My wife says that when women like one another, they compliment each other. But men, when they like one another, insult one another. I jested with no one as much as Stan.

Like our laughter, our insults were therapeutic. My jests were not signs that I simply *liked* Stan; I *loved* him as much as I have loved any male outside my immediate family.

For years, Stan, Kirby Godsey, Don Midkiff, Suthern Sims and I gathered every weekend before Thanksgiving at St. Simons Island for three days of marathon poker. Stan left the table only to watch on TV his LSU Tigers play football. He played as hard as he worked.

To invert a line from the movie *Shadowlands*, the pain of his leaving today is all because of the happiness he brought us yesterday. I will cherish all the yesterdays with Dr. Stanley G. Lott, one of this generation's stalwart educators among Baptists and a really good human being. [NEJ](#)

—Church historian Walter B. Shurden is retired from Mercer University.

# Learning to tell a truer, more complex story

BY JANA PETERSON

As a 31-year-old, stay-at-home mother of four, I just knew the world was about to end on Inauguration Day, 2009. Everyone I trusted had told me so.

In the faith community in which I grew up, children were to honor their parents (Ephesians 6:1). Young adults were to respect their elders (implied in Titus 2:1-10). The possibility of asking critical questions was slim to none. So I believed and lived in the way I was told.

I felt palpable fear when President Obama was inaugurated. I was afraid for my family, and didn't know how to prepare for the inevitable apocalypse. Looking back, I was a dyed-in-the-wool Christian nationalist.

In her book, *Jesus and John Wayne*, Kristin Kobes Du Mez defines Christian nationalism as “the belief that America is God's chosen nation and must be defended as such.”

Sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, in *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, write: “Christian nationalism is a cultural framework — a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems — that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civil life.”

In my private Christian high school, *The Light and The Glory* by Peter Marshall and David Manuel was assigned reading. The book declared that Columbus' discovery of the new world and the colonists' subsequent establishment of America were not accidental, but ordained by God, as the founding fathers claimed in their journals.

America was the new promised land, established by the providential hand of God to be a light to the whole world. “God's call on this country has never been revoked,” the authors claimed while implying it could

be rescinded.

These were some seeds of Christian nationalism in my own life, but there was another story I did not know.

In her TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie notes the perils of reducing complex human relationships to a single, overarching metanarrative: “Show a people as one thing and only one thing over and over again and that is what they become.”

The stories we tell shape us in powerful ways. Stereotypes, created by our single stories, rob people of their dignity while closing us off from transformation.

Christian nationalism relentlessly pushes a single story about America. Whitehead and Perry identify key components of this exclusive narrative, including the belief that the U.S. should be declared a Christian nation and the government should advocate for “Christian values.”

Separation of church and state is weakened in favor of visible displays of Christian symbols in public spaces. The return of government-sponsored Christian prayer to public schools is sought since the nation's success is divinely ordained.

According to their research: 51.9 percent of Americans, 78 percent of evangelical Protestants, and 80 percent of Republicans support the claims of Christian nationalism.

The stories that get erased when we tell a single narrative of our history are those that do not support the values of the dominant storytellers. The editors of *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations* (Smith, Lalitha and Hawk) note that overarching metanarratives tend to “collapse all of human events in a comprehensive history.”

Such storytellers can easily become

“reductive, coercive, racist, colonialist, and sexist in their choices of which narratives to include and which to erase...”

Maintaining the myth comes at a high cost — “and involves loss of life, suppression of culture and denial of autonomy to those who stand in the way of the supposed mythic destiny of the powerful.”

Our patriotism, however, must be vulnerable enough to acknowledge all of our country's history, not simply the nostalgic, mythical glory days, which were really only glorious for those with privilege and power.

As Adichie affirms: “When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.”

I found this to be true. My single story changed when I found the courage to ask questions — and discovered that my own story was much more complex than I originally understood.

When I took my story to a community that courageously sat with me, I found Jesus' comforting presence. This allowed me to ask more questions, to see a more complex story of America's past and present, and to understand the atrocities done to Indigenous, Black and other people of color — in the name of American progress — that continue today.

On Inauguration Day, 2021, many BIPOC women, whose traditionally marginalized stories had expanded my own, celebrated by wearing their Converse Chuck Taylor All-Stars shoes and pearls to honor the incoming Vice President. Their joy shaped my own.

There is much work to be done, but my hope will not be deterred. Telling a truer, more complex story invites us to lament, but points us toward liberty and justice for all. [NFJ](#)

—Jana Peterson of Bozeman, Montana, is an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Intern with Good Faith Media.



# Ronald Reagan (1981–1989): Part Two

By Bruce Gourley

During his first year as president, Ronald Reagan repeatedly conjured up dark memories of the past, proclaiming in 1981 that America was “in the worst economic mess since the Great Depression.” The way forward, he insisted, was tax cuts and reduced federal spending.

A “reduction in tax rates,” the president declared, “would provide incentive for the individual, incentives for business to encourage production and hiring of the unemployed, and to free up money for investment.”

Subsequent tax cuts collectively reduced tax rates for corporations and wealthy Americans, the latter from 70 to 28 percent, but did little to help ordinary Americans. Budget cuts, meanwhile, targeted social programs for the poorest Americans, especially minorities.

A year later, on Oct. 13, 1982, Reagan in a televised speech again invoked the Great Depression.

“I was 21 and looking for work in 1932, one of the worst years of the Great Depression,” he somberly recalled. “And I can remember one bleak night in the ’30s when my father learned on Christmas Eve that he’d lost his job. To be young in my generation was to feel that your future had been mortgaged out from under you, and that’s a tragic mistake we must never allow our leaders to make again.”

His words of a bleak past, however, arrived as national unemployment reached 10.8 percent, the highest since 1940, and

far higher than six percent unemployment in 1979 during Carter’s presidency.

Even so, the former actor’s glossing over of the greatest recession since the Great Depression came with the characteristic smile and cheerfulness he had previously displayed so effectively in show business.

## ECONOMICS

On the campaign trail in 1980, George H. W. Bush, Reagan’s opponent in the Republican presidential primary, had warned that if Reagan were elected president he would lead the country into recession. Bush derided Reaganomics — ultra low taxes on corporations and wealthy Americans — as “voodoo economics.”

Ignoring the criticism, President Reagan in 1981 happily signed his first round of tax cuts in the presence of “scores of reporters.” He insisted that all Americans would benefit.

However, in an unguarded moment, David Stockman, Reagan’s Director of the Office of Management and Budget, acknowledged that the modest tax reductions for ordinary Americans were “a Trojan horse to bring down the top [tax] rate” on the wealthiest Americans.

Corporations helped craft the tax cut, inserting “special tax concessions for oil-lease holders and real-estate tax shelters, and generous loopholes that virtually eliminated the corporate income tax.” Stockman marveled at their aggressiveness: “The greed level, the level of opportunism, just got out of control.”

As unemployment reached 10 percent in the second half of 1982, Reagan doubled down on privileging the rich. In private on September 4 he signed a massive tax increase of nearly \$100 billion in order to offset the damage of his previous tax cuts benefiting wealthy Americans.

“Reagan’s tax increases fell mainly on consumers, low- and middle-income people,” House Speaker Jim Wright summarized. “Sales and excise levies. Reagan didn’t call these taxes. They were, in his euphemistic lexicon, ‘user fees’ and ‘revenue-enhancers’ that allowed Reagan to continue cutting taxes on the rich.”

No photographs were allowed of the signing of the legislation. Only two aides witnessed the event jilting ordinary Americans for the benefit of the wealthy.

Reagan also misrepresented the Great Depression and his family’s experience during those dark days. In reality, tax cuts for corporations and wealthy Americans in the 1920s under Republican presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover had led to the economic suffering.

In addition, the depths of the Great Depression in 1932 occurred as Hoover refused to provide federal assistance to tens of millions of unemployed Americans — including young Reagan — instead bailing out big banks and railroads.

Comedian Will Rogers in 1932 observed: “The money [that Hoover took out of the federal treasury] was all appropriated for the top in the hopes that it would trickle down to the needy.”

Hoover’s laissez-faire capitalism had failed to trickle down to a young Reagan. Nor, years later, did President Reagan acknowledge that during those dark times he found employment after Franklin Delano Roosevelt assumed the presidency.

Likewise, he never mentioned that as a young man, during the Depression years, he supported FDR, nor acknowledged his father’s devotion to Roosevelt and his job as an administrator in FDR’s New Deal government.

Masking his own past, and the politics of the 1920s and ’30s, Reagan followed a

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



President Ronald Reagan speaking at a rally for Senator Durenberger in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1982 / Wikimedia Commons.

similar playbook. But whereas Hoover had ignored the pleas of ordinary Americans during the Great Depression, Reagan pretended to help ordinary Americans, even as he took from the poor and middle-class to benefit the rich.

Roosevelt's administration ultimately alleviated the Great Depression through massive government spending on jobs and infrastructure for poor and middle-class Americans, and tax increases on the rich — precisely the opposite of Reagan's recessionary economic policies.

Both Roosevelt and Reagan, however, ultimately turned to national defense spending — World War II and the Cold War, respectively — and increased national debt to right the economies of their particular eras.

By the end of their respective terms, Roosevelt's deficit spending increased jobs by 36 percent, while Reaganomics generated a 17 percent increase. FDR's policies increased workers' wages, while Reagan's policies decreased workers' earnings.

Notably, and at the bidding of corporations seeking yet higher profit margins, Reagan's administration waged ideological warfare on labor unions, effectively eliminating 20 percent of well-paying, middle-class union jobs.

Pushing government deeper into corporate alliances, Reagan signed legislation deregulating the financial sector, allowing financial institutions to exploit the poor and middle class while paying massive compensation packages to corporate executives.

On balance during Reagan's presidency, the overall federal tax burden on the poorest one-fifth of American families grew by more than 16 percent, while federal taxes on America's top one-fifth of families fell. Higher taxes paired with lower wages, adjusted for inflation, for most Americans marked the beginning of a pattern of wage stagnation that continues to the present.

In short, Reagan's policies produced extreme economic inequality. Nevertheless, his most loyal base — conservative white evangelicals, a largely poor and middle-class constituency that had swept him into the White House — cheered their own economic demise.

## COALITION

Uniting a diverse coalition of conservatives during his presidency, Reagan emerged as the most impactful president since FDR.

“Supply-sider” (trickle-down) conservatives, who advocated for low taxes on corporations and rich Americans, largely

disdained the “New Right,” a coalition of social conservatives opposed to abortion, homosexuality, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and affirmative action. But the two groups agreed with Reagan on taxes.

Many neoconservatives — contrary to the view of supply-siders, the New Right and Reagan — supported federal programs designed to assist the poor and middle class. Yet similar to Reagan and the New Right — but mostly in opposition to the supply-siders — neoconservatives advocated for an aggressive national foreign policy funded by increased defense spending.

Within the New Right, the culturally conservative Christian Right, represented by the recently-formed Moral Majority — a “political-moral organization” led by white evangelicals coveting political power to Christianize America — found an ideological home.

Allied with supply-siders on the one hand, and aligned with neoconservative hawks on the other, the Christian Right meshed well with Reagan's policy agenda. In fact, the Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell was among the first visitors Reagan received in the White House.

An amalgamation of wrathful theology, racist and paternalistic cultural and social beliefs, inequitable economic measures, and aggressive foreign policy, the Christian nationalist dream of transforming a secular democracy into an authoritarian theocratic construct finally seemed possible. But implementing Christian nationalists' agenda would require a steep price.

During the Civil Rights Movement, some regions of the South had shut down public school systems to avoid sending white children to school with Blacks. Such drastic measures had revealed the willingness of many poor and middle-class white southerners to sacrifice the well-being of their own families.

Now, decades later and conditioned to accept a modest economic status in return for government privilege over Black Americans, many conservative white evangelicals prized the maintenance of cultural and social superiority over and above color-blind legislation, such as minimum wage laws.

Christian Right leaders recognized the opportunity afforded them. In a shared New Right political and religious worldview of nationalistic white pride, and with enough commitment, conservative white evangelicals could defeat ascendant racial equality.

Albeit suspicious of the Moral Majority — formed in 1979 but not widely known beyond the Bible Belt and fundamentalist Christian television shows — Republican elites realized the future of their party depended upon accommodating Christian nationalists. Statistically deemed “the major factor in 12 of the 17 states that switched from Carter to Reagan,” the Moral Majority represented the base of Reagan’s victorious coalition.

Like Reagan, Falwell understood the essence of politics: proper messaging. Rather than appealing to theology, the Moral Majority focused on cultural positions deemed popular with New Right voters at large: opposition to abortion, homosexuality, illegal drug traffic and pornography.

He also fostered a theme of nationalism reflective of white evangelicals’ eschatological beliefs that the “end times” were near. “[W]e are pro-American,” Falwell declared, “which means strong national defense and [advocacy for] the State of Israel.”

Apart from eschatology, neoconservatives agreed.

In fundamentalist eschatology, the re-establishment of Israel as a nation (having taken place in 1948) — followed by conflict in the Middle East between Israel and Arab nations (ongoing for decades) — would presage the return of Christ to Earth, and, ultimately, the Apocalypse.

While supply-siders and neoconservatives struggled to understand the ideology and significance of the Christian Right, theocratic and apocalyptic-minded white conservative congregations cheered their newfound power in the nation’s capital.

## THEOCRACY

In 1981 another Christian nationalist organization, sinister and secretive, was birthed. Established in Washington, D.C. by prominent conservative white evangelical leaders allied with the Moral Majority and other Republican-oriented organiza-

tions, the Council for National Policy set out to restructure American government.

Founding members included evangelical leaders Tim LaHaye (future author of the apocalyptic *Left Behind* book series), Anita Bryant (anti-gay activist), Phyllis Schlafly (anti-ERA leader), and Paul Weyrich (co-founder of the Heritage Foundation think-tank).

Reagan appointees in the CNP included Morton C. Blackwell, the president’s special assistant, and Robert Billings, who served in the Department of Education created by Carter for the advancement of inclusive public education.

Conservative special interests represented in the CNP included anti-abortion, pro-gun, anti-environment, anti-women’s rights, anti-communist and anti-union organizations.

At their first meeting on May 19, 1981 the CNP presented an award to Reagan’s director of the Office of Management and Budget, David Stockman — the engineer of Reagan’s tax cuts for the rich and tax increases for the poor and middle class — for his role in “defunding the Left.”

As identified in a CNP letter to Reagan on Sept. 2, 1982, other far-right Christian members of the secretive organization — devoted to serving “as an umbrella organization for all major national conservative leaders and organizations” — included Falwell, Pat Buchanan, Pat Robertson and James Robison.

In 1983 the CNP went on the offensive against America’s mainstream media by initiating a program for recruiting newspaper editors who advocated for “the principles of free enterprise, limited government and a strong national defense.” This early anti-media crusade presaged what in time would become a world of conservative fake news propaganda devoted to drowning out truth-based reporting — appropriating, ironically, tactics of Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union.

That same year Reagan appointed CPN’s director Woody Jenkins to his Advisory Committee for Trade Negotiations, embedding Christian nationalists into national trade conversations.

Among its leadership, the CNP also

included Christian Dominionists Gary North of Tyler, Texas, and R.J. Rushdoony of California, advocates for the execution of homosexuals — among other violent measures — in order to subdue the earth to rule by the “Kingdom of God.”

Also affiliated with CNP were Paige Patterson of the Criswell Center for Baptist Studies and Texas judge Paul Pressler, the pair who spearheaded the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. Focus on the Family’s James Dobson, motivational speaker Zig Ziglar, and Amway executive Richard DeVos, among many others, represented far-right social and capitalistic agendas.

Also among the roughly 230 government, business and religious leaders comprising the Council on National Policy, a few conservative Black pastors — including E. V. Hill of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles — provided cover for white Christian nationalists’ dreams.

CNP leaders routinely communicated with Reagan’s administration. In 1983 the president praised the organization for sharing his “philosophy of freedom” and “creating a network of activists and opinion leaders almost unparalleled in our nation’s history.”

With the blessing of a transformative American president, the quietly influential Council for National Policy would grow ever more powerful.

## ISSUES

Within and without his administration, Reagan galvanized Christian nationalists. Whereas Carter had refused to appoint any conservative white evangelicals to top government posts, Reagan doled out two important positions to Christian nationalists.

James Watt, a fundamentalist Pentecostal, was appointed as Secretary of the Interior; C. Everett Koop, an anti-abortion activist, became Surgeon General. A third evangelical, Robert Billings, became an administrator within the Department of Education. The appointments were strategic — and controversial.

Upon securing his Senate confirmation, Secretary of the Interior Watt set about opening federal lands to wholesale surface

mining and offshore drilling, pleasing energy corporations. He equated environmentalists with Nazis. “We’re deliriously happy,” Carl E. Bagge, president of the National Coal Association, said of Watt’s anti-environmental crusade.

“I want to change the course of America,” Watt declared in 1983. “I believe we are battling for the form of government under which we and future generations will live ... The battle’s not over the environment. If it was, they [environmentalists] would be with us. They want to control social behavior and conduct.”

Environmentalists, in turn, disdained Watt “as almost a devil-figure antagonist bent on turning around decades of preservationist gains,” according to a June 1981 *Washington Post* article. Nathaniel Reed, an assistant secretary of the Department of Interior during the presidencies of Republicans Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, declared Watt a “disaster” pushing “bankrupt and infantile” policies.

“Watt only has two constituents — Reagan and the Lord. If you’ve got both of them on your side, you don’t have to worry about anyone else,” Gaylord Nelson, chairman of the Wilderness Society, declared.

“Watt has made himself the darling of the hard-shell Christian conservatives and other elements of the New Right ... his born-again rhetoric identifies him solidly with the Moral Majority fundamentalists who feel persecuted themselves,” a *Rolling Stone* article observed.

However, Watt became too open about his white Christian nationalist beliefs. After comparing abortion to Nazism and openly espousing racist views, he was forced to resign less than three years into his tenure.

Surgeon General Everett Koop, too, had a history of comparing abortion to Nazi genocide. But whereas Watt moved too far rightward to be effective in office, Koop shifted to the left. Failing to advocate for the abolishment of abortion, he dismayed the Christian Right.

Koop’s ultimate ambivalence on abortion — despite earlier rhetoric — reflected Reagan’s own strategy. Sandra Day O’Conner, nominated in 1982 for the Supreme Court, in her confirmation hearing

noted her personal opposition to abortion, but signaled support for *Roe v. Wade*.

Robert Billings, in the Department of Education, although less influential, remained ideologically consistent. A co-founder of the Moral Majority, Billings identified himself as “Mr. Conservative,” a reference to his opposition to integrated public education and commitment to segregated private schools. To his disappointment, however, he was “not high enough up the ladder to have a lot of influence” on defunding public education.

Reagan, meanwhile, made clear his support of private education above public education. Thrilling his conservative white base but angering Black voters, in 1982 the president argued that racially discriminatory private schools should receive tax-exempt status unless Congress passed legislation otherwise.

Collectively, Reagan appointees Watt, Koop and Billings represented a Christian nationalist agenda of white male dominion over Earth, women, minorities, and education in the name of God and unfettered capitalism.

Although breaking into the inner circle of national political power, conservative white evangelical influence initially fell short. Watt’s anti-environmental, capitalistic agenda ended in disgrace. Sandra Day O’Conner’s senate confirmation to the Supreme Court by a 99–0 vote angered anti-abortion advocates. And Reagan’s efforts to defund the Department of Education failed.

Even so, Christian nationalists had ample reasons for remaining hopeful.

## RACE

From his appearance and addresses at anti-abortion rallies, to his verbal support for mandated government-sponsored Christian prayer in public schools, and anti-minority rhetoric, Reagan thrilled those determined to Christianize America.

To some degree, Reagan’s cheerleading soothed Christian nationalists’ disappointment in his personal lack of piety. Rarely did President Reagan, a nominal Presbyterian, attend church, preferring instead to not “wear his religion on his sleeve.”

Christian nationalists were disap-

pointed in Reagan’s failure to transform much of his religious rhetoric into law. Yet finding common ground regarding race, Reagan pleased conservative white evangelicals.

In the 1960s the future president had opposed civil rights for Blacks. In 1971 he had called Africans “monkeys.” Code-whistling racism in his 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan labeled Blacks as lazy and undeserving, a message that resonated with white conservatives of both parties.

In his first term, having enriched wealthy Americans while quietly further impoverishing poor Americans, Reagan easily won re-election on the strength of white voters. His second presidential victory signaled his success in appealing to the primacy of white pride.

Only 16 percent of white voters in the 1984 election — a voting bloc Reagan won overwhelmingly — listed “fairness to the poor” as a concern. Most poor whites seemingly focused on their superior social and cultural status affirmed by Reagan.

Although 60 percent of white voters in 1984 claimed they were better off due to Reagan’s policies, in reality only the wealthy benefited financially. The bottom 90 percent of Americans earned less than during Carter’s presidency, a status that remained throughout the entirety of Reagan’s two terms.

With their economic well-being in decline, how could most white Americans claim they were better off? University of California professor Justin Gomer and Christopher Petrella, a director at American University’s Antiracist Research & Policy Center, in 2017 offered a succinct answer:

“More than any other modern U.S. president, it was Ronald Reagan who cultivated the concept of so-called reverse discrimination, which emerged in the 1970s as a backlash against affirmative action in public schooling as court-ordered busing grew throughout the country.”

“During these years,” Gomer and Petrella concluded, “a growing number of white Americans came to believe civil rights programs and policies had outstretched their original intent and had turned whites into the victims of racial discrimination.”

As president, Reagan, under the mantra of “Let’s Make America Great Again,” exempted most federal contractors from following mandatory affirmative action programs. In addition, he removed affirmative action supporters in the departments of Justice and Labor, and from the Commission on Civil Rights. Newly installed conservative leaders worked against affirmative action and civil rights.

Despite faring economically worse under Reagan than Carter, many white Americans — and especially white Christian nationalists — who had perceived themselves as victims of equal rights under Carter, now believed themselves better off under Reagan due to the president’s policies suppressive of minority rights and well-being.

Delivered with optimism and a wink, Reagan’s messaging and politics of white privilege in the name of conservatism served to distract many poor and middle-class white Americans from his economic policies that shifted wealth to the richest Americans. This would become one of Reagan’s most enduring political legacies.

## TRIUMPH

Reagan also shaped modern political conservatism in two other significant ways, both with the approval of white Christian nationalists.

Despite some setbacks during his presidency — including the Supreme Court confirmation of eventual pro-abortion-rights Justice Sandra Day O’Conner, and the failure to elevate far-right conservative Robert Bork to the Supreme Court — Reagan’s two-term administration played a long-term game by systematically stacking federal courts with socially conservative and free market ideologues.

This strategy countered Carter’s judicial agenda that had resulted in record numbers of Blacks, women, and other minorities appointed to the federal bench during his one term in office. Some analysts consider Reagan’s re-making of the federal judiciary as the president’s greatest and most enduring accomplishment.

In addition, Reagan thrilled his loyalists by initiating the Strategic Defense Initiative — a missile defense system

designed to protect America from a Soviet nuclear attack — and, in 1987, calling for the Soviet Union to tear down the Berlin Wall dividing democratic West Germany from communist East Germany.

Although the Berlin Wall would not be torn down until November 1989, nearly a year after Reagan’s presidency ended, his anti-communist tough talk is often credited as the trigger that eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Historians and political scientists often argue that Reagan’s verbal jousting with, and increased defense spending to counter, the Soviets, were less of a factor in the demise of the Soviet Union than internal currents within the communist empire.

Nevertheless, tens of millions of Americans celebrated the nation’s triumph over communism and, hence, American liberalism. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, conservatives have largely dismissed liberals as communists and socialists.

Meanwhile, mere months after Reagan left office in 1989, the Moral Majority also folded. An Aug. 31, 1989 Associated Press story covered the organization’s demise, quoting organizational leaders.

“The Moral Majority acted as a catalyst, as an energizer for the conservative movement. It had a major impact on bringing a new voter bloc into the political mainstream,” said the organization’s president, Jerry Nims, as the Christian nationalist organization shut its doors.

The Moral Majority had not achieved all its objectives: in the estimation of Nims, the federal bureaucracy remained too large. Some disappointments aside, the organization had made a major impact upon America.

“We are encouraged by the fact that 10 years ago there were virtually no like-minded organizations,” noted Mark DeMoss, a Moral Majority spokesperson. “Today, there are literally dozens of conservative organizations involved in moral and social issues, family issues.”

## IMPRINT

One such “issue” was AIDS, a deadly disease primarily afflicting homosexuals at the time. Falwell had dismissed AIDS as “the wrath of God upon homosexuals.”

Pat Buchanan, Reagan’s communication director, had followed the lead of the Moral Majority, arguing that AIDS is “nature’s revenge on gay men.”

Together, the Moral Majority and the Reagan administration of the 1980s did little to prevent the deaths of nearly 90,000 fellow Americans from the disease, exposing as a lie their “pro-life” claims.

Throughout America, many conservative white evangelical churches — never bastions of social justice — savored their culturally conservative marriage with the Republican Party during the Reagan years.

There would be no turning back. Memories of his presidency hallowed in the minds of many white evangelicals, Reagan’s lasting imprint transformed church congregations and halls of political power alike. Welcomed and affirmed by Reagan, Christian nationalists thereafter would vastly expand their religious, social, cultural and political agenda of white dominance.

Post-presidency, Reagan and wife Nancy sometimes attended church at the Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, Calif., as they had done during Reagan’s years as governor of California. Near the end of Reagan’s life, Jerry Falwell fondly remembered the former president as his “Christian hero.”

“We had long been shut out of the White House when Mr. Reagan took office,” recalled Falwell. “But he realized that this community was largely responsible for his election and held the key to stalling our nation’s moral collapse. Many churches had organized (quite legally) voter registration drives through the help of my Moral Majority because we believed Mr. Reagan could make a difference.”

“In answer to prayer and hard work, God had given us a great leader,” Falwell summarized. “He [Reagan] was as pro-life, pro-family, pro-national defense and pro-Israel as we were.”

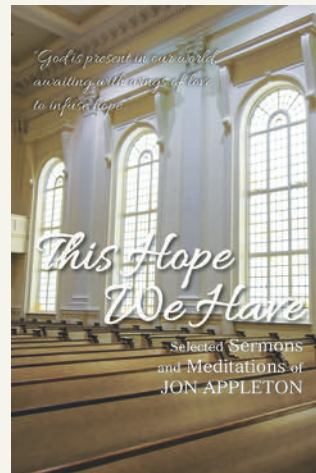
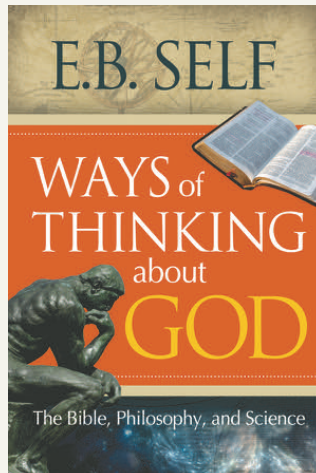
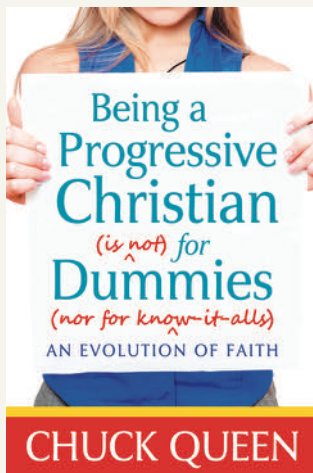
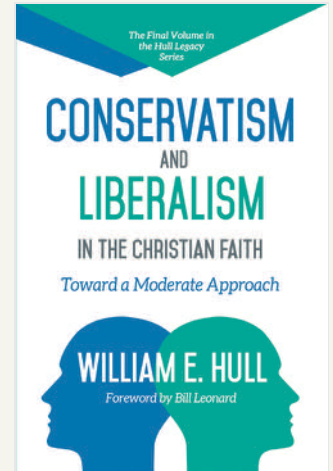
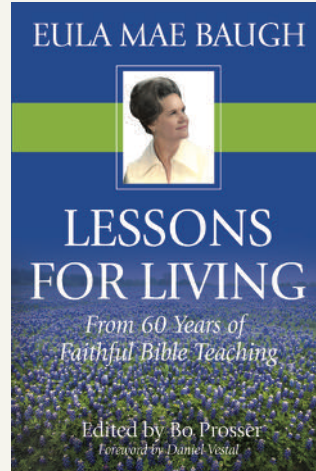
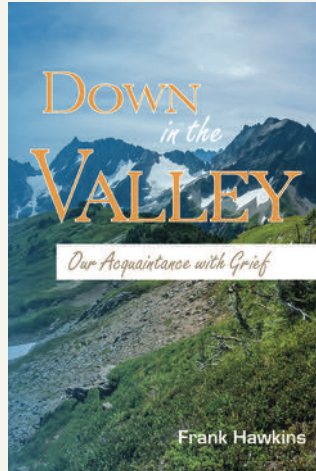
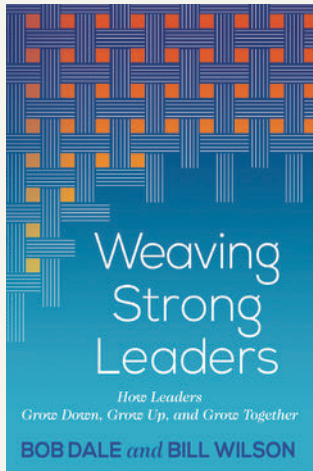
Having molded his party into an institution of racial and economic inequality under the umbrella of conservative white privilege and power, Reagan died on June 5, 2004. Yet his influence remains entrenched in conservative politics and ideologies, none more visible than white Christian nationalism. [NFJ](#)



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# ‘RACELESS GOSPEL’

A conversation with podcast host, minister Starlette Thomas

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Starlette Thomas hosts “The Raceless Gospel” podcast from Good Faith Media. Five episodes are available now at [goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org).

She is Minister to Empower Congregations for the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, and chairs the video/podcasts council for Good Faith Media’s Strategic Advisory Board. Her blogs and other resources are found at [racelessgospel.com](http://racelessgospel.com).



**NFJ: What do you mean by “raceless gospel,” and what do you not mean?**

ST: The raceless gospel preaches a skinned theology and extends a call to discipleship that invites us to live in our skin — not through it. Because race is a kind of works-based righteousness.

It says that Jesus’ disciples should not color in his face or color-code his message to align with the sociopolitical construct of race; that salvation does not come in black and white; and that deliverance is not found in our bodies — but in his.

It is the embodiment of Galatians 3:27-28 — “There is no longer Jew or Greek.” Likewise, there are no longer beige, black, red, yellow or white people. It dives deep into the Christian’s baptismal identity and seeks to drown out historical voices that tell us we are to live segregated lives.

The raceless gospel is not a call to color-blindness, but to see race for what it is. With no biological basis or biblical reference, it is what Brian Bantum calls “a word we made flesh.”

The raceless gospel is not post-racial but pre-racial, trusting that race was not

“in the beginning with God.” So any gospel that subjects the will of God, the image of Christ, the move of the Holy Spirit to race is heretical — because race will not save us, though it often serves us well.

**NFJ: Why did you choose a worship service format for the podcast?**

ST: Our racist assumptions go to church and should be taken to task there. Race built the church in North America. Its family and progeny are well respected, have long-standing membership, and/or give the most money.

Whatever the reason for our theological accommodation, race needs to be acknowledged in our church constitutions, hymns, ministry endeavors and sermons.

**NFJ: What do you hope the podcast will evoke from listeners?**

ST: I hope it evokes from listeners their own stories around race and racial formation as a practice of Christian discipleship. That it leads them to question the credibility of race and to wonder: “What have I been hearing and seeing all this time?”

It is my prayer that the podcast gives them “ears to hear” the gospel differently.

**NFJ: Which issues are on your front burners now?**

ST: White Christian nationalism is on one of my front burners. After the siege of the U.S. Capitol Building, it is clear this pseudo expression of Christianity will burn the United States down.

This is more than hot heads that need to be cooled; this is a sickness, a fever that needs to be broken.

Likewise, police brutality and the extrajudicial killing of unarmed African Americans

by police officers and citizens alike are issues of theology, of another creation narrative that doesn’t see socially colored black bodies as made in the *imago dei*.

Both need to be examined and discussed unapologetically and faithfully. Because neither is good news and certainly do not bear witness to the ministry of Jesus.

**NFJ: What opportunities does your website provide for you?**

ST: It has allowed me to really think through this raceless gospel and, in doing so, I have led a raceless retreat in Washington, D.C.; spoken on racelessness and community-building in Henderson, Ky.; presented papers to the Baptist World Alliance in Switzerland and the Bahamas; taught youth about race and identity formation at a church retreat; and published a chapter on the raceless gospel through Faith Forward, a network for leaders of youth and children. And to think it all started with a blog.

**NFJ: How might those of us raised on the Jesus “with light skin and good hair” (as you’ve put it) reconsider what it means to be followers of Christ?**

ST: I, too, had normalized this image of Jesus, or perhaps I had not really given it a second thought. But how we see Jesus determines who we see Jesus in, and likewise where we see Jesus.

When we suggest that Jesus looks like us, then it is easy to believe that Jesus favors us and is a member of our “race” — to the exclusion of all those who are not.

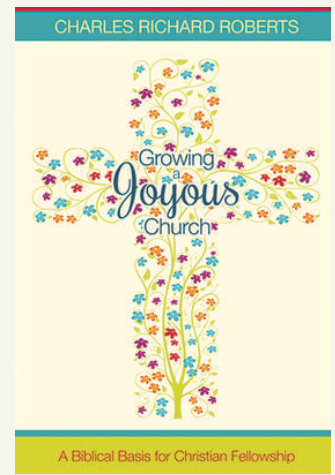
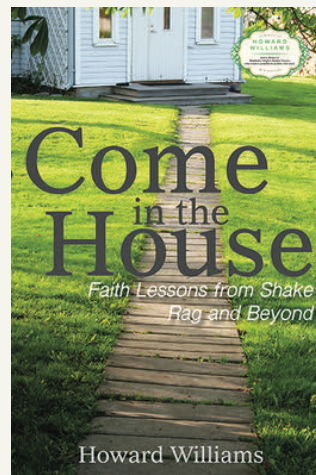
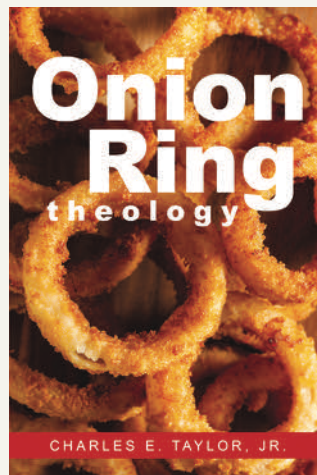
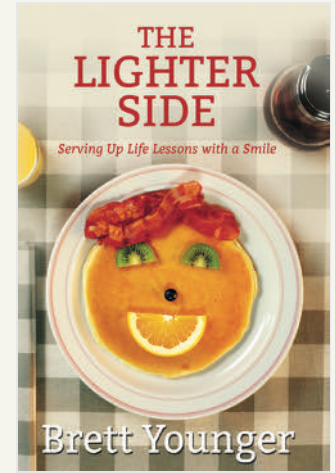
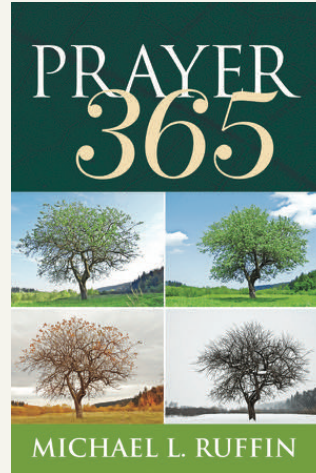
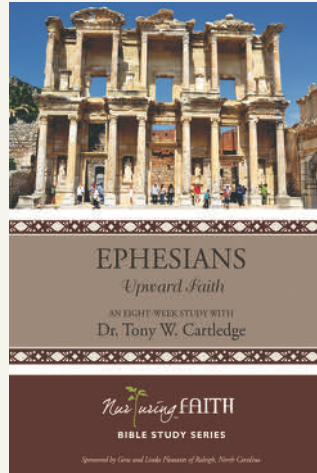
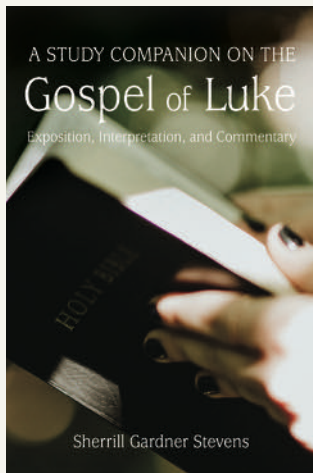
It also suggests that we are not following the Jesus of the Gospels but one of our own making. We must think long and hard about why Jesus’ physical appearance is a condition for us to follow him. **NFJ**



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# Rethinking the attributes and expectations of our heroes

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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.

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BY TERRELL CARTER

Our nation loves heroes. This is evidenced by, among other things, the continuing popularity of comic book super-humans who, unlike us normal human beings, can leap tall buildings in a single bound.

These heroes are made, and their legacies are secured, through the stories that are told about them in print, through movies, and on television screens. One reason we idolize these fictional characters is because, for the most part, they use their powers for good and willingly make sacrifices that typically serve the greater good of humanity.

Although the heroes do not necessarily make much money from their actions, those who tell their stories sure do. Some of the most profitable industries in our nation are those that help tell the stories of superheroes through various media.

But super-humans are not the only people we view as heroes. We view athletes as heroes because of their power and strength. Athletes regularly prove to be as mentally strong as they are athletically competent.

Athletes regularly leverage their celebrity to bring attention to multiple social causes and are handsomely rewarded for their outspokenness. Many, however, have paid a price for speaking out on social issues.

Newsmakers and news-breakers can

receive the title of hero as well. We admire their work, tenacity, and the fact that they seem to seek to hold those in power accountable to the common person.

There was a time when newscasters such as Walter Cronkite and Tom Brokaw were household names and trusted voices within our nation because they could be trusted to hold politicians' feet to the proverbial fire in hopes of keeping government transparent and focused on serving ordinary citizens.

With the advent of multiple media outlets and innumerable social media methods for immediate information sharing, anyone can become a newsmaker or news-breaker.

Traditionally, the primary news-breakers have been trained journalists who, ideally, seek to inform our nation of what is occurring and how our lives are affected by certain events. Yet one of the current challenges of this process of potentially anyone making or breaking news is that some people intentionally, or unintentionally, see their job as one of the ways to shape public opinion about certain people and groups by attempting to dictate who should be considered a hero and who should not.

But who or what is a hero? In general, a hero is a person who regularly does what the public is unable or unqualified to do.

One thing we do not usually think about our heroes is that they do not always live pure and sacrificial lives. We often forget that they have the ability, and potentially the inclination, to commit certain atrocities that negatively affect others.

Throughout history, heroes were not perfect people. They could experience major moral failures and still be capable of positively affecting other people's lives.

Heroes did not always wear white nor were they saints.

I wonder if the realization that heroes do not always consistently act like the "good guys" will cause any of us to reevaluate what our definition of a hero is and what the implications of this new realization could lead to.

This idea of our heroes not being fully perfect may force some of us to reconsider what is acceptable and unacceptable for our heroes to do in their down time. It may cause us to reevaluate whether we need heroes in the first place.

It may even lead to us asking what happens when our heroes fall short of our expectations for them and whether there should be some type of repercussion when they experience a public fall.

Despite the moral and ethical conundrums this line of thinking may lead to, hero-making fills a vacancy in our collective lives. It helps us identify people we can look to for help and adoration when we think we cannot find similar qualities within ourselves or our acquaintances.

We yearn to look up to someone or some group that consistently puts others before themselves. We want to trust in someone who is willing to give more than they take so others' lives can be better — and safer.

We also want someone bigger and better than us to believe in because we think having a hero enhances our lives, makes our society better, and provides us with hope that one day we will be able to relate to others and the world in a different way.

What are some of the other general qualities we find appealing and seek to attribute to our heroes? First, the good deeds they perform are usually in service to others in need.

Second, when they perform their acts of service, they know that their actions carry certain risks for themselves and their safety.



Third, they serve others without anticipation of personal gain. Who would not love and admire someone who willingly sacrifices like this?

Although heroes have the potential to do great things for altruistic reasons, that does not insulate them from experiencing the desire or impulse to do some not-so-heroic things. Just because a person has heroic qualities or performs heroic acts does not preclude them from doing things we may consider anti-heroic.

We all possess ideals and attributes that have been shaped by our life circumstances. Those circumstances help direct each of us toward certain viewpoints about life and people.

They shape our desires to either look toward others for heroic acts or to perform heroic acts ourselves. They help us understand that saving the world or a local community becomes possible when you work alongside others.

They save the world through the support and teamwork of others who share a common purpose, and common resources.

Although the circumstances that

bring a potential hero to the attention of media may be accidental or come by non-traditional means, the process of making law enforcement into heroes is not.

Even when an officer is found to have committed a gross abuse of power on camera, media outlets are still strategic in their attempts to lionize law enforcement and insulate officers from critique and criticism.

Media regularly prop law enforcement up as heroes to be envied and protected, sometimes at the cost of truth and community good, even when information clearly shows they have overreached past decency, legality and legitimacy through their actions.

This media bias can lead to an unquestioning allegiance to law enforcement by the ordinary citizenry who may not fully understand the history and purpose of policing or the many issues that are present within the current incarnation of police in the U.S. This sounds like hero-making to me.

As a former officer, I say this without an ounce of hyperbole. Having worked for the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Depart-

ment, I can attest to the hero-making that occurs through, and because of, this type of thinking.

I agree that, in general, many officers do not choose what happens in the world or the areas they patrol. But they do choose how they will respond to the people and circumstances they find themselves interacting with.

Unfortunately, some decisions are not altruistic and are selfish because they are built on a need or desire to be perceived as a certain type of officer to be promoted, given choice assignments, or be considered as a member of the inner circle — so when something goes terribly wrong, they can depend on other officers to help them cover their tracks.

In my opinion, this is the antithesis to heroic behavior. **NFJ**

—Terrell Carter, with a background as a police officer and a pastor, is executive director of Rise Community Development in St. Louis. He is a member of the Good Faith Media Strategic Advisory Board.

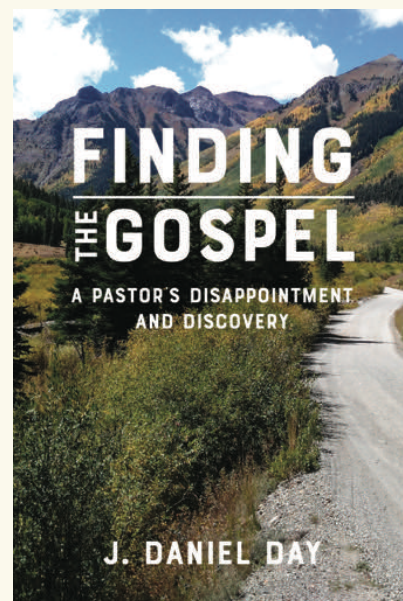
# HONEST AND INSIGHTFUL!

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# IN PRAISE OF THE PIG

By Tony W. Cartledge

A research article posted in a recent issue of *Science Advances* reports that the oldest known example of representational art has been identified on the wall of a cave in Sulawesi, Indonesia. And it's a portrait of a pig ...

**O**r at least three pigs, drawn in dark shades of red ochre made from powdered rocks. One has survived entirely, while two others have deteriorated significantly.

The pigs appear to be interacting in some way. And they're no small effort: the best-preserved pig is about 4.5 feet wide and 21 inches tall.

Researchers from Griffiths University, in Queensland, Australia, report that the images appear to depict a type of warty pig: males of the species have large wart-like protuberances on their heads. Descendants of the warty pigs still live on Sulawesi, a roughly pinwheel-shaped island with a tropical climate.

Although cave art from European sites such as the Lascaux and Chauvet caves in France is well-known, it is even more abundant and older in the caves of Sulawesi.

The colorful paintings in Lascaux are usually dated to about 17,000 years ago, while the detailed charcoal drawings from Chauvet may date to as early as 37,000 years before our time.

The pigs painted near the back of Sulawesi's Leang Tedongnge cave, however, appear to have been painted an astounding 45,500 years ago. But how does one arrive at a date for cave art?

Karst caves are formed over millions of years when thick layers of limestone or



other soluble minerals become hollowed out as water seeps through and gradually dissolves the minerals. This can lead to spectacular formations of stalagmites and stalactites, familiar to those who have visited underground cave attractions, usually in mountainous areas.

As water seeps across the face of the cave through the years, calcite encrustations build up on the walls. Researchers took a small sample from one of the pig's hind feet, sliced it thinly, and analyzed the rate of uranium decay in the layers that had accreted above the colored ochre.

The results suggest a minimum age of 45,500 years for the Leang Tedongnge paintings, making it a few hundred years older than a hunting scene found at the nearby Leang Bulu' Sipong cave.

There's little question that the presence of pigs in art has something to do with the pleasure of pigs in stomachs. While folks like me delight in the opening of any new barbeque restaurant and binge on televised barbeque competitions, it is evident that the practice has been around for a long time.

Pulled pork barbeque doesn't just date back to plantation times or prehistoric times, but to Pleistocene times.

Reading about the ancient pig art reminded me that, taxonomically, they belong to the *Suidae* family. Horses are equines and cows are bovines: pigs are suids.

My great-grandmother didn't know that her pigs were suids, but that didn't stop her from yelling "Sooy!" when she poured slop into their trough.

I come from a long line of pork eaters — I just didn't realize quite how long. I've always felt sorry for Jewish friends who can't go hog wild over bacon for breakfast, carnitas for lunch, or pork chops for dinner.

Various theories have been given for why the ancient Hebrews were forbidden from eating pork (Lev. 11:7, Deut. 14:8). Some writers suppose it's because pigs were considered to be nasty or disease-ridden, while others argue that pigs are hard to herd and don't fit a nomadic lifestyle.

I've read suggestions that pigs were not favored because they don't produce side products such as milk or wool. Yet another theory is that the pork taboo was designed to draw a sharp distinction between the Israelites and the despised Philistines, who left a lot of pig bones in their wake.

It occurs to me that if the purpose of kosher rules was to set the Hebrews apart and show dedication to God, a juicy haunch of roast pork would be one of the hardest things to give up.

Many people choose not to eat pork for their own reasons, but I tend to side with the late Roger Miller, who won a Tony Award for writing the music and lyrics for *Big River* back in 1985.

A lighthearted number features Tom Sawyer singing porcine praises that conclude with this verse:

*The way I see it, it looks like this  
Either you ain't or either you is  
A true-blue lover of the swine, folks:  
How 'bout a hand for the hog?*

I'll eat to that. **NFJ**

# If not required by Jesus, it isn't a requirement

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This column first appeared at [goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org), where daily news and opinion can be found.

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BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**H**ow did we end up with so many odd and changing requirements for being Christian — all those things Jesus didn't require of his first disciples?

With so many conflicting and confusing applications, the label gets slapped on all sorts of ideas to the point that identifying someone or something as “Christian” today doesn't really say very much.

Sometimes the term is applied too broadly, for example, false claims — historically and practically — that the U.S. is a “Christian nation.” Other times it is used to narrow the circle of faith by adding required beliefs that would have excluded Jesus' first disciples — and millions since.

Would the first disciples be considered “Christians” at all — even though that designation came along later in Antioch? Did they believe or do enough to qualify?

All that Jesus required was enough belief to throw down their stuff and follow him. There is no gospel account of Jesus creating a list of beliefs to be affirmed or else to be cast from his inner circle.

He taught his disciples to pray, love and give generously. But there were no requirements to affirm the inerrancy of scripture, condemn homosexuals, demean people based on their ethnicity, or throw aside basic morality in exchange for societal privileges.

It seems Jesus himself would be outside many definitions of Christianity today.

The first disciples' faithful, though sometimes failing, response to Jesus' call was to follow his lead by living in an upside-down, counter-cultural way in which the first becomes last and losing one's life is the best way to gain it.

A Google search of “What is required of Christians?” first showed entries on Christianity that emphasized certain traditional beliefs. It was familiar Christian doctrine, yet lists of beliefs rather than anything about following Jesus.

Have the requirements changed? Is it possible that what Jesus called his early followers to be and do is an inadequate definition of Christianity now?

Certainly, the summons of Jesus is very different than what is offered by those who define Christianity primarily in terms of an instantaneous salvation experience, followed by a narrowly defined belief system that protects its own institutions and reflects a self-serving political ideology.

Such definitions of Christianity, however, are the ones most strongly defended as valid expressions. Just point out how a political ideology — popular today — is at odds with the life and teachings of Jesus and hear, “But I thought you were a Christian.”

Before Jesus came on the scene, the prophet Micah gave a summary of what God requires: to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). That three-fold call speaks to how one is to live rather than simply affirming a list of beliefs.

Living in such a generous and self-giving way, however, reflects belief and trust in a God in whom those attributes abide.

While Jesus called for belief, it was an important starting point, not the finish line

of faith. That seems to have changed over the millennia.

Many branches of Christianity — from deeply rooted denominations to modern faith-based organizations — require various doctrinal conformities in order to be deemed sufficiently “Christian.” These tests of orthodoxy range from long-held creedal affirmations to quick-changing, expedient political allegiances.

Unsurprisingly, many people today are choosing to self-identify as “followers of Jesus” as a way to distance themselves from politically polluted, pejorative meanings so widely attributed to the term “Christian.”

Doctrinal frameworks can be helpful in reflecting shared beliefs and values of Christian believers in community with one another. The problem arises when latter-day definitions of what it means to be “Christian” surpass and often discard the primary call to faith and discipleship.

In issuing his call to “Follow me,” Jesus didn't say, “...and look for the add-on requirements that will come much later.” He simply looked for abandoned fishing nets, dropped tax ledgers and footprints headed in his direction.

We must not fall for the distractions of humanly devised, add-on requirements that tend to benefit those who added them. If Jesus didn't require something of those whom he called first, it couldn't possibly be essential for those who are summoned now. **NFJ**

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# DOUBTERS WELCOME

New website invites those whose faith includes questioning

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

COOKEVILLE, Tenn. — “Doubter’s Parish is a unique website designed to help thinking people navigate faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” said Martin Thielen in an interview with *Nurturing Faith Journal*.

The former editor of the once-popular Southern Baptist preaching publication, *Proclaim*, and more recently a United Methodist pastor, Thielen created doubtersparish.com and filled it with resources — including books, articles, stories and blog posts addressing issues of faith in modern culture.

“The site also includes a special section for clergy, including more than 100 sermons,” said Thielen, whose pastoral leadership included tiny congregations as well as the 8,000-member Brentwood United Methodist Church near Nashville.

Thielen was steeped in Southern Baptist life from his youth in Muskogee, Okla., through his college and seminary years, to a career with what is now LifeWay Christian Resources. Like many, he found the fundamentalist swing of the convention to be at odds with his understanding and practice of the Christian faith.

His exit ramp appeared while taking classes at Vanderbilt Divinity School and, in 1994, making contact with a United Methodist Church bishop.

In retirement, Thielen wanted to make good use of his gifts and experiences as both a pastor and a writer/editor. His published works include the popular book, *What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?*

Creation of the web site provided the right opportunity — and all the posted resources are made available at no cost.

“Not all of the materials deal with faith struggles,” said Thielen. “However, everything posted on the site respects doubters, both within and outside the church.”

That approach, he said, reflects his

Doubter’s Parish 



Former editor and pastor Martin Thielen created the Doubter’s Parish website to provide a variety of resources for Christians, including those with lots of questions. Contributed photo.

own experiences with personal faith and pastoral ministry.

“I have always held a special place in my heart for doubters,” he said. “As a pastor, I loved interacting with people who could relate to the experience of the disciples in Matthew 28:17 who “worshipped [Jesus], but some doubted.”

Thielen said Doubter’s Parish was created for people who resonate with that kind of faith/doubt experience. So, admittedly, it will not appeal to everyone.

“I did not create this website for orthodox believers who don’t question their faith,” he said. “Half of the population of the United States has serious questions about traditional faith and church. They struggle to believe. I created Doubter’s Parish for them.”

Thielen said he is willing to accept some criticism for this approach “in order to help thinking people grapple with the enormous faith struggles inherent in today’s challenging and complex environment.” But he’s also grateful for the early affirmation this new venture has received.

Author Brian McLaren, whose

latest book is titled *Faith After Doubt*, commended the site for those who have few other places to turn.

“Imagine being sick and feeling the last place you’d want to go is a hospital, or being robbed and feeling the last organization you want to call is the police,” said McLaren. “That’s how many people feel about the church, especially if they have honest doubts.”

Preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor said this online parish “will become home to all sorts of people.” Extending that kind of welcome, said Thielen, 64, is what led him to create this online ministry in retirement.

Recently, he told the United Methodist News Service: “I’m very much a lover of Jesus, but I struggle with some traditional beliefs myself, and I certainly struggle with institutional religion.”

That confession, he believes, is widely shared — though sometimes kept to oneself out of fear of being condemned or ostracized. He hopes the wide open doors of Doubter’s Parish will welcome them in. **NFJ**

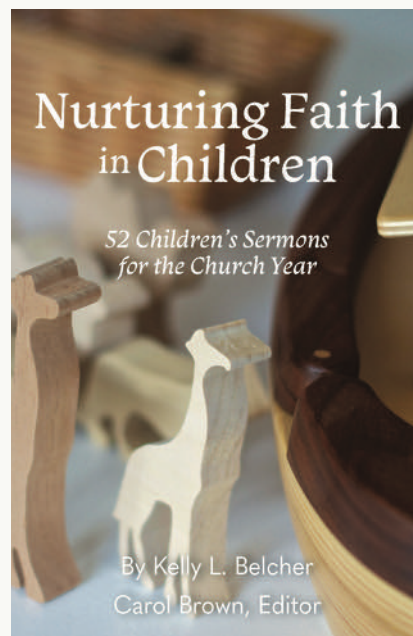


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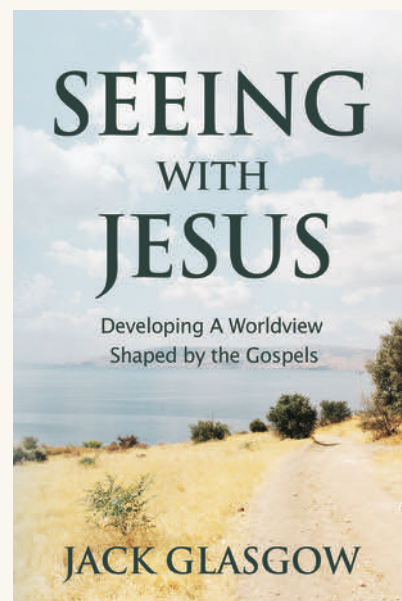
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—Author Jack Glasgow, Pastor,  
Zebulon (N.C.) Baptist Church



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



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

# TOGETHER

Author Jeff Hampton prompts conversations that enhance caring communities

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

DALLAS, Texas — Through storytelling and reflections, author Jeff Hampton draws readers into conversations that encourage helpful and hopeful ways of living in constructive and caring communities.

From his time at Baylor University, where he studied journalism and was editor of the *Baylor Lariat*, Hampton's evolving career has included newspaper and magazine writing as well as corporate marketing. And for the past decade he has written a weekly blog for Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.

A collection of those well-received writings appears in a newly published book, *Together: Thoughts and Stories About Living In Community* (Nurturing Faith, 2021). In the book's preface he confesses: "The act of working out my thoughts at a keyboard has forced me to explore what I believe and whether or not I practice what I preach."

In the following conversation, Hampton talks about his writing life and the intended purpose of using stories and reflections to improve community life.

## NFJ: What roles do memory and nostalgia play in your writings?

JH: Much of my writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, is drawn from real-life experiences, so memory plays a definite role. Whether describing a place or an event — or expressing emotions through a character — memory is part of the process.

To the extent that some of those

memories are from 40 or more years ago, that probably prompts some nostalgia for those times as well. I'll admit that I'm not what you'd call an "edgy" storyteller, so perhaps my writing leans toward a more thoughtful, nostalgic style.

## NFJ: How have you evolved as a writer — and who/what influenced you?

JH: Professionally, my writing has evolved from newspaper journalism to magazine features to corporate and institutional marketing. That progression has meant the development of a broader, more relaxed style.

But some readers tell me my fiction still has "an economy of words," which probably comes from the brevity I learned from writing newspaper stories. While I have read and appreciate all types of writing, including the champions of verbose, long-winded storytelling, when I sit down to write I tend to stick

to a voice and style that moves along and gets to the point.

As for content and themes, there have been times in the past 10 years when I've lamented that I didn't start writing books when I was younger. But the obvious response to that is: I didn't have enough real-life experience to draw from when I was younger.

## NFJ: Personal storytelling has to be more than a biographical dumpsite. How do you see this type of writing connecting with readers?

JH: Even though our life experiences may be vastly different, there still are universal truths, challenges and emotions that most



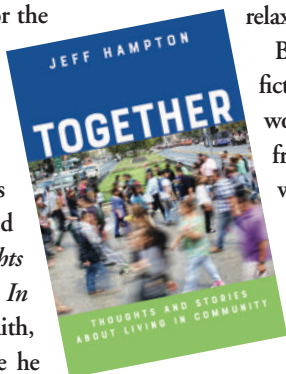
of us can relate to. If I write about how I felt when a neighbor harangued me for putting a flyer in his mailbox, someone else might remember a time they were rejected by someone they tried to help or invited to be part of something, as I was trying to do.

The underlying theme is rejection and how we respond to it — and in this case, what we do or don't do to be good neighbors. So somewhere in the storytelling you want to strike that universal note that resonates with readers.

## NFJ: What subject matters draw your attention?

JH: As a writer — and I suppose as a reader as well — I'm drawn to stories about people who have overcome challenges and experienced loss and recovery, missteps and redemption, isolation and community.

I think it's interesting and beneficial to read about people who have had to "get through" something because we all are on that continual journey of becoming, and there's plenty to learn from others.



## NFJ: You've written six previous books. What kind?

JH: All my previous books are fiction. They include:

- a novel about an ordinary citizen who becomes an unlikely candidate for president and must push back against a process that challenges who he is and what he believes,
- a two-novel series set on the Texas Gulf Coast about a group of strangers who become a family of sorts as they face personal and communal challenges,
- a collection of Christmas short stories ranging from realistic to whimsical,
- a story for older kids about snowmen who come to life and get revenge against bullies,
- a short-story retelling of the Book of Jonah set in the modern business world.

## NFJ: Are there some ingredients that tend to be found in your writings?

JH: I think realism is a main ingredient. Coming from a background in newspaper journalism, I like to write about real places and real people.

In fiction, my characters are loosely drawn from bits and pieces of real people I have known. Also I like conversations between characters that provide personal background and help advance the story rather than relying on third person narration.

In my blogs and in this new nonfiction book, I think the conversation is between me and the reader, with me telling a story and inviting the reader to think about what they would do or have done in similar situations.

## NFJ: What tip or two would you give to those seeking to improve their writing skills?

JH: Write about something you know and are passionate about exploring further. Don't try to write for a large invisible audience but instead write for yourself and a small intimate group.

As you write — and as you are editing and proofreading — read your words out loud. That will help you find mistakes and typos, but perhaps more important, it will

help you write in a way that is readable.

If you have characters, reading their quotes out loud will help them come to life and will let you know when they are speaking out of character. It also will help you write in a voice that is true to you.

## NFJ: Your new book, *Together*, grew out of writing a weekly blog for your congregation. Does that seem more like ministry than other forms of writing?

JH: I am one of a group of people who have blogged for the congregation over the past decade. There has been no agenda or specific parameters dictated by the church; we've all been allowed to just write what we want to write.

Some of the other bloggers are chaplains, counselors, people with some theological education. I'm just an average person who tends to make observations from what I experience in everyday life. Often, I do that with a story about something that's happened in my life that has some relevance to current events or has a relatable emotion or perspective.

Often, I am confessing a shortcoming or misunderstanding and I'm sort of prompting the reader with, "huh, maybe you too?" In that regard, it may be a ministry if it helps someone feel less imperfect and lost because they are reading someone who has been in the same situation.

## NFJ: "Community" has many meanings. What does it mean to you and how does it play out in these writings?

JH: I think of "community" as being those places where our lives intersect with other's lives, and as I describe in the preface to the book, those intersections occur in many places: family and friends, neighbors and towns, the human race and the Kingdom of God.

And there are subgroups within those communities. So, with that in mind, these writings offer stories from my own life as well as opinions and perspectives about the ways that we can live in harmony or in disharmony in our various communities.

## NFJ: Does the need for community building and nurture seem more relevant in this era of fractured relationships among family, friends and congregations? And how might story sharing make a positive impact?

JH: This collection of essays was gathered from a decade of writing through peaceful times and turbulent times, and the question has always been: What can we do or how can we behave or interact that contributes to a good community versus those things we do that might contribute to a bad community?

I do believe there has been an escalation in recent years of forces that are hurting our communities. We're behaving in ways that are disrespectful, dishonest, intolerant, self-serving and sometimes just plain hateful.

My hope is that these stories and reflections will at the very least prompt people to pause and think about how they are interacting in their various communities. I think pausing instead of reacting immediately can create space for doing the right thing, which may be doing nothing at all or jumping into a situation with both feet.

More than anything, I hope some of these writings will remind readers of just how precious and important our relationships are.

## NFJ: What might readers expect — or not expect — from your writings?

JH: With the exception of just a few essays in this book, readers should not expect to be preached at or provided with formulas or checklists for how best to live in community. In most cases the message is more subtle: show up, be present, pay attention, don't be so timid.

And quite often: don't make the same mistake I made. And if you do? Give yourself some grace and learn from it.

Readers also should not expect a lot of scriptural references because I am not a Bible scholar by any measure. I'm more prone to make a point with a song lyric that tells a story or expresses a universal truth. **NFJ**

Editor's note: At times the subjects of articles published over the past 20 years come to mind as having particular relevance or interest. This article is one of those occasional features based on earlier topics and writings.

# The CURIOUS, ADVENTUROUS LIFE of GENE ESPY

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Gene Espy first heard of the Appalachian Trail — the world's longest footpath, stretching for more than 2,000 miles across the rugged mountain range from Maine to Georgia — from his seventh grade teacher in Cordele, Ga. The trail had been completed just two years earlier.

Ever the adventurer, Gene was intrigued that it reached into the northern portion of his home state, although he lived in South Georgia and had never seen a mountain. Several years later, in 1945, Gene and another Georgia Tech student walked a portion of the trail in the Great Smoky Mountains during a school break.

"I thought, 'If I ever get the chance I'd like to hike the whole trail,'" Gene said in a 2010 interview for this journal.

That time would come in 1951, when at age 24 he unknowingly became just the second person to "thru-hike" the trail — that is, making the entire 2,025-mile trek in one outing. And he did it alone — covering 14 states over 123 days.

The now-popular trail was obscure then — known somewhat as the "government trail" to those who lived near its construction. At times Gene would

bushwhack his way to stay on course, unlike hikers today who follow white rectangular blazes along well-tended paths.

At times, Gene would walk for more than a week without seeing another person.

## ADVENTURER

A retired aerospace engineer, Gene, now 93, and his wife Eugenia lived for six decades across the street from Highland Hills Baptist Church in Macon, Ga., where they were actively engaged. Now they live with their daughter in metro Atlanta.

His slight build and soft voice belie the courage, curiosity and even mischief that have marked his long and adventurous life.

"My lack of fear and my yearning to explore the world drove me to conquer new things," said Gene in the earlier interview.

A 10<sup>th</sup>-grade Spanish class led Gene to suggest to a classmate that they ride their bicycles to Mexico the next summer. But his friend's father overheard their planning and put a stop to it.

So Gene set out on a solo bike trip from Cordele to Dothan, Ala., then into Florida, with stops in Panama City, Tallahassee and Jacksonville. He then rode through Waycross, Ga., en route to home.

"I'd never heard of gears," said Gene



In 1951, at age 24, Georgia Tech graduate Gene Espy solo hiked the 14-state Appalachian Trail "to see God in nature." Contributed photo.

with a grin. But his strong legs, adventurous spirit and balloon tires were enough to complete the journey.

Gene pitched his tent in cemeteries or churchyards, he said. And he had no contact with his parents until he rolled back into the driveway a week after his departure.

"But I enjoyed it," said Gene in his usual understated fashion.

## DYNAMITE

More adventure would come when the Flint River was dammed to form Lake Blackshear near Gene's home. He had seen a newsreel about water skiing at Cypress Gardens in Florida and thought: "I've got to try that."

A make-your-own water ski kit from *Popular Science* magazine, and some locally bought rope, lumber and a broom handle were all he needed. Or so he thought — since he had already built his own boat.

However, no one anticipated such water sports, so many stumps were left just below the lake's surface. But Gene had a plan.



Gene Espy's rudimentary gear used while hiking the entire 2,000-plus-mile Appalachian Trail is displayed at the Amicalola Falls State Park visitor's center in North Georgia. Photo by John D. Pierce.

## ON THE TRAIL

With that kind of spunk and tenacity, taking on the Appalachian Trail seemed natural. Gene was not pleased with a sales job he'd taken after graduation, so he decided the time was right.

He started the hike on May 31, 1951, later in the season than preferred, because a 17-year-old Boy Scout from his hometown wanted to join him and needed to complete the school year.

"He had a lot of complaints about his heavy backpack and the rough trail," Gene recalled. "On the second day, he went back to Cordele and I hiked the rest of the trail by myself."

Gene's equipment was simple but his planning meticulous. He shipped supplies — including replacement boots — to post offices he could leave the trail to visit. He secured the needed information and kept the most current map under his hat for safety and easy access.

Gene said he enjoyed the solitude and would add some miles by taking side trails to waterfalls or overlooks described in his guidebook. "I didn't keep track of the mileage; I just enjoyed it."

With an increasingly scruffy appearance, Gene didn't always receive a warm welcome when he ventured into towns for food and other supplies. However, he recalled a police officer in Damascus, Va., offering to give him a driving tour of town.

Afterward, Gene was heading back to the trail as darkness and a storm moved in. But the officer suggested he spend the night "down at headquarters."

"Headquarters was the jail," said Gene with an impish smile. But he enjoyed the comforts of the bunk secured to a cell wall by chains "just like in the movies."

Returning to the trail, Gene would continue his adventure that had but one purpose: "I wanted to see God in nature."

## MILES & MILES

Gene's most trusted companion was a walking stick he found as a 12-year-old boy. It's a good bit shorter now than when he began his AT thru-hike — and not from daily wear.

He acquired a plat of the land before the lake was built and identified the location of trees. Then he bought a case of dynamite to eliminate the stumps.

"I'd go down about three feet," said Gene, explaining his technique that included lighting long fuses. He then marked the course for himself and future skiers to follow.

Dynamite came in handy again when he led a group of boys from the First Baptist Church of Cordele to transport — by boat — an "outdoor privy" to the new lakeside picnic area of the local Baptist association. However, the ground at the designated spot "was like concrete."

So Gene drove over to the next county and bought dynamite. Testing a stick with a leak, he accidentally started a quick-spreading grass fire that required the aid of fire fighters to put it out.

Once extinguished, one of the firefighters pointed to a sawdust pile near the edge of the burned area and surmised: "This fire must have started from spontaneous combustion."

Gene nodded his head vigorously and said, "Probably so."

As a college student, Gene got the bright idea he'd hitchhike from Atlanta to St. Louis and back one weekend just because he'd never been there. It was before

the era of interstates, so after Friday classes Gene pointed his thumb northward on U.S. 41.

When two men headed for Indiana offered him a ride, Gene knew it wasn't a direct route to St. Louis, but he was "just traveling" and had never seen Indianapolis either. Next he flagged down an 18-wheeler emblazoned with "Danger — High Explosives."

The driver said he wasn't supposed to pick up hitchhikers but needed someone to talk to since he was having trouble staying awake. Gene asked what he was hauling.

"Dynamite," the trucker responded. Gene recalled, "So I talked pretty good to him for 60 miles."

In St. Louis at 10:30 on Saturday morning, Gene sent a penny postcard to the Georgia Tech classmate who doubted the success of his journey. The return trip included sleeping on a bench at a closed gas station in Blytheville, Ark., before catching a ride to Memphis and then one to Georgia with two businessmen headed for Savannah who treated him to a nice Sunday lunch along the way.

They dropped Gene at his dorm around 5:30 on Sunday evening— completing a 1,600-mile adventure through 11 states in one weekend. "And I only spent \$2.35," said Gene proudly.

“I killed several rattlesnakes,” said Gene, matter-of-factly, noting one well-placed swing took about a foot off the end of the stick. How many is several?

“I lost count at 15,” he said with a shrug. “I killed all the rattlesnakes I saw.”

Oh, and then there were the copperheads he encountered “mostly in Pennsylvania.”

Gene would reward himself with Baby Ruth or Hershey’s Chocolate bars for reaching various destinations. “Then I’d read the wrapper a couple of times; it was my only contact with the known world.”

On occasion he would meet another hiker, such as the generous Boy Scout who gave Gene a plastic container with a lid to help with preparing his powered milk and other dry mixes.

“I’d never heard of Tupperware,” recalled Gene. “But it sure came in handy.”

Gene never built a fire, cooking his meals on a small camp stove that allowed for setting up and moving on quickly. His staples included dehydrated potatoes, pudding and cornmeal, which he sweetened with sugar and raisins. And he ate a lot of sandwiches.

“I’d buy two loaves of bread and three jars of different kinds of preserves,” said Gene of the times he’d go off trail to find a store. He would assemble the sandwiches and return them to the bread bags, alternating the flavors, for easy access and some variety.

## GEAR

At times the trail was more adventurous than expected. After two wildcats visited his campsite, Gene creatively strapped himself and his sleeping bag to a nearby fire tower — some 50 feet aloft — using his belt and shoestrings.

He went through three pairs of L.L. Bean hiking books and got great results from Wigwam 100-percent nylon socks. “Two pairs for the whole trip — with no holes in them.”

Gene said he’d wash his feet and socks each night — attaching the newly cleaned pair to his backpack to dry during the next day’s hike.

Only once did he question his decision to tackle the entire trail. It came on a very



Gene Espy (right) recounts his adventurous life in an interview with editor John Pierce during a dinner event in 2010. His book, *Trail of My Life*, is available at [genespyhiker.com](http://genespyhiker.com). Photo by Bruce Gourley.

cold September day in the White Mountains of New Hampshire when the winds were so strong he had to lean forward to stay afoot.

In the distance he spotted smoke coming from a house’s chimney and wished for the comfort of that fire. But he quickly remembered that allowing such thoughts could lead to desperate consequences. So he finished his Baby Ruth and hit the icy trail.

“That was the only time I wondered what I was doing,” said Gene, a good and determined man who described even military boot camp as “fun.”

## THE FINISH

When Gene finally reached the end of the trail atop Mt. Katahdin in Maine, on a cold Sept. 30, 1951, there was no grand celebration as is common among AT hikers today. In fact, there was no one else around.

So Gene just took in the spectacular views in all directions, and then leaned his trusty though shortened walking stick against the sign and took a picture.

“Then I knelt down and said a prayer of thanks to God for watching over me and allowing me to make this hike.”

The trail had ended, but not the adventure. Gene had to get home somehow.

First, he would spend the night at nearby Katahdin Stream Campground where his tales spread. The next day a reporter came out for an interview.

As Gene disposed of some remain-

ing food, a deer walked over and licked his outstretched hand. An alert photographer captured the moment — which later a Maine artist made into an oil painting.

Gene was invited to speak to the local Chamber of Commerce in nearby Millinocket, Maine, where he eased back into civilization. He even received a discount on a new “Sunday suit” that, along with a haircut, he hoped would make hitchhiking home easier.

Before sticking out his thumb, however, Gene shipped his hiking gear back home and mailed a postcard to let his parents know he’d made it to the end.

“We only made long-distance phone calls if it was an emergency,” said Gene. “And I didn’t figure finishing the trail was an emergency.”

Before his postcard could reach Cordele, Ga., however, his mother read an Associated Press news story about Gene’s adventure.

After hitchhiking some 500 miles southward, Gene saw the road filled with uniformed soldiers and knew he wouldn’t have much luck catching a ride. So he flagged down a Greyhound bus and rode back to Georgia in relative comfort — satisfied with all he had experienced over many mountains and many miles.

Indeed, he had encountered God in nature as he had hoped — yet in ways beyond what he had imagined. **NFJ**

# Great Reads

from

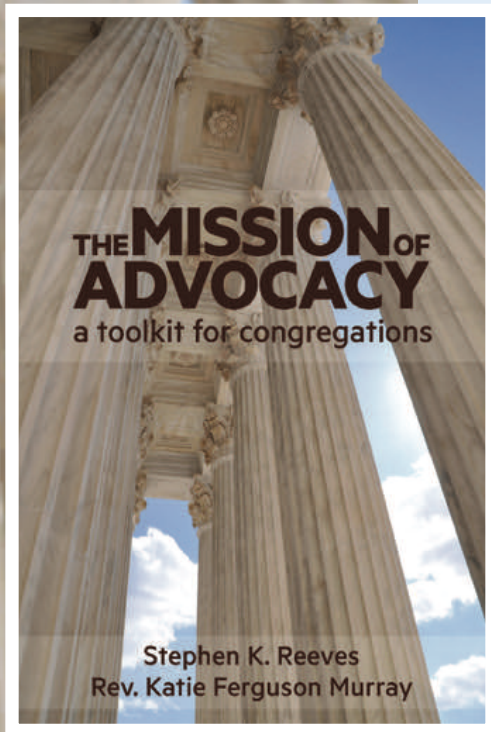
## Nurturing Faith Books

- How can Christians follow Jesus' command to love our neighbor in the political realm?
- How can the local church help form members for responsible Christian citizenship?
- How can your church engage in advocacy issues and work for justice?

...

***The Mission of Advocacy: A Toolkit for Congregations***, based on a partnership between the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Wilshire Baptist Church, provides guidance on modeling an effective and positive public witness in divisive times.

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.



# Questions Christians ask scientists

*What is your favorite faith-and-science passage in the Bible?*

BY PAUL WALLACE

In a certain narrow sense, I don't have a favorite faith-and-science passage because there really is no science in the Bible. What we call science did not appear until more than a thousand years after the biblical canon was established.

However, the people of ancient Israel may have approached the created world, they did not perform controlled experiments or make systematic, quantitative observations of nature with the purpose of understanding how it works.

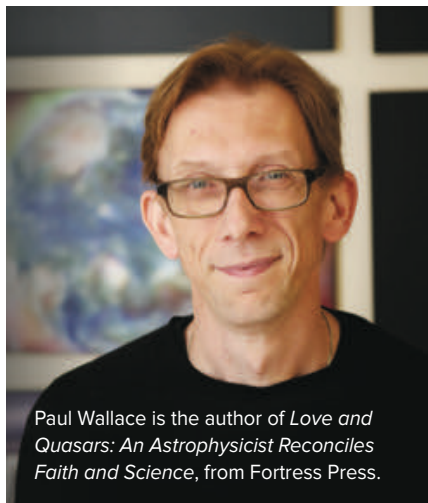
Were you to ask, "What is your favorite passage about creation in the Bible?" — then we would be in business. The word "creation" implies the presence of a creator and scripture is saturated with the theme of creation.

In response to the creation question, then, I have a lot to think about. You cannot beat Genesis 1 for its liturgical grandeur; Genesis 2 for its messy, down-to-earth, improvisational character; or Isaiah 40–66 for its rhapsodic vision of a new creation.

Proverbs 8:22–31 celebrates the foundational role of wisdom in the creation of the world, and Psalm 104 praises God for all creatures — even the great sea monster Leviathan. And Job 38–41 takes us on an unforgettable tour of a brilliant and brutal cosmos.

But for sheer efficiency and scope, for drawing together the human and the cosmic, for inviting us into a coherent and morally serious view of the cosmos and us in it, one can do no better than Psalm 19:1–10 (NRSV):

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his  
handiwork.



Paul Wallace is the author of *Love and Quasars: An Astrophysicist Reconciles Faith and Science*, from Fortress Press.

Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes out like a bridegroom from  
his wedding canopy,  
and like a strong man runs its course  
with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them;  
and nothing is hid from its heat.

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the LORD are sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is clear,  
enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the LORD is pure,  
enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the LORD are true  
and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.

We often think of humans as separate from creation; values such as wisdom and justice and righteousness seem to have nothing to do with the universe, and the universe seems to have nothing to do with them.

The ancient and evolving biophysical world is surely disconnected from, indifferent to, and perhaps even hostile to the moral imperatives so central to our lives as humans. In the face of this uniquely modern problem, Psalm 19 invites us to behold the cosmos anew, as a coherent, unified whole.

The first four verses emphasize creation. David, the traditional author of this psalm, seems to be in a playful mood. The heavens declare, he writes. They proclaim; they speak with a clear voice.

At the same time there is no speech, there is no voice, and there are no words. How can this be? A riddle has been posed to us.

I believe we all know the answer to this riddle, especially those of us who sense a deep attraction to the created world. Creation speaks and never ceases, not for a day, not for a night, not for a minute.

The psalmist looks to the heavens as an example, and it is an excellent one. As a professional astronomer who has spent a lot of time thinking about and looking at the night sky, I can say that I have, upon gazing skyward, heard this voiceless voice.

But, of course, the sky turns for everyone, and viewing it is free. Everyone gets the same stars, the same planets, the same sun and moon. And they speak to all people without ceasing, day and night.

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to [john@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:john@goodfaithmedia.org).



But if the heavens declare, what do they say? They say something about beauty.

Beauty, as art critic Sister Wendy Beckett reminds us, is not a pretty word; it is a strong word. The beauty of the heavens, as the heavens themselves, reveals something fundamental, something concrete.

The heavens say that reality transcends our most daring thoughts. They suggest that there may be more intelligent life in the universe than mere *Homo sapiens*.

They tell us that creation is orderly but also wildly, fabulously creative. They proclaim knowledge, suggestive of physical laws that we have begun to understand today but that the author of Psalm 19 could not have imagined.

Verses 5-6 introduce a variation on the cosmic theme. To 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers this new theme is hidden, but is nonetheless present behind the words as the psalmist praises the sun in the figures of a bridegroom and a running man.

These lines almost certainly have their inspiration in the broader context of the ancient Near East, a context in which the sun was considered to be the god of law and justice. This is not to say our author considers the sun to be a god.

One of the interesting things about ancient Israel is that they did *not* consider the moon and stars and sun to be gods, but rather that the connection between the sun and law and justice was in the air, so to speak, and so shows up here.

Next we see why. These sun-law-justice verses transition the reader between the first section and the second, in which the author's focus switches explicitly from creation to the moral law, which rejoices the heart and enlightens the eyes.

At this point the psalm sounds exactly like Proverbs, that great storehouse of traditional wisdom. Even the fear of the Lord, perhaps the most prominent theme of the Book of Proverbs, is emphasized.

Unlike creation, the law praised by the psalmist — the Ten Commandments plus all the additional laws of the Pentateuch — concerns human beings directly. It provides

a roadmap for creating a good and useful and beautiful and righteous life.

Righteousness is just a stained-glass word for justice. So the law bears both individual and communal elements.

The law tells us how to live in this world successfully: how to live a morally serious life, how to show love to others, how to get along.

Stepping back, we see two themes: creation, which declares knowledge; and the moral law, which enlightens the eyes.

Is the author simply saying that both creation and the law are good and beautiful and praiseworthy and thus go together nicely? No. More is happening here, and again we miss it if we fail to understand the cosmology of ancient Israel.

Creation, in this view, is not just organized elements, the law is not just words in a book, and justice is not just something people achieve. A deep, powerful reality animates both creation and the moral law and binds them together in a single vision. This reality is called “wisdom.”

Wisdom is alive, dynamic, creative and cosmic. Wisdom was present at the time of creation (Proverbs 8) and is best understood as an attribute of God folded into the fabric of all things, human and nonhuman alike.

Law, justice, beauty, creativity and knowledge are all grounded in wisdom, which shines through all creation and remains accessible to all people everywhere for the building up of righteous lives and justice-filled communities.

By singing praises to God for creation and the moral law in a single hymn, the author of Psalm 19 weaves all the elements of the universe into a unified cosmic tapestry. Through both creation and human morality, God calls us to choose wisdom, to stitch our own lives into this tapestry, to take part in it, to become part of it.

There is a unity and coherence to this view — at once particular and universal — that attracts us 21<sup>st</sup>-century folks and helps us draw together all the elements of our often-fragmented worlds. **NFJ**

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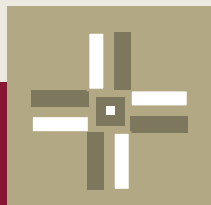
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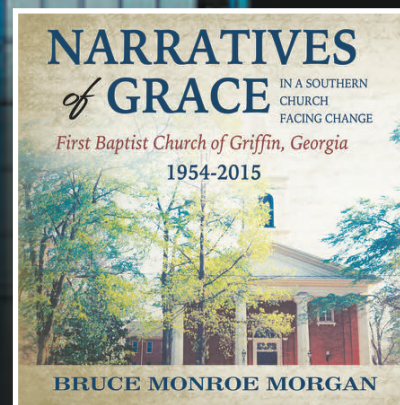
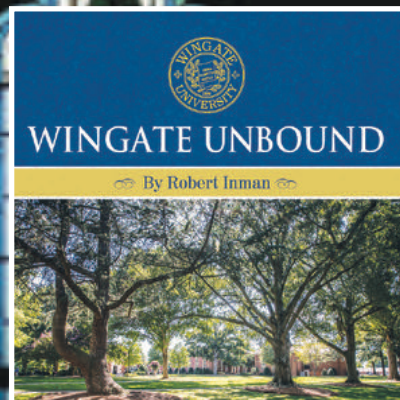
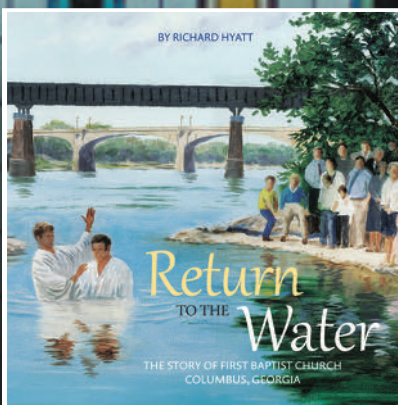
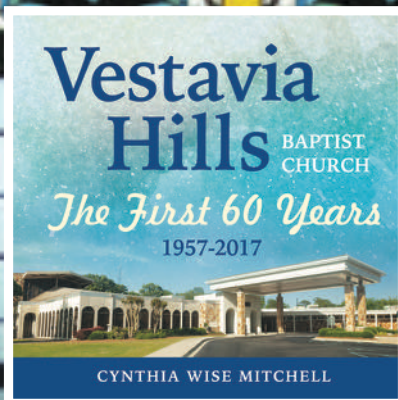
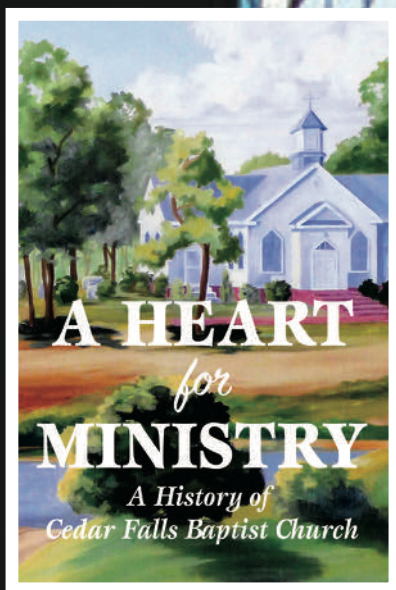
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