

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2022

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

FAITHFUL & ENGAGED:

Reflecting on a long,
shared ministry
journey

FAITH-SCIENCE QUESTION:

How do faith and
science come together
in your daily practice
of the Christian life?

PRINCIPLES & PERSPECTIVES

Coach Bill Curry on
lessons learned
and shared

How to
keep
being
wrong

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Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge are scholarly, yet applicable, and conveniently placed in the center of this journal. Simply provide a copy of the journal to each class participant, and take advantage of the abundant online teaching materials at teachers.nurturingfaith.net. These include video overviews for teacher preparation or to be shown in class.

See page 21 for more information.

Editor's Letter

When approaching a new year, we often focus on the idea of a fresh start. We make promises to ourselves — and to others, including God — about what we will or will not do in the future.

Unless we change what we truly value, however, we are unlikely to change what we do. Aligning our values with those revealed by Jesus is an ongoing effort — yet the primary goal of those of us seeking to be faithful followers through thick and thin.

While Jesus' call for self-denial and love of God and neighbor is straightforward, the cultural context in which we live out such faith can be challenging.

In 2012, Nurturing Faith published



the book, *The Pulpit Ministry of the Pastors of River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond, Virginia*, edited by William Powell Tuck. The Foreword was written by historian Fred Anderson.

He quotes the church's longest tenured pastor, James Slatton, as saying: "Truth is never wrapped in cellophane and handed out predigested. Well, it often is, actually, but you should not swallow it whole that way."

My hope is that the articles in this journal will serve the good purpose of stirring our minds and hearts in ways that cause us to rethink or redirect or reaffirm that which enables well-wrought faith and faithfulness.

While free from editorial interference, we rely on the support of those who value

what we do. So, I want to express deep appreciation to those who enable us to carry out the uniquely autonomous and varied mission of Good Faith Media — which seamlessly brought together the resources of Nurturing Faith and EthicsDaily, and expanded and amplified our voices.

Your affirmations, questions, challenges and contributions are all appreciated. We are better when you are engaged with us.

Blessings for the New Year!

Executive Editor

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OUR MISSION

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

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

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

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Cover photo by John D. Pierce: Beaming structures such as the North Head Lighthouse in Washington State have long symbolized the call for Christians to reflect the light and love of Jesus. The rugged coastlines, lush forests and snow-topped mountains of the Pacific Northwest will make for a wonderful Good Faith Experience, July 23-30. Check out this and other small group experiences set for 2022 at goodfaithmedia.org/group-experiences.



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Worth Repeating



“After a year of trying to assure people that we were still the church even when we weren’t in the same room, I don’t know how to convince them now of the importance of gathering in person.”

Rector Elizabeth Felicetti of St. David’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Va.
(The Atlantic)

“She made Christianity seem like a decent place to be while you asked questions, rather than something you had to abandon to be free.”

Kathryn Lofton, professor of religious studies at Yale, remembering author Rachel Held Evans who died in 2019 at age 37 *(The New Yorker)*

“Echo chambers do not produce faith; they produce conformity. True faith communities create space for engagement and exploration, not indoctrination.”

Professor and author Susan Shaw on Samford University disinviting as a speaker Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian Jon Meacham (GFM)

“One of the myths the church perpetuates is that people with problems are ‘out there’ and need to be brought into the church for salvation. The reality is, a whole lot of people inside the church live with just as many problems as those who never darken the doors.”

Mark Wingfield, executive director and publisher of Baptist News Global

“The term ‘evangelical’ — the English translation of a Greek word in the New Testament literally meaning ‘good news’ — is connected to different identities and values, depending on the race of the adherent.”

Robert P. Jones of Public Religion Research Institute (BNG)

“Spend too much time online, and you’ll emerge with a distorted view of your opponents and your allies.”

Columnist David French in *The Atlantic*

“Thriving churches often experience as many or more failures as they do successes. That means an extra dose of grace and tolerance needs to be baked into the culture of the congregation.”

Bill Wilson, founding director of Center for Healthy Churches (BNG)

“To an unusual degree, evangelicals have remained oblivious to how their own stories map onto larger histories. It’s not that evangelicals disregard history entirely, but they tend to prefer their own versions of events.”

Church historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne*, writing in the *New York Times*

“God created us to be in community with one another. As human beings, we have a deep, innate need to be loved, seen, heard and in community. We were not created to live life alone.”

Missy Ward-Angalla, based in Kampala, Uganda, who works with refugees through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (BNG)



There’s More to Tell

Good Faith Weekly offers reflection and resources at the intersection of culture and faith through an inclusive Christian lens. New episodes drop every Friday. Subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you like to pod so you don’t miss an episode!

How to keep being wrong

By John D. Pierce

The familiar, shoulder-shrugging line, “That’s just the way I was raised,” should be followed by the admission: “And, now, I’m choosing to remain ignorant.”

There’s a clear methodology to avoiding needed change, righting wrongs, and seeking redirection of one’s thinking. For professing Christians, the way one understands God and approaches biblical interpretation heavily impacts those methods and the results.

The first step in continuing to be wrong when an issue of justice and equality comes to the forefront is to downplay wrongful thinking of the past. This form of Christianity gets dragged along by culture until it finally loses its grip on the past and surrenders to the reality of truth exhibited by those outside the faith as well as some from within.

A needed confession is: “Since we were wrong about slavery, racism and other atrocities, we must consider the possibility we could be wrong about other issues of equality and justice now.” However, I’ve never heard those words uttered within conservative Americanized Christianity.

To do so would take away the certainty that keeps the fragile faith of fundamentalism intact. It allows for continually pulling and reframing selected texts to justify one’s fearful, self-serving bigotry.

It continues the same spirit of those who spoke or wrote in defense of human bondage, such as: “We ... hold that the Bible says nothing to condemn slavery as sinful... Either believe the Bible and support slavery, or oppose slavery and throw out the Bible as God’s authoritative Word.”

That quote comes from one of my most used, well-worn books: *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (1983, Herald Press) by Willard M. Swartley.

A Mennonite scholar, Swartley doesn’t

opine on these controversial issues of the past and present. Rather he presents how those issues have been framed — letting both sides speak for themselves.

Yet the book serves a greater purpose than its exploration of these four important but limited issues. It reveals

how many Christians keep ending up on the wrong side of issues related to justice and equality by taking the same failed approach.

They do so by going on a grand and glorious hunt for isolated Bible verses to construe into a case to justify a favored injustice that serves themselves well at the expense of others while ignoring larger biblical themes in general and, specifically, the life and teachings of Jesus.

Why do such critical lessons — following failure after failure — remain unlearned by such a large portion of white Americanized Christians?

Perhaps it is because learning, growing and changing are not high priorities. And, surely, it is because the same methods that led to early moral failures are enshrined into the bad theology that gets defended and repeated.

The case for slavery rested on an argument that “the Bible is clear” on this matter and any opposing view comes from those who don’t believe the Bible and God. However, that position is no longer held or advanced (at least publically) by most — even very conservative Christians.

Yet the methodology (and theology) on which this case was argued within white, Americanized Christianity is alive and well. No lessons were learned.

Swartley suggests approaching the Bible in ways that limit our biases and misuse of texts when seeking to apply them



to controversial issues. To be helpful, though, requires one to actually pursue truth rather than build the reinforcement of existing prejudices and justification for hatred and exclusion.

Swartley notes “the appropriate (God-intended) biblical word is more likely

to be heard” when, among other things, “the Gospels in their direct witness to Jesus Christ are to be taken as final authority.”

Conversely, the way to keep getting it wrong is to pull selective verses out of context and assume a “flat view of biblical authority” that gives all texts equal significance. Such an approach allows for an isolated statement on slavery to trump the moral imperative to love one’s neighbor.

Those concerned about the Christian witness — or, more importantly, about truth and justice — must face up to the hard but justifiable question: “Why do you keep getting it wrong?”

Whether it’s slavery, racism, patriarchy, politics of self-interest, discrimination, abuse, or other forms of inequality and injustice, the honest answer is: Because we keep doing the same thing.

But that response addresses “how” more than “why” — which can only be understood as an unwillingness to change out of fear of what might be lost.

Whether it’s called confession and conversion — or deconstruction and reconstruction, or just admitting when one is wrong and then taking a better approach — the only way to get different results is to do things differently.

“When anyone lives in Christ, the new creation has come. The old is gone! The new is here!” (2 Cor. 5:17 NIRV) **NFJ**

PRINCIPLES & PERSPECTIVES

Coach Bill Curry recalls life lessons he learned and now teaches

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
JOHN D. PIERCE

// Every morning I ask God, “What do you want me to do with my life?” said former professional football player and college coach Bill Curry, 79, reflecting on and responding to a question about what stays on his mind and heart these days.

The entry wall to his Atlanta office is all glass. The other three walls are filled with memorabilia from a lifetime of sports, leadership and Christian service.

When playing center for the Green Bay Packers and then the Baltimore Colts, he snapped the ball to legendary quarterbacks Bart Starr and Johnny Unitas. Both were great persons also, he attests.

Shortly after arriving in Green Bay as the last-to-be-drafted rookie in 1965, Curry was headed to dinner after practice when he heard a warm voice beside him say: “Welcome to the Packers.”

It was Starr, who had played at the University of Alabama, and would lead the Packers to three consecutive league championships and victories in the first two Super Bowls. He asked if they could eat together — and then invited the rookie from Georgia to join him and his wife on Sunday at the Methodist church they attended and for a meal afterward.

“That’s how he treated people,” said Curry, noting again his rookie status compared to Starr’s fame. But a friendship was formed, and the next year, due to another player’s injury, Curry would become the starting center who snapped the ball to and blocked for Starr.

“That’s how we started, and he never left my side until the day he died,” said Curry of their lasting friendship.

In 1967, Curry joined the Baltimore Colts where “[Coach Don] Shula’s practices were just unbelievable.” Despite the intensive heat, “Unitas had on a rubber



Coach Bill Curry's Atlanta office is filled with memorabilia, including photos of star quarterbacks Bart Starr and Johnny Unitas — and hall-of-fame defensive end Willie Davis — with whom he played in the NFL and who were influential in his life.

jacket and was whistling a happy tune.”

Curry was not interested in doing either — and asked Unitas why he was so upbeat.

“Billy, you’re a long time dead, but you don’t get much time on this planet,” Unitas said to him.

It was just the perspective Curry needed. “My practice habits improved immediately.”

And soon he was handing the ball on Sundays to this friend with a strong arm and proper attitude.

Of Starr and Unitas, he said: “The two greatest quarterbacks of all time changed my life the instants I met them.”

WELCOME TO THE NFL

Curry’s low draft status was just one concern when going from playing for

Coach Bobby Dodd — “a southern gentleman” — at Georgia Tech to the training camp of the Packers where the brash Coach Vince Lombardi ruled the football world.

Curry, a 22-year-old white kid with a Southern accent, wasn’t sure he would be received well by Lombardi, and the most racially diverse NFL team at the time.

It was the middle of the civil rights movement and Curry had never been in a huddle with black players except for a couple of recent college all-star games — which caused him to be two weeks late to camp — that included Bob Hayes and Gayle Sayers.

However, his understanding of racial equality had been changed when, as a teen, he did grunt work on a construction site with an African-American supervisor he deeply admired. But he wasn’t sure how he

would fit in at Green Bay.

“I wanted to make the team desperately,” said Curry. “But, mostly, I was concerned about being rejected.”

Also challenging was lining up at center during practice with veteran middle linebacker Ray Nitschke across the line of scrimmage.

“He broke my nose and my facemask, and knocked me out,” Curry recalled. “And that was the first day, and I was supposed to block him.”

Lombardi — who’d experienced discrimination as an Italian-American — didn’t tolerate racism on what became known as “the greatest team of all time.” And no one contributed to that team’s success more than Willie Davis, an African-American player from Louisiana and a hall-of-fame defensive end.

After practice, the doubtful Curry was leaving the field when Davis called out: “I’d like to speak to you, young man.” Curry feared he was indeed being “called out.”

Instead, Davis said: “Bill, I’ve been watching you practice and I really think you’ve got what it takes to make our team. And I’m going to help you.”

Davis, who had played at Grambling State, was taking graduate courses in business at the University of Chicago. He broke every stereotype Curry had heard growing up in the segregated South.

Sensing Curry’s fears, he told the rookie that he faced two choices: “the pain of discipline or the pain of regret; you choose.”

Curry said he owes so much to Davis — whom he often asked to explain his kindness and support. The usual response was, “I don’t know.”

Decades later, when the two former teammates met up, Curry pried again for an answer. Davis said, “I did that because of my Christian faith.”

Saying that earlier, Davis said, would have sounded boastful. But growing up in church he was taught to love everybody, including those who are different. And he took that to heart.

Davis’ influence “changed the trajectory of my life,” said Curry. “It transformed the way I think about other people.”

VALUES

“God doesn’t care about a football game,” said Curry, a United Methodist lay leader who studied theology at Emory University, “but cares a lot about whether we quit on one another.”

Lessons learned on the field and with teammates can carry over to life’s larger arena, he said. “You build a relationship such that you just don’t let each other down.”

After his playing career, Curry sought to convey such values to young men who played on the college teams he coached at Georgia Tech, Alabama, Kentucky and Georgia State.

Coaching, he said, “began a new era in my life of a sense of responsibility that continues to this day.”

He recalled standing in front of the Georgia Tech team for the first time as a head coach and feeling the weight of responsibility — not as much for the success of the team as much as for the positive shaping of their lives. He simply prayed, “Dear God, please help me.”

Curry does have some regrets, however. He said the demands of coaching kept him from his home in ways he considers “a sin against my family.” He has spent a lot of time seeking their forgiveness and trying to make up for lost time.

Of his wife of 59 years, Carolyn, he said: “We love each other more than we ever have in our lives.” An author and educator, Carolyn is founding director of Women Alone Together, a non-profit foundation that addresses the special needs of women.

Outside of football, Bill Curry has studied and taught on leadership and healthy group dynamics. He knows the various theories and principles well.



Although drafted in the last round in 1965 by the Green Bay Packers, Bill Curry became the starting center in 1966 for the world champion team.



Coach Bill Curry is a student and teacher of leadership and teamwork, with a deep devotion to family. He and his wife Carolyn (pictured bottom right)—a leader of a nonprofit that serves women — have been married for 59 years.

But for “very specific guidelines,” he said no source compares to what is found in Jesus’ teachings — particularly in the Beatitudes that call for mercy, meekness, righteousness, peacemaking and other characteristics shown by Christ.

He added: “My best answer to what is leadership is Matthew 5:1-16. There is so much there.”

Curry said he memorized that passage of scripture in order to bring it to mind repeatedly. “It connects me to Christ in a way that I’ve never been connected before.”

NFJ

Good Faith Media enhances user-friendly, online bookstore

By John D. Pierce

Shopping for Nurturing Faith books — the book-publishing imprint of Good Faith Media — is even easier and more informative now. The robust online bookstore (goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore) features a new product filter to enhance the shopping experience, expanded interior previews of each book, and author interviews.

The bookstore upgrades make it very user-friendly and easy to sort through the more than 100 book titles, said Good Faith Media's Zach Dawes, who designed and implemented the upgrades.

"A new filter allows customers to do live sorting of books based on category, author, series and/or price, with the products showing up immediately on the page," said Dawes.

"On the individual product pages, customers will find a brief description of the book and author, along with the front and back cover images and a preview of the opening pages of the book," he added. "A growing number of authors have been featured on the Good Faith Reads podcast, with their interviews embedded on their book and author pages."

Nurturing Faith is purposefully different from traditional book publishing in that it makes use of the latest publishing technology, takes an author-friendly approach, and markets its books through the broader Good Faith Media enterprise.

Marketing initiatives include dedicated author pages on the bookstore site, advertisements through Nurturing Faith Journal and other GFM outlets, social media promotions, Good Faith Reads podcasts that feature authors

discussing their books, and direct sales at events where GFM has a presence.

"Our Nurturing Faith Books team enjoys working alongside authors not only in the publication process, but also in promoting and marketing our authors' books," said Bruce Gourley, who guides the book-publishing process.

A mutually beneficial relationship with its authors was enshrined into the innovative book-publishing effort when launched in 2011 in collaboration with the creative services firm,

Faithlab. Benefits include higher royalty payments, steep discounts on direct sales to authors and no first-refusal requirement on future books.

Retired pastor and professor Dan Day recalled an old bank slogan, "Small enough to know you; large enough to help you." He said, "That combination of personal relationship and professional capability applies well to Nurturing Faith Books."

"They are small enough to know you by name, and to consult with you while your book is being assembled," said Day, whose third Nurturing Faith book was just published. "But best of all, they are professional and capable enough to produce a book that looks, feels and reads just as good as the 'big boys.'"

Several authors have found the experience so positive, they have published multiple Nurturing Faith Books. Currently, authors Jon Roebuck, Lynelle Mason, Bruce Salmon, and Maralene and Miles Wesner are each publishing five or more titles.

"Working with the staff of Good Faith Media from the moment of submitting a proposal until the work is ready for publi-

cation is an invigorating experience," said Lynelle Mason. "I have found each person involved in the process to be both knowledgeable and caring. And I like being able to express my views freely with no fear of being rejected."

Author Bruce Salmon said, "One big advantage of publishing with Nurturing Faith Books is the promotional support provided by Good Faith Media."

"With five books published — or soon-to-be published — by Nurturing Faith, I can attest to the professionalism and quality of the enterprise," he added. Salmon commended Gourley and copyeditor Jackie Riley for their help throughout the publishing process — and expressed appreciation for the chance to discuss his books in two Good Faith Reads podcasts.

"All my books have been promoted in Nurturing Faith Journal and on the Good Faith Media web site," added Salmon, who has also written related articles for the journal.

The newly enhanced online bookstore offers a variety of excellent books and additional information on the creative and collaborative book-publishing ministry of Good Faith Media. Some books also have free, downloadable study guides.

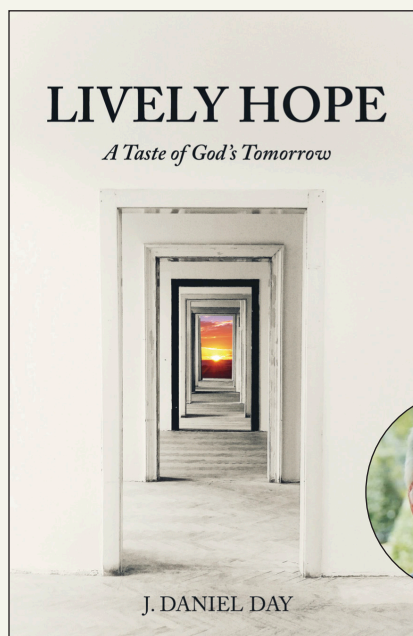
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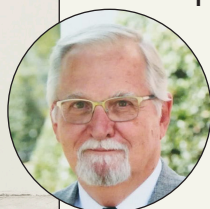
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Good Faith Media has received a gift from Martha Cates of Rome, Ga., in memory of Bob Cates, M.D., a former director of Nurturing Faith.

New From Nurturing Faith Books!



Lively Hope by J. Daniel Day explores hope through thoughtful meditations that distinguish between our life-hopes and our hopes for the world. Day guides the reader through understanding the phenomenon of hope, hope's many challenges, and our literary view of hope.



"I want to explore lively hope, the kind that sings songs in the night and stares down long odds in clear daylight, the kind that dares to dance before the fiddler has even picked up his bow and won't stop talking until the right has been done. Anything less isn't worth your time or mine."

—Author J. Daniel Day

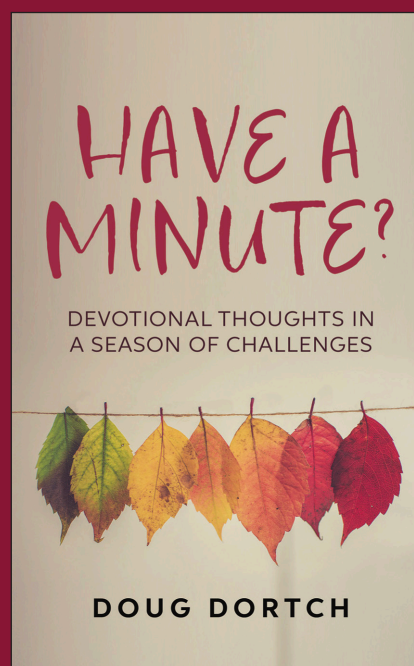
"...rich in pastoral wisdom...guides us to understand that hope is a chosen behavior"

—Molly Marshall, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

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is our decision.*

Based on the Christian year, *Have A Minute?* by Doug Dortch invites readers to enjoy the rhythms of the various seasons of the liturgical calendar so that they might align their lives with the broad redemption story of Scripture.



Order today at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore.

Healing one of history's deepest wounds

BY CHAPLAIN (COL. RET.)
CHARLIE REYNOLDS

There are few if any names in history that personify suffering and pain more than that of Adolf Hitler. To play even a small role in healing the emotional wounds left by Nazi Germany's violence against the Jewish race is no small feat.

In 2016, while serving as director of the Army Center for World Religions, I was invited by LTC Michael Brendel, director of the Central Coordination Office on Cross-Cultural Competence for the German Bundeswehr (Bundeswehr is the term for Germany's military), to attend a conference titled "Coping with Culture: The Military's Response to Diversity and Globalization."

The purpose was to assemble experts in cross-cultural issues to provide guidance to Western nations in military operations.

The conference — held in Koblenz at the intersection of the Rhine and Main rivers — opened with a boat tour dinner on the Rhine. I was surprised to see an Orthodox Jewish rabbi as one of the participants.

After introducing myself to Zsolt Balla, a very charismatic individual, we quickly built a friendship. He explained that he was at the conference because he wanted to be a Jewish chaplain and provide services for a growing number of Jewish soldiers who were now serving in the Bundeswehr.

Zsolt said it was unlikely this would happen because, unlike in the U.S. where chaplains are selected by the military, the Bundeswehr chaplaincy was operated and controlled by the Roman Catholic and

Lutheran Churches, a carryover from Germany's history when these were the only two recognized state churches.

The next day I found out why I had been invited to the conference. Due to the growing diversity in Germany's population, the Bundeswehr had a significant population of soldiers who were not Roman Catholic or Lutheran.

"This is why we asked you to come," LTC Brendel explained to me. "We want you to explain how the American army handles such a diversity of chaplains from so many different religions."

So I spent the next hour answering questions and explaining how the U.S. military managed religious diversity.

As I attended a variety of conference sessions that day, it became obvious how the guilt from the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany was still prominent in the presentations and discussions. It was evident that the shame from these atrocities was a present reality, and that Germany still needed to heal.

Rituals and ceremonies are a key component in healing. So as I was praying in my room that night, it occurred to me how symbolic it would be for the Bundeswehr to commission a Jewish chaplain.

I shared my epiphany with LTC Brendel at breakfast the next morning. He immediately understood the symbolic impact this would have not only for the Bundeswehr, but also for the entire nation.

During the break after our first session, Brendel told me he had called Ursula Gertrud von der Leyen, Germany's Secretary of Defense. "She liked the idea," he told me.

However, it would be an uphill battle with the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches. She said it would take some time to accomplish, but she believes it is the right thing to do.



"She understands the symbolic impact this would have," Brendel explained.

That evening I shared the news with Rabbi Zsolt, who responded: "I don't think it will happen." He noted how the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches do not want to give up their control.

"If it does happen, I want you to invite me to the ceremony," I told him. "I would like to be there for that historic occasion."

Zsolt promised that he would, and we began to share occasional messages on Facebook. I would occasionally listen in on his services posted online.

I kept hoping for a message inviting me to come to the commissioning of a Jewish rabbi into the Bundeswehr. But after four years had passed, I began to think that Zsolt was correct: it probably would not happen.

In June of 2021, however, almost five years after the conference, I received a call from Zsolt that began: "Charlie, I have great news."

From the excitement in Zsolt's voice, I knew what that news would be. Zsolt Balla would be commissioned as the first Jewish chaplain in the Bundeswehr since World War I.

The ceremony was aired on Germany's International TV Station. Zsolt apologized that COVID-related travel restrictions meant he could not invite me to attend in person.

"But I wanted to personally share with you the good news," he said.

Of course, I did really want to be there, but it's OK. I will always know that God used me to play a small role in the healing of one of history's most grievous wounds. **NFJ**

—Charlie Reynolds, a retired U.S. Army chaplain, serves as associate endorser for military chaplains for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Giving credit where credit is due

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

When the Fall 2021 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* (BAR) arrived, I was pleasantly surprised to see, at the top of the cover, a small image of a bronze figurine I'd uncovered during a dig at Lachish.

The article is titled "Canaanite Worship at Lachish — New Details Emerge." Yet the "new" details weren't entirely new.

They were uncovered during the Fourth Expedition to Lachish (2013–2017), and published in detailed academic format two years ago. They've now made their way to the popular format.

My wife, Susan, and I dug with the expedition for three weeks in June 2015. By good fortune, we were assigned to an excavation square right in the middle of what has now been identified as the "North-east Temple," a Canaanite worship center that functioned during the Late Bronze Age. The temple, along with the rest of the city, was violently destroyed around 1150 BCE, and the site was abandoned for two centuries before being resettled by Israelites from Judah.

A photo of the bronze image of Baal that I found is pictured to the right of a similar image found the year before. Both were missing parts of their arms but were clearly in the traditional stance of a "smiting god," probably Baal Resheph, with the pointed hat a symbol of divinity. Tiny remnants indicate the faces were originally covered with silver foil.

"In front of the entrance to the holy of holies, we uncovered two bronze figurines, a cultic scepter head, a variety of gold, carnelian, and faience beads, gold leaves, a scarab, and pieces of a special bronze situla, among other finds," writes Itamar Weissbein.

"We uncovered?"

That's correct, in the collective sense — but lead archaeologists are rarely the ones who find anything. They plan and oversee the digs. With the help of area supervisors,



Susan Cartledge digs alongside archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel.

they decide where to excavate and lay out the squares.

They analyze the pottery and artifacts, write the reports, and get credit for any discoveries made. It's demanding work that requires significant expertise.

But the people who do the actual digging and discovering are nearly always students or volunteers who pay their own travel, lodging, and meal expenses for the privilege of rising at 4 a.m. to labor in the heat, digging carefully, filling buckets with dirt, removing stones (once they've been documented), and carefully working their way from one occupation level to the next.

The "cultic scepter head" that Weissbein mentioned is made of bronze that was coated with silver and embossed with a symbolic design. It was discovered by Susan, who also uncovered several pieces of gold foil, a silver earring, and a nearly intact pyxis (a small pottery jar with two handles and a small mouth), among other things.

I spent much of my time sifting dirt from the square, which turned up many of the beads that Weissbein describes.

Are either of us named in the article, or any of the others who provided the grunt labor necessary for carrying out a dig? No, and we didn't expect it.

We're just happy to have played a small role in bringing the ancient temple to light. We love archaeology and are glad to make some contribution to our understanding of the biblical world from which the Hebrews

emerged.

Which brings me to church. Who does the work that makes a church thrive?

Pastors and other staff do important work. I spend much of my time helping present and future ministers be prepared to lead and to preach with effectiveness and integrity. But we all know ministers can't do it all.

I served five different churches as pastor over a period of 26 years. There's no question that the healthiest churches doing the most meaningful ministries were the ones with the most committed and cooperative lay people.

Volunteers teach Sunday school for all ages, care for little ones during worship, serve on thankless committees or teams, sing in the choir, assist in leading worship, set up tables and chairs when needed, prepare meals, and do any number of other tasks.

The most vibrant churches are those in which members of the church also go into their communities and serve others. Their joyful enthusiasm draws friends or neighbors to join them in the congregation.

Ministers can make a difference: the quality of their preaching, leadership, and pastoral care should set the tone for others. Yet laypeople do most of the work — for the glory of God and not for credit. But sometimes we should pause to give a little credit where credit is due. **NFJ**

What I believe we believe

BY LARRY HOVIS

Recently, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina (CBFNC) colleague and I met with the leadership team of a partner congregation in their small fellowship hall. Actually, the leadership team comprised pretty much every active member of the church, and that is the problem.

They don't have a pastor. The last three pastors left under difficult circumstances. Numerically and financially, they really aren't a viable congregation and are struggling with the decision of what to do about their future.

Some people in the group still lived with the illusion that if they can just find the right pastor, all their problems will go away. We tried to explain the fallacy of that kind of thinking.

One woman, refusing to follow our argument, asked a series of questions about "our pastors," including these:

- What do you require your pastors to teach?
- Do they teach that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God?
- Do they teach that homosexuality is a sin?
- Do they teach that Jesus is the only way to salvation?

I explained that as Baptists we don't have authority over the pastors of congregations that voluntarily choose to affiliate with us. Pastors articulate their beliefs in their own words, and are not completely uniform in all their beliefs.

We provide résumés of prospective pastors we believe might be a match, but Baptist congregations must do their own due diligence and call the pastor that they believe, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, is the best fit for their congregation at this particular time.

That explanation didn't satisfy her. "But what does your organization believe?"



she asked. "We need to know what you believe so we will know whether to trust any pastor's résumé you might send to us."

I responded that we don't have a creed or confession of faith that deter-

mines the beliefs of the churches, pastors or individuals who voluntarily choose to work together through our fellowship. But, in general, here is what I believe that we believe:

We believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We believe Jesus is the clearest expression of God the world has ever seen. He is the starting point and ending point for faith and practice. We strive to follow the Way and ways of Jesus in all that we do. We fall short daily. We often get it wrong, but following Jesus is our focus.

We believe in the priesthood of all believers — not just some believers, not just "professionals." Every believer — male and female, young and old, laity and clergy, illiterate and highly educated — is a priest of God. Every believer has the privilege of relating directly to God and the responsibility of ministering on behalf of God in the church and the world.

We believe the Bible is an inspired, special book that reveals God's ways and God's will like no other source. It is unique among all written documents. The Bible is not God, but it does reveal God to those who study it faithfully and diligently. Every believer is responsible for reading, interpreting and applying the scriptures to life and faith.

We believe in the freedom of each local church to determine its own faith and practice, through the individual and corporate study of the Bible by its believer-priests, and its communal discernment of the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Each church is free to determine who it accepts as members, who and how it baptizes, who it ordains and calls into leadership, and how it is to worship and participate in God's mission in the world.

We believe in voluntary cooperation in the pursuit of God's mission. God's mission is larger than any single church. Churches are called to work with others to engage in God's mission in the world.

We believe cooperation with other churches does not mean agreement in all things. It means that we agree to work together on many things and to respect other churches when it comes to the things on which we do not agree, recognizing that we all "see through a glass darkly." Uniformity of belief is not a requirement for unity in mission.

I concluded by saying to this woman (and the group overhearing this conversation):

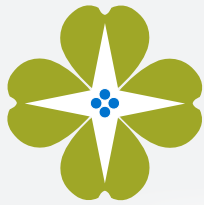
"Not everyone in our fellowship would articulate their beliefs in exactly this way. But I believe it does capture the spirit of what the vast majority believes. And this is how I try to lead us.

"If you find resonance with what I believe we believe, then you will be comfortable in our fellowship. But if not, you should probably find another organization that better reflects your understanding of Christian discipleship, fellowship and mission."

What do you believe? [NFJ](#)

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

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Church as a home for outcasts

BY TYLER TANKERSLY

My family and I have been watching *Loki* on Disney+. For those unfamiliar with the Marvel universe, Loki is the God of Mischief and an archvillain of the Avengers.

At the beginning of the show Loki finds himself being transported to the home offices of the Time Variance Authority (TVA) that safeguards the “Sacred Timeline,” a phrase used for what is supposed to happen in the universe.

Because Loki has acted outside of what the TVA believes he should be doing, he is labeled a “variant.” Without giving away too many spoilers, as the show unfolds you begin to learn that the origin story of the TVA is itself a myth and that they are more interested in control than in what is truly good for the universe.



Loki begins to team up with other “variants” who live outside of the TVA’s sacred timeline and calls himself “the god of outcasts.”

Many people view the church as a TVA in our own world. They see it as an outdated institution whose sole purpose is the perpetuation of its survival rather than what is good for the collective.

Many regular church attenders (of which there are fewer and fewer) bristle at such criticisms and lament the loss of young people among their fold. And I certainly have no interest in merely taking potshots for the sake of winning points with the disenchanted.

However, for those of us who desire to see the church truly be the church in our world, we must listen to the experience of others if we ever hope to be who God has

called us to be.

Recently, on Facebook, I asked for feedback from those who used to attend church regularly but had made the decision to stop going within the past five years. I wrote the post late one night as I was pondering how to lead my own congregation. When I woke up the next morning, the post had at least 20 comments and there were 25 private messages in my inbox.

As I made my morning cup of coffee and began to read these stories, I found

myself weeping. Here are a few examples:

“Never quite feel like I can be myself at church. I’m uncomfortable with the structure of church.”

“When I got divorced I was embarrassed to be seen at church. My family no longer fit the mold that the church seemed to be pushing on everybody.”

“I grew tired of trying to make my energetic children attend a worship service where they were expected to be quiet for

an hour. They spent the whole time begging me to leave.”

“I work on the weekends and my church seemed to put all of their energy into one hour on a Sunday morning. When I talked to our pastor about a worship opportunity during the week, he shunned me for having a job where I had to work on Sundays.”

“I could no longer tolerate my evangelical church’s entanglement with the conservative right.”

“I kept wishing that my church would be more passionate not just about evangelism, but also about issues of justice in our world. Instead, they seemed obsessed with heaven instead of real suffering here on earth.”

“My family and I were asked to step

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

down from leadership because our beliefs about equality differed from that of other leaders.”

I don’t have easy answers for how best to respond to each of these people. I have faith that simply providing a space for them to express their pain is at least a start.

Churches have had to adapt or die in these pandemic days, and I hope we are not foolish enough to waste this opportunity by simply going back to reinstating the same cultural paradigms that we have been fruitlessly perpetuating for a long time.

This is an opportunity for churches to take a good, hard, long look at ourselves and consider where we have drawn the lines of who is in and who is out. It’s a chance to put to test just how expansive we believe God’s grace to really be.

Clergy cannot do this alone. Unless these sorts of systematic shifts in church culture bubble from the ground up, nothing will truly change.

As much as pastors need to be paying attention to the voices of those on the margins, it is really for congregational leaders — deacons, committee chairs — and others who sit in the pews to decide that their church will be a home for all, even the outcasts.

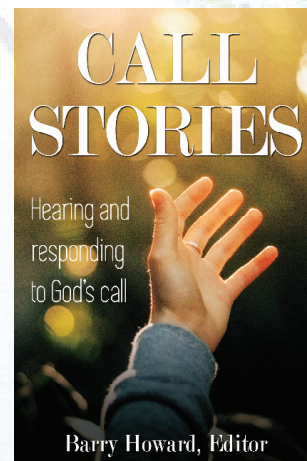
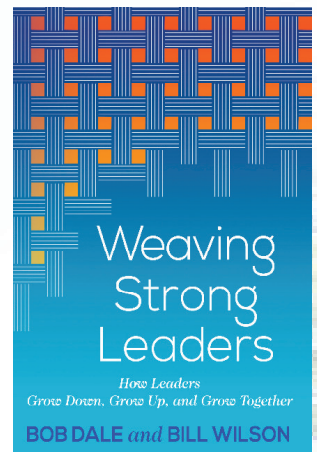
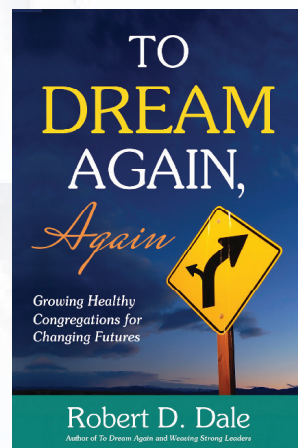
If so, the church will live into what God has called it to be: a community of grace and welcome, and good news for all — not the keeper of a sacred timeline known only to the hidden powers that be.

That is our mission. That is, if you will, our glorious purpose. **NFJ**

-Tyler Tankersly is pastor of Ardmore Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C.



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Welcoming refugees calls for compassion, collaboration

By Mitch Randall

The United States ended the longest-running war in the country's history in 2021, lasting nearly 20 years. Almost immediately after the end of the war was announced, another crisis instantly developed.

Afghan citizens who supported and assisted the U.S. for more than two decades found themselves in dangerous peril. With the Taliban set to take over the country once the U.S. departed, those citizens feared for their lives and futures.

Therefore, a refugee crisis emerged quickly — forcing government and faith-based organizations to expedite policies and procedures for those needing to leave Afghanistan.

According to news reports, the U.S. government accepted at least 50,000 Afghans within the first several months after the war. Faith-based organizations worked diligently to help refugees settle into their new homes.

Good Faith Media talked with some individuals involved in the work of welcoming their new neighbors with love and hospitality.

Rick and Lita Sample, with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), have served numerous refugee communities in the San Francisco Bay Area for 19 years. Rick recently spoke about the moment these new refugees step off the plane.

Families are tired and scared, he said. They have no idea what to expect when leaving their homes for a life-altering journey.

When they arrive in San Francisco, Rick and Lita meet each refugee at the airport with a smile, an embrace and a message: “Welcome home.”

Because housing costs are extremely high in the Bay Area, the Samples cannot afford to help with rent. However, they excel at networking with other organizations and private businesses to find donated furniture and supplies.

Refugees often arrive with a few

clothes but nothing else.

During an annual Afghan Friendship Week, Afghan refugees and immigrants are matched with U.S. citizens in their communities to share a meal. Through this experience, bonds of friendship may develop into life-long relationships.

Mark and Kim Wyatt, also CBF field personnel, serve in Raleigh, N.C. They have long worked with displaced peoples — including starting the Matthew House in Toronto, Canada, a refugee resettlement ministry. Currently, they are replicating that model across North Carolina.

The Wyatts have watched the refugee crisis increase over the years. The United Nations states there were more than 82 million refugees in 2019, with the number set to increase in the future due to climate change and violence.

The Matthew House model provides transitional housing for refugees and immigrants while they resettle. Welcome House Raleigh, for example, provides “a safe home, settlement assistance, and bridges into the community,” according to Mark.

He offered two very practical suggestions for those wishing to help Afghan refugees: First, search for local organizations in your area that are working with refugees. They need resources and volunteers.

Second, property owners may consider providing affordable housing to refugees. Local organizations conduct the vetting of residents and are eager to work with local property owners. For people having to resettle in an unfamiliar land, affordable and safe housing can make a significant impact on a successful future.

Adam Soltani is the executive director for the Center on American-Islamic Relationships in Oklahoma. CARE's main objective is to improve the lives of Muslims across the country and, by extension, to better the lives of others through fostering understanding and relationships.

CARE worked with Catholic Charities

in Oklahoma City to prepare for the arrival of more than 1,000 Afghan refugees. Soltani emphasized the objective of living out the “Oklahoma Standard” that calls citizens to help each other in times of need regardless of differences.

Citizens came together to help Oklahomans heal after the deadly Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building explosion in 1995, the largest domestic terrorist attack in the country's history. Soltani witnessed most within the faith communities of Oklahoma live up to that standard as refugees started arriving in the Sooner state.

Working with other organizations, CARE created welcome kits for refugees. Since most of the arrivals are Muslim, the kits included PPE items, hygiene resources, a guidebook to Oklahoma City, a welcome letter from Imam Imad Enchassi, a Quran, a prayer rug and prayer beads. Catholic Charities asked CARE to provide Halal meals from local Muslim restaurants.

Soltani thinks this is unique to Oklahoma, as people from all faiths understand the importance of making refugees feel as welcome and comfortable as possible.

“The potential has always been there for Oklahomans to embrace people from other faiths,” said Soltani. Seeing this happen now and in this way has been a joy for him to witness as pride in his state abounds.

As more and more Afghan refugees make their way to the U.S. and into our various communities, these interviewees expressed hope in the better angels of humanity. In the middle of a crisis, most people are ready and willing to help.

If we who profess to be Christian can see others as Jesus saw them, then there might be hope for this world after all. **NFJ**

—Mitch Randall lives in Norman, Okla., and is CEO of Good Faith Media.

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Good news for this life

By John R. Franke

One of the most common misunderstandings of the message of Jesus and the good news he proclaimed about the coming Kingdom of God is that it primarily concerns the next life rather than this life.

In this view, the preaching and teaching of Jesus are about a spiritual kingdom that comes to fruition in the life to come and is focused on the destiny of individuals with respect to heaven and eternal life.

The effect of this assumption has often led the institutional church to support the maintenance of the *status quo* while pandering to the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and marginalized. Over against this picture, Jesus proclaims another reality: good news for this life, and not merely the life to come.

At the beginning of his public ministry in Luke's gospel, Jesus proclaims the words of the prophet Isaiah as a summary of his message:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

This is the central theme of his life and work: to turn the world around and put it the way God intended it to be.

Jesus' immediate concern for the poor and oppressed is powerfully expressed in Matt. 25:31-40 and Jesus' response to those who asked:

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you



clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

In a similar fashion, James writes, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress."

These texts point to the concern of God and Jesus on the temporal, here-and-now aspect of salvation. Their concreteness points beyond common interpretations that imagine this in primarily, or only, a spiritual sense.

This is consistent with the Hebrew tradition, in which the idea of deliverance from the forces of oppression to be enacted in the present in such a way that the existing social order is actually changed.

This salvation is holistic. It includes deliverance from political, cultural, economic and spiritual oppression. All of these are part of the message of Jesus.

Together they are part of a single, all-encompassing process that takes root in temporal history but is not exhausted by it. This is salvation in its holistic, biblical sense.

The extent of this liberation and its challenges are graphically illustrated in what occurs immediately after Jesus concludes his proclamation in the synagogue in Luke's gospel. We're told that those present "got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff."

Why? Because Jesus has been making the point that the grace of God extends to

all people, not just a particular group.

To make this point, he tells the stories of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was sent to help a widow, but not an Israelite. Elisha healed a leper who also happened to be the commander of the enemy army. The liberating grace and love of God are for all, not just the chosen few.

This is not what the crowd wanted to hear.

They were waiting for God to deliver Israel from pagan enemies by bringing condem-

nation and wrath on their oppressors. Instead, Jesus implies that Israel's enemies are also the intended beneficiaries of God's grace.

This is the scandal of God's

"This is the scandal of God's love. It extends to all people — ourselves and our enemies, whoever they may be."

love. It extends to all people — ourselves and our enemies, whoever they may be. We rejoice that God loves us and offers us the grace of forgiveness and salvation in our lives. But we must never forget that the reception of this gift brings with it the responsibility to extend it to others.

This scandalous divine love is also revolutionary. If followed faithfully, it leads to a world where everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid.

This is the vision of God's kingdom intended from the beginning, initiated in the covenant with Abraham, and inaugurated in Jesus Christ — a reality in which the will of God is done on earth as it is in heaven. **NFJ**

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

How we talk about race is part of the problem

By Starlette Thomas

Talking about race can be awkward, but it doesn't have to be. The way we talk about race specifically is key.

Racialized identities embody conflict — white versus black, us versus them — that causes us to see race

as the enemy. Race fights against authentic human being and belonging. We are not the problem: race is.

Race creates body borders and draws what W.E.B DuBois called the “color line” through American communities. This was not done mysteriously.

Consider Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. The sociopolitical construct of race is supported and maintained by our divisions, which is why there will never be racial justice, racial unity, racial equality, racial reconciliation or racial healing.

As a hierarchal system of oppression, race just doesn't work that way. It wasn't created to help us work through or work out our differences.

Instead, race is an invented difference, categorizing, divinizing and demonizing our bodies. Race suggests that the social coloring of our skin — as there are no physically colored beige, black, brown, red, yellow or white people — makes all the difference.

It says that all we are — or will ever become — is determined by a thin layer of skin, the epidermis and the presence or lack of melanin.

By now, you have read the word “race” more times than you are likely to say it in a given day. Get familiar with it so that you can see it for what it is and hopefully put race in its place. Because it is not eternal:



there will come a time when race ceases to exist.

It is not omnipresent: there are spaces and places where race does not exist. It is not omniscient: race is not able to tell you this.

Instead, this four-letter word curses everything it addresses — and we have got to start talking back to

it. Race talks over us.

Using hand-me-down prejudices and stereotypes, it suggests that we can know what every person on the planet is like — just by looking at them. But we don't actually know them. All we know is what race says about them.

Understanding what race is doesn't ensure that the conversation goes smoothly. However, it can ensure that the dialogue occurs with at least the mutual understanding that race is the problem.

The existence of culturally diverse human beings who belong wherever they are on the planet is not problematic. Historically, we have always been different — just not the way that race claims we are.

Most often occurring under difficult conditions, we talk about

race because it is brought to our attention. There's been an incident, an occurrence of racism, prejudice or police brutality, and we've got to talk about it.

It's been recorded. It's being reported. It's being protested against.

It comes in news cycles, which might be part of the reason why the conversations are cyclical. We typically end up right where we started, no closer to understanding why. Because we only talk about race when something bad happens, and that's a problem.

We need to talk about race faithfully until we have absolutely no faith in

race. We must talk to each other and swap stories of our upbringing, our habits and hobbies, until race becomes the stranger. This will start to change the dynamic, no longer us versus them but my neighbor, my friend, my next of kin.

Deborah Plummer argues that we can change the way we relate to each other through friendship. In *Racing Across the Lines*, she writes: “The time for talking about the elephant in our societal living room is long overdue.”

We can establish new terms and create a new agreement by which we relate to each other as friends. But we would have to hash it out.

Plummer offers some questions after each chapter in her book that can help us out, which include:

- How have your friendships led you to the transcendent?
- What boundaries need to be removed to allow the transcendent to be realized?
- How can we realistically break down barriers to multicultural living?
- How can we manage racial stress and discomfort in multicultural settings?

We must do so, because race is not the answer. Race often goes before our person — beige, black, brown, red, yellow, white person. But that is not the order of things. Race causes more confusion than anything.

It is a social construct, not a covenant between God and us. So, we can rip it up and then pull our chairs closer and talk about the time when race used to come between us.

But first we've got to put race in its place, which means it can no longer come in front of you and me, or come between us. **NFJ**

—Starlette Thomas is director of Good Faith Media's Raceless Gospel Initiative.

The Lighter Side

By Brett Younger

New Message

Recipients **The Worship Committee**

Subject **This Year's Epiphany Service**

Dear Worship Committee,

I am looking forward to our meeting to plan this year's Epiphany service. You will remember that I was on vacation last year and put Tyler, our minister of youth at the time, in charge.

Tyler is so creative, though his gifts may be better suited to his new ministry at Dave & Buster's. Some felt last year's Epiphany service was "a bit much," "off the rails," "bizarre," "messed up," "disconcerting," "troubling," and "an affront to all that is good and holy."

I am sure many people enjoyed exploring Epiphany in new ways, but we are not going to repeat everything we tried last year.

The ushers will not be dressing up like the three kings. The turbans were conversation starters, but it was confusing to guests from out of town.

The offering will be received as the offering on other Sundays. We will not be insisting that worshippers bring gold, frankincense or myrrh.

Epiphany is the celebration of light, but we will not be passing out laser pointers this year. The choir found this distracting

and, for a few altos, alarming.

We are going to sing "We Three Kings of Orient Are," even though, as Tyler pointed out several times, "There weren't three, they weren't kings, and they weren't from the Orient," and even though we know the middle schoolers will sing "tried to smoke a rubber cigar, it was loaded and exploded" — which I suspect they learned from Tyler. We will ask the organist to play extra loud.

We will not be giving free childcare to prospective parents who agree to name their child Caspar, Melchior or Balthazar.

We will not be burning frankincense, or any of the incenses that set off multiple sensitivities. Let people know there will be no Patchouli, Precious Lavender or Dragon's Blood burning on the communion table.

While people are welcome to grow their own beard, we will not be supplying "glue-on facial hair that will make you look like a wise man" this year. We are also not giving out crowns.

There will be no camels, no camel costumes, no camel cutouts, no Camel cigarettes and no inappropriate jokes about camel toes.

The children's sermon will not be about how to welcome ayatollahs from Iraq into our homes.

My sermon will not be titled, "In Defense of Herod."

Tyler helped us learn traditions from around the world that we will not be observing this year. Children will not be leaving grass and

water in the church yard for the camels as they do in Argentina. Children will not be dressing like wise men and expecting candy and money in return as they do in the Netherlands. Children should not come to church looking for almonds, dried figs and nuts as the children in Slovenia do, who must wish they were in the Netherlands.

Last year we learned that Epiphany includes special desserts in other countries, but our refreshments on Sunday will be our normal fare. We will not be supplying Finnish, star-shaped, gingerbread cookies. If you want to find a bean, clover, twig or rag in your cake, you will need to go to a church in England.

Like you I'm sure, I find it amusing that in India three youth in robes and crowns ride horses to church, but that will not be happening at our church.

We were glad to learn that in Ireland, Epiphany is called "Women's Christmas" and the women get to rest after the hard work of Christmas. This is a fine tradition, but everyone at our church will fulfill their usual responsibilities regardless of gender.

We were surprised to hear that in Portugal, men dress as women for the Epiphany dance, but we are not encouraging that this year.

Some people will miss what Tyler helped us experience last year, but we do not want to miss the story, which is worth our attention.

Maybe we make stuff up because Matthew does not give us details. The magi's visit lasts all of one verse. We are not told what they thought, what they felt or if Mary traded the myrrh for more swaddling clothes. The wise men's unreasonable trip could not have a reasonable beginning. Some unexplainable longing led them to follow a light without knowing where it would lead. Epiphany reminds us that we have a desert to travel, a star to discover and a hope to celebrate — but not like last year.

Happy holidays!

Your Pastor **NFJ**

Send



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





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 **Bobby Tackett-Evans**, a veteran youth minister now serving as pastor of three United Methodist congregations in Liberty, Ky.

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

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 2, 2022

Psalm 147

Good Beginning

The turn of the year offers an annual opportunity for reflection on what is past, and hopeful consideration of the future. Many people set new goals for weight loss, physical fitness, or an expanded circle of friends. For Christians, it is an optimal time to point themselves toward a closer relationship with God.

Psalm 147 is an appropriate text to guide that thinking. It declares an amazing belief that the Creator of the universe has offered to live in personal relationship with people of the earth, and that calls for a healthy dose of daily praise. ↓

God's restorative power (vv. 1-6)

Psalm 147 was probably written at some point after many former Hebrew exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. After the Persian king Cyrus had defeated their Babylonian captors, he not only gave permission for their return, but also authorized the rebuilding of the temple, and even provided some funding.

The early years of the return, beginning after 537 BCE, were not as joyful as expected. The returnees found the city in ruins and surrounded by hostile

His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love. (Ps. 147:10-11)

neighbors. A time of famine made it difficult to survive, much less to prosper.

The excitement of the return soon faded. The appointed governor Sheshbazzar had struggled. He ordered workers to clear the temple site, and priests built an altar so they could again offer sacrifices. Neighboring provinces opposed the rebuilding efforts, however, and times were hard. Residents focused on building houses and establishing farms for themselves, leaving the temple unfinished. ↓

When the prophets Haggai and Zechariah arrived with another wave of exiles around 520 BCE, they were appalled by the lack of progress and lambasted the early returnees for not having rebuilt the temple. Haggai claimed that the famine was Yahweh's punishment for their failure to make the temple their first priority (Haggai 1). ↓

Before they could restart the process, Zerubbabel, the new governor, had to petition the Persian authorities to throw out legal challenges from neighboring provinces that had halted rebuilding efforts. That initiated a five-year construction effort that culminated with the dedication of the new temple in 515 BCE. ↓

Psalm 147 was probably written during this tumultuous period, and it reinforces the importance of offering praise to God – an activity typically

associated with the temple, where a professional order of temple singers led in worship. After the opening “Hallelujah,” a call to worship that literally means “Praise Yahweh,” the psalmist declares that singing praises to God is a good and proper response to God's ongoing display of grace (v. 1).

As evidence of Yahweh's beneficence, the psalmist praises Yahweh for building up Jerusalem and gathering those who had been exiled from their home, healing their broken hearts and bandaging their wounds (vv. 2-3). ↓

With v. 4 the psalmist changes gears, amazed that the same God who could count and name every star also cared for the hard-pressed people of Jerusalem (v. 4). One might expect a God of such immense power and immeasurable wisdom to be unconcerned with human struggles, but not so: Yahweh had intervened to lift up the downtrodden exiles and to cast down wicked folk such as the neighboring officials who had interfered with the rebuilding of the temple (vv. 5-6).

When you think of your own life and perhaps your church, do similar thoughts ever occur to you? How amazing it is to look up on a clear night and ponder the stars in their number and magnitude, while imagining that the same God who created the universe also cares for humankind and desires to live in a relationship of covenant love with us.

God's dependable provision (vv. 7-11)

The second strophe of Psalm 147 begins with a renewed call to praise God with song.

The word translated as “sing” in

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the NRSV usually means “to answer” or “to respond.” In this way, the psalmist reminds us that our prayers and songs of praise are a human response of gratitude for God’s goodness to us (v. 7).

And how has God been good? The psalmist considers the gifts of clouds and rain that make the grass to grow on Israel’s fertile hills (v. 8). Like other ancients, he did not think wind and rain resulted from natural meteorological phenomena, but that the seasonal showers were a gift of God’s sustaining grace not just to humans, but to all life on earth (v. 9).


The psalmist imagines God looking upon the earth and considering its inhabitants. What aspect of creation would bring God pleasure? It would not be the impressive beauty of a muscled horse in full gallop or the efficient stride of a human runner (v. 10), the psalmist says, but the response of “those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (v. 11).

Some writers think the reference to strong horses and swift runners could be a military reference to chariots and infantry, but that is an unnecessary assumption: it’s unlikely that the people of Judah had either horses or chariots at the time. The point is that God may find some satisfaction in gazing upon the wonders of creation, but is most pleased by the grateful response of those who have put their hope in the promise of God’s love.

The injunction to “fear the LORD” is especially common in Israel’s Wisdom literature, which insists that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 1:7, 9:10; see also Ps. 111:10 and Prov. 4:7). In this context, “fear” does not suggest fright, but a sense of reverence and respect for God that goes deep enough to motivate someone to live faithfully in relationship with God.

God’s covenant word (vv. 12-20)

With each section, the psalm goes a little deeper into the joys and challenges of an ongoing relationship with God. As in the first two stanzas, the third section begins with a call to praise Yahweh. Here it utilizes two different words for “praise,” two different terms for God, and two different names for Jerusalem: “Praise (*shavchi*) the LORD (*Yahweh*), O Jerusalem,” the psalmist calls. “Praise (*haleli*) your God (*Elohim*), O Zion” (v. 12).

Again, the call to praise God is followed by reasons for why adoration is due. The first cause for praise addresses the renewed Jerusalem specifically: Under God the city’s gates have been reinforced so children can find safety and people can live in peace, enjoying the earth’s bounty that God provides (vv. 13-14). 

But God’s work extends beyond Jerusalem to all of nature, including the ability to control the seasons by divine command. With delightful imagery, the psalmist declares that “his word runs swiftly” to bring snow, frost, hail, and cold (vv. 15-17). But winter ends: As God’s word brings on the frozen precipitation of winter, so God also “sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind to blow, and the waters flow” (v. 18). Many residents of ancient Jerusalem had farms and family members living outside the city. They understood the importance of the alternating seasons for growing needed crops.

But divine care goes beyond the physical: God has provided both a covenant of relationship and the instructions needed to follow it: “He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel” (v. 19; see “The Hardest Question” online for more on this).

In drawing to a close, the psalm-

ist highlighted Israel’s unique place in God’s order: No other nation had been granted the opportunity to live in such a relationship with God, whose ordinances were not demands as much as they were gifts, keys that could open the door to lives of peace and of praise (v. 20).

The psalm is impressive, but can it speak to people who aren’t Israelites, who don’t live in Jerusalem, at a time when the temple no longer exists?

The answer, of course, is *yes*. Followers of Jesus live under a new and different covenant, but it is rooted in the same God who loved and blessed and disciplined and forgave the people of Israel. Our relationship is not based on keeping the law, but in trusting the One who fulfilled the law and did for us what we could not do for ourselves, in Jesus who offers grace beyond measure.

This is not to say that our relationship is devoid of demand. As Israel was called to love God and keep the commandments, Jesus challenged his followers to love God and keep his commandments – namely, to love one another as we love ourselves. Every commandment is bound up in this: when we are guided by love, positive actions will follow.

Followers of Jesus are not promised that the faithful will always prosper or that hardships will not come our way, good behavior is no guarantee of financial freedom, and wrongdoing will not automatically bring punishment. Our motivation in following Jesus goes beyond the selfish desire for personal prosperity; it is a longing to see the world with Christlike compassion and to do our part to bring peace and wholeness to others.

Praising God with our voices and songs is one response to the grace we have received: offering praise through our love and our lives is even better. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 9, 2022

Acts 8:4-17

Amazing Grace

When I was a boy, we usually kept a few goats. They served two primary functions: first, so they would eat the underbrush in the wooded area below our house, and secondly, so we could eat them. Mediterraneans had nothing on us.

We had two billy goats who did not like the confines of their fence. Although their enclosure included a nice grassy area, they persistently sought to get at the lush hay in our neighbor's cow pasture.

The older goat found that he could stick his head through the four-inch square openings of the hog wire and reach the neighbor's grass with little trouble. Inevitably, though, his curved horns would hook the top wire and trap him. One of my daily after-school jobs was to listen for his bleating and free the stubborn goat from his self-imposed captivity.

The younger and nimbler goat could jump the fence, and he often did. The fence may have held others back, but it was not much of a hindrance to him – until the neighboring farmer shot him for trespassing.

The story of Philip is the story of an early believer who paid little attention to human barriers, even when it was risky. Philip was aware of racial and cultural differences that kept God's many peoples separated into their

But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. (Acts 8:12)

respective fields, but he refused to let those fences be a barrier to him – or to the gospel message he carried.

The Samaritan fence (vv. 4-8)

Acts implies that the early church was growing rapidly when the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7) touched off a wave of persecution in Jerusalem, leading many Christians to flee the city. Still, God was at work in the lives of those early believers, for “those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word” (8:4, NRSV). One of the most outspoken was Philip.

This would not have been Philip the Apostle, for v. 1 says the apostles remained in Jerusalem. It was probably the same Philip who was appointed as one of the seven proto-typical “deacons” called to serve the church in Acts 6:1-7 (the word *diakonos* means “servant,” or “minister”).


Philip was Jewish, but his family must have been comfortable with their Greek neighbors, for his name is Greek rather than Hebrew.


Like the other early “deacons,” Philip was chosen because he was “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3), and when the seven were named, Philip was preceded only by Stephen the martyr. Philip was evidently a powerful and unprejudiced preacher.

Upon leaving Jerusalem, he traveled to an unnamed city of Samaria

“and proclaimed the Christ there” (v. 5).

To understand why this would be shocking, we need a bit of historical background.

In this context, Samaria was a geographical region located south of Galilee, in the central hill country. Historically, it was the name of a city founded by King Omri in 876 BCE as the capital of the Northern Kingdom. The prophets often referred to the entire Northern Kingdom as Samaria. 

King Sargon of Assyria conquered Israel and destroyed the city of Samaria in 722 BCE, marking the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Many Israelites fled to Judah, but many of the more prominent Israelites were forced to emigrate to other lands, while poorer people remained. People who had been conquered in other lands were brought in to resettle the region, changing the character of its populace (2 Kgs. 17:1-6, 24). 

When the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 BCE, more captives were taken. Over the years, many of the Jewish people who remained in the area intermarried with the new settlers and with other people groups indigenous to Palestine.

When the Hebrew exiles from Judah began to return following Cyrus' victory over Babylon in 538 BCE, many of the returnees also intermarried with the local people. Deuteronomy 7:1-5 expressly forbade such marriages, and religious leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah sought to enforce strict rules of purity and pedigree. They sought to end the practice, sometimes with violence (cf. Ezra 9:1-15, Neh. 13:23-27).

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What began with a desire for religious purity became an ingrained social prejudice. Because the ethnically mixed people lived mostly in the geographic region of Samaria, they came to be known as “Samaritans.” The resulting “Samaritan schism,” as scholars call it, had long-reaching effects (see “The Hardest Question” online for more).

Though rejected by the self-identified “pure” Jews, the Samaritans wanted to continue practicing their Hebrew faith. To do so, they constructed a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim, and preserved their own distinctive version of the Torah, now known as the “Samaritan Pentateuch.” Pious Jews considered this to be a travesty. They avoided contact with Samaritans and would walk many miles to avoid going through a Samaritan city.

When Jesus came on the scene nearly 500 years later, he made a point of ignoring the Jewish/Samaritan fence. Jesus boldly traveled through Samaria and talked with Samaritans, who were just as surprised as the Jews (John 4:9). Not all of Jesus’ disciples followed him across the barrier, but Philip was one who did.

Philip believed the gospel was for all people, so as persecution drove many followers of Christ from Jerusalem, he went into Samaria and began proclaiming the gospel with high hopes that the people would be receptive.

The Spirit was greatly at work in Philip, according to the text. He was able to accomplish many miraculous deeds, so that “The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did” (v. 6). Many were healed, many believed, and “there was great joy in that city” (vv. 7-8). While others saw the Samaritans as hated “others,”

Philip saw people who needed the love of Christ. With that motivation, fence-jumping became worth the risk.

The magical fence (vv. 9-17)

The text gives special attention to one individual from the Samaritan city, a self-promoting sorcerer called Simon who practiced the magical arts so well that “All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great’” (v. 10). Many who had been impressed by Simon were even more amazed by the mighty works of Philip, and so they believed in Christ and were baptized.

Simon also came under conviction and submitted to baptism. The text says that he “was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place,” and he began to follow him everywhere (v. 13). While this might lead us to think Simon wanted to be a disciple, the following verses suggest that he also may have been trying to learn Philip’s secrets.

When news of the Samaritan revival reached Jerusalem, Peter and John came out to investigate. They noted that the Samaritans’ faith was immature – perhaps, like Simon, they were only following Jesus because of the miracles they saw Philip do. When Peter and John prayed that the Holy Spirit would come into the Samaritans’ lives and laid their hands on them (vv. 14-17), “they received the Holy Spirit.”

Simon was suitably impressed. Having lost his own role as mystical leader, he offered the disciples money, seeking to purchase the secret of receiving and granting the Holy Spirit (vv. 18-19). Peter rebuked him sternly, pointing to his selfish motives (vv. 20-23), and Simon apparently repented of his shocking request and asked for forgiveness (v. 24).

Some Christians might have seen Simon as a satanic sorcerer, and would have avoided him like the plague. Shouldn’t we put fences around magicians, Wiccans, or any who

practice other religions? If we would follow Philip’s faithful example, we must be willing to scale any fence that stands between us and people who need the gospel.

Modern fences

Learning more about the social and historical setting of the New Testament can be fascinating, but it is worth little unless we find some connection with our own lives. With this text, the connections are obvious, though we may not like them.

We don’t have to look far or think hard to identify religious, social, ethnic, or cultural barriers that may stand in the way of effective ministry to our communities.

Are our churches open – truly open – to persons of other ethnic or economic backgrounds?

Do we welcome people who may interpret scripture or understand gender roles differently than we do?

Would Jesus be pleased to look around most of our churches and take note that almost everyone shares the same ethnicity and similar social standing?

The church is likely the most racially segregated institution in America. Should that concern us? [DD]

Philip understood that the Samaritans were not of a different and unworthy race. They were no less human and no less in need of the gospel than anyone else, and so he reached out to them.

It is time we understand that all people belong to one race, the human race. Genetically, there is no separate European, African, or Asian race. We may bear ethnic markers, but neither race nor worthiness in the sight of God is affected by skin color or facial features.

Have you crossed any fences lately? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 16, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Amazing Gifts

Do you consider yourself to be “gifted”? The word is commonly used, but not always in a helpful way. Many schools assign high-performing children to programs or classes for the “gifted and talented.” While such programs may please some parents, they can cause others to feel distinctly ungifted, and may also sharpen racial and economic divides, leaving disadvantaged children behind.

A problem of “giftedness” arose long ago in the city of Corinth, where many people were caught up in a pervasive “honor culture.” Evidence suggests that many Christians bought into the campaign for greater status, which could be gained through wealth or public association with prominent people. Apparently, some also sought honor through the display of certain spiritual gifts. 📌 Their spiritual pride led people with less obvious giftedness or prestige to think of themselves as second-class Christians.

Paul was alerted to the issues by people from Corinth who visited him in Ephesus, and also by a letter from the church. His response is found in the epistle we call 1 Corinthians, though it was probably not his first correspondence with the church.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor. 12:4-7)

Wrong thinking (vv. 1-3)

Paul had an up-and-down relationship with the Corinthian church that extended over many years. 📌 In earlier chapters of the book, Paul dealt with a variety of problems, including factionalism, immorality, settling grievances, family life, slave holding, and eating food that had been offered to idols.

In chapters 12–14, Paul moved to the hot-button topic of “spiritual gifts.” While some considered speaking in tongues to be an essential marker of faith, Paul argued that the primary evidence of Christian spirituality is not glossolalia, but loving service. 📌📌

Paul’s serious concerns suggest that a misunderstanding or overemphasis on tongues had led to division in the church. Some apparently insisted that speaking in tongues was a necessary sign of the Spirit’s presence. Today, some Pentecostal groups still do.

Paul disagreed. He insisted that the manifestation of tongues was not proof of the Spirit, and reminded his readers that many of them had once worshiped idols, which were incapable of speech (v. 2). Some of the pagan cults and mystery religions also practiced glossolalia: one can experience religious ecstasy and speak in tongues without

knowing the true god. 📌 One can also fake it, mimicking what they heard and claiming to have the gift.

The proper test of one’s speech – or at, least, the source of one’s speech – lies in its content. Thus, Paul turned to another argument: no one claiming to have the Spirit of God would curse the name of Jesus, but would rather confess Jesus as Lord (v. 3). The point is not that Christians are incapable of mouthing the words “Jesus is cursed” – Paul spoke them as he dictated the letter – but that one inspired by the Spirit of God would not (indeed, could not) wish Jesus to be cursed. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on this.)

A proper approach (vv. 4-11)

The issue of spiritual gifts had caused division and strife at Corinth, but Paul knew the Spirit promotes harmony rather than discord.

He wrote: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (vv. 4-7). 📌

Note the emphasis on a common source and a common purpose for spiritual gifts – to be exercised for the benefit of all.

In vv. 8-11, Paul lists several activities associated with spiritual gifts. Other lists of spiritual gifts also appear in scripture (Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:27-28). All of them are different, and none of them are exhaustive.

Additional information at
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In this context, Paul speaks to nine areas of “giftedness.” Although some apparently thought of glossolalia as the most prestigious gift, Paul named it last.

The first two “gifts” are closely related: the ability to speak with wisdom (*sophia*) and knowledge (*gnōsis*). Paul had pointed (sometimes sarcastically) to the Corinthians’ love of wisdom in chapters 1–4, contrasting their love of earthly eloquence with the deep wisdom that comes from God.

Literally, Paul speaks of the “word” (*logos*) of wisdom and of knowledge. Since the context has to do with speaking, however, Paul’s intent is probably the “utterance” (NRSV) or “message” (NET) of wisdom and knowledge spoken by Spirit-empowered believers.

Whether Paul meant to suggest different things by “wisdom” and “knowledge,” or simply doubled up the same thought for emphasis, is not clear. Typically, we think of wisdom as reflecting the mature and insightful use of knowledge. While knowledge may indicate no more than the accumulation of information, wisdom suggests the ability to employ knowledge in appropriate ways and at the proper time.

“Faith” in v. 9 is not faith that leads to salvation, for Paul is speaking to persons who are already believers. Rather, he speaks of the kind of faith that stands firm in times of crisis, enables the believer to give spiritual service in all circumstances, and inspires others with its staying power.

The pairing of “faith” with the gift of “healing” does not necessarily imply “faith healing,” or the notion that healing is always available for those who have sufficient faith. Jesus healed people who had expressed no faith at all, and his disciples who had faith were not always able to effect healing.

Paul clearly believed that God had blessed some persons with gifts of healing that went beyond ordinary

medical skills. Paul had demonstrated that gift in his own life (Acts 20:9-10, 28:9) – but he also struggled with a personal “thorn in the flesh,” and his colleague Epaphroditus nearly died before “God had mercy on him” (2 Cor. 12:7, Phil. 2:25-27).

Modern believers sometimes claim to have experienced miraculous healing, too, but this has never been the norm. Christians should not doubt their faith if they pray for healing and do not receive it.

The term translated “miracles” (v. 10) is *dunameis*, the root word of “dynamite.” It can also be translated as “mighty works.” We can only guess what such displays might have been, but some believers thought of them as signs of God’s new age breaking in upon the world.

“Prophecy,” a gift attributed to persons such as Agabus (Acts 11:28, 21:10f) and the daughters of Phillip (Acts 21:9), was thought of as the ability to declare the word of God for a given situation – not just the ability to predict the future.

Paul’s readers believed that demonic spirits could also inspire prophetic speech, however. Acts 16:16 speaks of a slave girl Paul had met in Philippi. A “spirit of divination” would reportedly prompt her to prophesy, a “gift” that her owners exploited, charging fees for her services as a fortuneteller.

For this reason, along with the possibility that some might fake prophetic gifts for the attention, it was important that some persons be gifted with the “discernment of spirits” so that the church could determine if a would-be prophet’s words came from God or from some other source.

The gifts listed in vv. 9-10 are all things that contribute to the welfare of the community, so we may expect Paul’s concluding mention of “various kinds of tongues” and “the interpretation of

tongues” to be understood in a similar context: they were for the benefit of the community, not the speaker.

By “various kinds of tongues,” Paul may have meant the ability to speak actual languages not previously known to the speaker (as in Acts 2:6ff), or the kind of ecstatic utterances that required the presence of one with the gift for “interpretation of tongues.”

If everyone with the “gift of tongues” spoke in the same way, others could learn the language, but that’s not how it worked: people apparently spoke in different ways.

In any case, it is notable that Paul named “various kinds of tongues” last on the list, perhaps suggesting that they were the least helpful in building community.

No matter what the outer manifestation, Paul concluded, there is one Spirit at work to energize all believers with the presence and the power of God’s grace gifts. The gifts are allotted “to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses,” but their purpose is communal, to build up the church in unity and love. 📖

Paul’s message is not complicated. All who trust in Christ are gifted by the Spirit of Christ, and all such gifts are for the benefit of the community, not just the individual.

All gifts and all people should contribute to the health and growth of the body of Christ, which Paul addressed directly in v. 12 – where we will begin next week’s lesson.

In the meantime, we would do well to ponder the areas in which we believe the Spirit has gifted us.

Do we allow them to flourish in our lives, leading us to be faithful not only in our personal walk, but also in building community and blessing others? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 23, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Amazing Oneness

Everyone matters, but not everyone believes it. Perhaps you have known someone who suffered from the depressing thought that their life was unimportant, that no one would care if they lived or died. It might have been you.

The Apostle Paul understood that followers of Christ, like other people, have a deep desire to matter. We want our lives to make a difference. We want to be missed when we're gone. When all is said and done, we want our lives to have counted for something.

The desire to be known is one of life's basic needs, but it can become overblown and turn into an egocentric desire to be noticed or honored by others. Constant cries for attention or primacy can lead to strife in the best of circumstances. In a church body, they can be devastating.

For this reason, Paul worked diligently to promote unity in the believing community, while also acknowledging the spiritual gifts of individual members.

He wanted all believers to know that they mattered, and that their gifts were important to the life and health of the church. At the same time, he wanted them to understand that the sharing of gifts was for the good of the body, not

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.
(1 Cor. 12:12)*

for individual glory.

This was a serious issue in the church at Corinth, where status-seeking and unchecked egos had contributed to ongoing strife. So, Paul urged believers there to think of themselves as contributing members of a single body in which every member matters.

One body, many members (vv. 12-27)

Paul clarified his intent with the familiar and memorable illustration of a body with different parts that must work together if the body is to function properly (vv. 12-27). The metaphor is obvious, but Paul elaborates on it for some time.

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ," he said (v. 12). By "so it is with Christ," his reference went beyond the local church to all believers as members of the body of Christ.


Paul wanted no misunderstanding. Feet should not feel left out because they are not hands, he said, and ears are not less needful than eyes (vv. 15-17).

Some parts may seem more honorable, but God designed the human body, Paul said, according to God's own plan (v. 18).

"If all were a single member," he asked, "where would the body be?" (v. 19).

We have many members, but one

body (v. 20). Eyes need hands to act on what they see, and heads need feet to take them where they want to go (v. 21).

Humans tacitly acknowledge this, Paul said, since we are most likely to "clothe with honor" those embarrassing parts we'd rather not be on public display. 

If one member suffers, the whole body suffers, Paul said; if one member does well, the whole body benefits (v. 26). Have you ever experienced an upset stomach or had a painful arthritic joint or a blinding headache?

Any one part of the body can demand all our attention, but when that one part is healthy, the whole body can get back to work.

Paul had introduced his body talk with a reminder that we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body: Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, and all are sustained by the same Spirit (v. 13).

The Spirit is both the source of gifts and the force that unifies members in their service to Christ. Paul, no doubt, was brokenhearted to see such prideful divisions in Corinth that he had to remind them that they were born of the same Spirit, precious to God and needed by each other.

One body, many gifts (vv. 27-28)

Paul concludes his body metaphor with a summary statement that looks back to the beginning of the chapter: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (v. 27).

Having emphasized community interdependence, Paul moves on to speak of individual gifts. Paul's listing of gifts suggests that he considers the first gifts to be more important than the

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last: as in his previous list (12:8-10, speaking in tongues comes at the end.

This appears to reflect an ongoing issue in Corinth, where tongues-speaking had become divisive. Perhaps some members emphasized the beauty or volume of their ecstatic utterances while minimizing gifts such as intelligible words of prophecy or teaching.

The most important thing to understand about spiritual gifts is that they come from God. They are gifts of the Spirit, not something earned or developed by human effort – or striven for as a source of pride.

Paul first speaks of apostles, prophets, and teachers whom “God has appointed.” Paul’s emphasis is not on their priority, but their service in what God’s Spirit has appointed and empowered them to do.

The Greek word *apostolos* is derived from a verb that means “to send.” Thus, an apostle is one who has been called and sent out for a purpose, empowered to lead in God’s behalf. Some readers regard only the 12 disciples and Paul as “apostles,” but Paul’s use of the term was broader (1 Cor. 15:5, 7). 📖

Second, Paul mentions prophets. As in the Old Testament, prophets were not so much foretellers as forth-tellers. They not only understood the world around them, but also spent time in communion with God. The Hebrew Bible depicted prophets as being admitted to God’s heavenly “inner council.” The New Testament portrays them as being inspired by the indwelling Spirit of God to bring together God’s teaching, society’s needs, and world events in ways that would speak God’s word to others. 📖

Teachers appear third on the list, but that should not be taken as an indication of inferiority: the disciples and other followers commonly referred to Jesus as “teacher.” Within the

church, teachers are those who instruct new believers and promote growth in discipleship.

We should pause again to remember that, while we commonly think of apostles, prophets, and teachers as persons who hold a certain office or have special training, Paul speaks of them as having spiritual gifts. It is by the Spirit of God that we are called and empowered for leadership positions within the church. 📖

The word “then” suggests a transition from apostles, prophets, and teachers to those whose gifts are expressed in other ways. The working of miracles is conveyed by the word *dunamis*, the root of our word “dynamite.” It literally means “power,” but can be translated as “deeds of power” or “mighty works.” In this context the syntax is stretched a bit to indicate one who is gifted to work such deeds. “Healing” is augmented by the word *charismata*, so it is “gifts of healing.” 📖

Those who despair of being gifted to work miracles may find comfort in knowing that Paul also names the gift of “helping,” though the present verse is the only time it is mentioned in the New Testament. In the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament), the word is used specifically for those who help the needy. In Rom. 12:7, Paul described a gift of “service” based on the word *diakonos*, which was used for early deacons who cared for the poor. Thus, Paul speaks of social ministry as a spiritual gift.

The word translated “forms of leadership” also appears only in this verse. Sometimes translated as “administrators,” it is drawn from a technical term describing the work of a helmsman who guides a ship on its course. The term is not tied to a specific office such as pastor or deacon, but could also be used of steady members who help

keep the church on course through the turbulent waters of changing times.

The last gift Paul mentions is “various kinds of tongues.” Paul may have in mind both the ability to speak actual languages not previously known to the speaker (as in Acts 2:6ff), and the kind of ecstatic utterances that cannot be understood apart from the presence of one with the gift for “the interpretation of tongues.” Since tongues and their interpretation can so easily be feigned, Paul seems concerned that they not be given undue emphasis. He neither criticizes the act of speaking in tongues nor suggests that everyone must do it, but simply speaks of it as a gift of the Spirit. 📖

One body, many benefits (vv. 29-31)

No matter what the outer manifestation, Paul concludes, there is one Spirit at work to energize all believers with the presence and the power of God’s grace gifts. One does not expect everyone to serve as an apostle, prophet, or teacher (v. 29). No one imagines that every member of the body has the gift of miracles or healing, helping or leading, speaking in terms or interpreting the words of others (v. 30). The purpose of all spiritual gifts is to build up the church in unity and love as a body with different parts that must work together.

Perhaps this is why Paul encouraged readers to “strive for the greater gifts,” or “be eager for the greater gifts” (NET). The gifts Paul had listed first were those most concerned with service to others rather than bringing attention or glory to oneself.

The importance of unselfish giving becomes even more evident as Paul transitions to a new appeal. He urges readers to consider a different and better approach to life: the way of love.

NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 30, 2022

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Amazing Love

Have you ever tried to reason with someone who refused to be reasonable? Many people may have felt that way while trying to convince recalcitrant friends or family members to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Many excuses for refusing the vaccine have been based more on emotions or political views than on reason. As Paul dealt with conflict in the Corinthian church, he employed a carefully reasoned argument that all believers should accept each other as gifted by God and equally valuable members of the one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12).

Knowing that appeals to reason alone don't always work, he then shifted from the body metaphor to "a more excellent way" that might be harder to reject: he appealed to love (12:31).

The love he speaks of is *agapē*, an unselfish love that goes beyond warm affection or heated eroticism to a deep place of caring and kindness for others.

Gifts without love (vv. 1-3)

Within the church family, even the most impressive gifts are useless if they are not accepted and shared with love, Paul

*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.
(1 Cor. 13:13)*

said, and we can see why. One may speak with beauty and power, but do little good if not motivated by love. One may utter what they consider to be the tongues of angels (a probable reference to *glossolalia*), but without love their speech is like a crashing cymbal falling off its stand in the middle of *Swan Lake*. In Paul's opinion, if we do not speak with love, then nothing we say will matter at all.

In v. 2, Paul mentions the gifts of knowledge and prophecy and faith, which he characterized as "higher gifts" in the preceding chapter. But even those gifts are worthless when not motivated by love, he wrote. We respect those who have accumulated wisdom, but misguided knowledge can be worse than worthless. We admire those who preach passionate sermons, but we have also seen pulpiteers brought to nothing when their performance was based on personal ambition rather than love for God. We are impressed by faith that leads to great deeds, but not if done for show.

Paul expands his parable to *agapē* by moving from spiritual gifts to personal sacrifice. Even acts that appear totally unselfish can be motivated by a desire for individual attention. He illustrates this with the extreme examples of giving away all of one's possessions or even selling oneself into slavery for the benefit of the poor. If the purpose is "that I may boast," we have accomplished nothing. 🇺🇸

No matter what we say, what we do, or what we give, Paul says, if we don't know and share the love of Jesus, we accomplish nothing in Christ's behalf.

What love is (v. 4a)

Having argued that life without love is empty and fruitless, Paul attempts to describe the exceptional qualities and incomparable benefits of sharing *agapē* love. He begins with *patience*, for good reason.

We can find it easy to become impatient. Children or co-workers or rush-hour drivers may "get on our last nerve" and lead us to react in negative or harmful ways. Outbursts in the family setting, especially if violent, can scar children or spouses, sometimes setting them on the same path.

Displays of frustration and pique rarely have positive outcomes, because they are often directed toward others who are innocent. When we cultivate the self-control needed to focus more on concern for others than on personal convenience or comfort, we make life better for everyone around us.

Love, Paul asserts, is also *kind*. To show kindness is to demonstrate unqualified good toward others, not because they are always good and deserving, but because of the goodness within believers who are fully open to God's indwelling love.

No one has demonstrated kindness better than the late Fred Rogers, of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* on PBS. He not only encouraged both children and adults to care about others

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and show kindness to them, but he also lived it every day. The only sticker on my laptop computer is in the form of a sweater over a shirt and tie, and the words “Be kind.”

What love is not (vv. 4b-5)

Patience and kindness describe love in positive terms, but the Corinthians were apparently more familiar with negative examples, so Paul continued with a few reminders of what *agapē* love is *not*. Love, he said, is not “envious or boastful.” Earlier parts of the letter indicate that some Corinthians were jealous of each other’s spiritual gifts or boastful about their own. Envy is never uglier than when it is spiritual envy. Genuine Christian love is the most wonderful thing a person can know – but it never brags about its greatness.

Love, likewise, is never “arrogant or rude.” The word “arrogant” carries the literal meaning of “puffed up.” People can get overly inflated by their own self-importance, but that is not the work of love. Rudeness is related to arrogance, because the arrogant don’t care if they hurt other people. Love cares, and cares deeply.

Because of this, love does not insist on its own way. Nor is it irritable or resentful. Self-seeking behavior and selfish resentment are flat contradictions of Christian love. When Paul discerned its presence among believers, he did not hesitate to call out the hypocrisy behind it.

Sadly, many of us have encountered church members or denominational officials whose desire for control was exhibited in self-centered behavior and underhanded dealings. It is challenging, but possible, to hold different opinions and express them in love. 📌

We are most familiar with the need for unselfish love in family and neighborly contexts. There, Paul

reminds us that love is not self-focused or hard to live with. Loving people do not resent it when good things come to others, but rejoice with them in their success.

A hallmark of true love is that it does not hold grudges. The term translated as “resentful” is *logizetai*. The word “log” for a written record comes from this Greek root: it literally means “to keep books on.” Love does not keep records on wrongs done or favors owed. Love helps us not only to be forgiving, but also to be forgetful.

What love does (vv. 6-7)

Paul now shifts from what love is and is not to what love does and does not. First, he says, love “does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” It takes no delight in the weakness or failure of others. It finds no joy (secret or otherwise) in sinful thoughts or behavior, but celebrates what is good and right. It does not harbor or spread lies, but holds to what is true.

Selfless love is not wimpy, but exceedingly strong. For this reason, Paul could say that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Love is not only willing to bear its own burdens, but also caring enough to share the burdens of others. Nothing is so ugly or so heavy that love will not lend a hand. 📌

To say that love “believes all things” does not suggest gullibility so much as trustfulness. Love gives others the benefit of the doubt, believing the best about them, not losing faith in them. Love is over-generous rather than over-suspicious.

Love hopes all things and endures all things because it is grounded in Jesus Christ, who is our present and eternal hope. Even when assailed by evil or engulfed by disappointment, the faithful believer knows that Christ’s

Spirit is near. Love can be patient in trials because it has hope for better days. Love is not demonstrated through disillusionment and bitterness, but by hopeful patience and graceful courage.

Living toward a future of love (vv. 8-13)

Paul could say that love never ends or fails (v. 8) because love is grounded in God, and God is not only eternal, but also eternally loving. The world we know now will pass. Prophecy, tongues-speaking, and the knowledge of this life will one day fade: they are only a faint shadow of what is to come (vv. 9-10).

Paul knew that even his own thoughts, sermons, and writings were like the words of a child when compared to the experience of what lies ahead. There will be no need for prophecy in God’s future age, nor for special speech, or even of miracles. Paul imagined a time when we will look back on even our greatest accomplishments as the work of children.

The polished metal mirrors of Paul’s day reflected dim images at best, but in eternity we will understand completely (v. 12). We all know what it is like to look into a foggy mirror. Many of us know how our vision can be impaired by dirty glasses. One day, Paul said, we will see clearly. 📌

When that time comes, we will see that of all the many things we cherished on earth, what remains is our faith, hope, and love, the same characteristics that Paul mentioned together in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 as the marks of a mature church.

Those who are wise will not devote their lives to the transient indulgence of selfish living, but to the life-long pursuit of that which lasts: faith, hope, and love – remembering that the greatest of these is love. NfJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Feb. 6, 2022

Psalm 138

Amazing Care

Can you recall a time of such negativity as we experience today? Conflicts of opinions and feelings surrounding politics, vaccinations, and mask-wearing have led to a pandemic of grouchiness. With increasing polarization leaving little middle ground, we find grumpy people at every turn, and sometimes in the mirror. Grouchy attitudes can grow from a sense of self-importance when we put ourselves at the center of the world. When we're crabby, it's harder to be kind and caring to others.

How do we deal with a downward spiral of curmudgeonly thoughts and put ourselves on a more positive path? The road to wellness often begins with gratitude: When we stop to count our blessings, it's easier to shift from cloudy complaints to sunnier days. The author of Psalm 138 was a big believer in the power of praise. 📌

Whole-hearted praise (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 138 presumes a time when a temple existed in Jerusalem, though it's unclear whether it was Solomon's temple or the more modest one built after the exile. 📌 The psalm is appealing in that we can pray it from our individual situation, or we can sing

The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands. (Ps. 138:8)

it together. It's written in first person singular, but so are familiar hymns such as "I Surrender All." We pray from our own needs, but also in community.

"I give you thanks, O LORD," the psalmist begins, using the divine name Yahweh. The act of praise is not superficial, but "with my whole heart" (v. 1a). Ancient Hebrews considered the heart as emblematic of the inner person, the real self as opposed to any outward appearances. The heart was the seat of thinking and decision making as well as emotions or passions. To praise God with one's whole heart was to do so with one's full being, thinking, love, and loyalty. 📌

The next line may come as a surprise, as the psalmist adds "before the gods I sing your praise" (v. 1b, NRSV). This is a reminder that for most of their history, the Hebrews were not monotheists. They assumed the reality of other gods, but believed they should worship Yahweh alone.

Even the first commandment doesn't deny that other gods might exist. "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3) insists only that the Hebrews should worship Yahweh alone. A clear trend toward monotheism emerged later, with the eighth-century prophets.

The word for "gods" could refer to other gods such as Baal and Asherah, but the NIV11 presumes that the psalmist spoke with tongue in cheek, translating it as "before the 'gods' I will sing your praise."

It is also possible that the psalmist had in mind the heavenly court of celestial beings who served Yahweh, more commonly called the "sons of God" (see Job 1:1). Thus the NET translates "before the divine council," and the MSG paraphrase has "Angels listen as I sing my thanks." 📌

In any case, the psalmist clearly believed that Yahweh was above all – which demands that we consider where our allegiance lies, and how many gods of our own making prevent us from offering wholehearted praise to the God we know through Jesus.

"I bow down *toward* your holy temple" has led some scholars to imagine the psalmist at some distance from Jerusalem, but most imagine that he spoke of being in the temple courts, prostrating himself in a posture of abject prayer. 📌

From his humble position, the psalmist thanks God "for your steadfast love and your faithfulness" (v. 2a). These defining characteristics echo the self-revelation of God to Moses in Exod. 34:6, when Yahweh passed by and proclaimed "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." The phrase appears often in the Hebrew Bible, and especially in the Psalms (see 25:10, 61:7, 85:10, 86:15, 89:14, 98:3).

The psalmist lauded Yahweh's dependable fidelity because his life, like ours, had been anything but constant. He had trusted Yahweh in the low spots, however, giving rise to his current position of thankful praise.

The latter half of v. 2 is difficult to translate. The words are familiar, but sound odd together. A literal reading

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is “for you have made great over your name your word.” †

The idea seems to be that the psalmist has found Yahweh’s promises (an alternate translation of “word”) to be even greater than he had imagined based on God’s name, in the sense of “reputation.” His adulation now grows from personal experience: “On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul” (v. 3).

The NRSV translation, like most others, is rather tame: the word rendered “increased” is an intensive form of a verb that normally means “to act arrogantly,” or even “stormily.” While neither adverb sounds appealing, the emphasis is on boldness: NET has “You made me bold and energized me.”

When the psalmist faced heavy trials, trusting Yahweh had given him confidence to act with boldness that some might have seen as arrogance, but the psalmist saw it as the empowering gift of God’s presence.

Expanding praise (vv. 4-6)

Enamored by memories of how God had helped him, the psalmist expressed confidence – or hope – that God’s reputation would spread throughout the known world. The NRSV takes the verb for praise as indicating a future certainty: “All the kings of the earth shall praise the LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth” (v. 4).

But how could he have such confidence? Human history offers no evidence that all earthly rulers have either heard God’s voice or responded with praise, though it may remain a hope for the future.

It seems better to take the verb as a jussive form, which is perfectly permissible in Hebrew, so that we read the verse as a wish rather than a certainty: “Let all the kings of the earth

give thanks to you, O LORD, when they hear the words that you speak” (NET), or “May all the kings of the earth praise you ...” (NIV11).

We face the same issue with v. 5, which the NRSV renders as “They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD.” The verb for “sing” could also be rendered as a jussive: “Let them sing ...,” or “May they sing ...”

However skeptical we might be concerning a global response of national leaders, we are led to wonder why the rulers of the earth should offer such praise to God.

Here’s the psalmist’s answer: “For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away” (v. 6). An alternate reading, based on an emendation to the verb, is “and from far away humbles the proud” (NET).

In either case, the point is the same: the God who is exalted above all has a special concern for those who are the lowest. This is a recurring theme in scripture, perhaps finding its clearest expression in Jesus’ teaching that following his way means ministering to “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40).

This theme is at the root of Liberation Theology, which emphasizes that God has a special concern for the poor and downtrodden. We may sometimes think of ourselves as victims, but we should give attention to ways in which we have been unwitting oppressors, benefiting from a history of racism and an economic system that inherently benefits more wealthy people at the expense of the poor.

In that sense, we are like the “kings of the earth” who are accustomed to ruling over others. We would do well to heed the psalmist’s call to remember that God is the highest of all, but cares for the lowest of the low. So should we.

Trustful praise (vv. 7-8)

Having offered praise for deliverance past, the psalmist turns to the present hope that God’s steadfast love and faithfulness will remain as he continues “to walk in the midst of trouble.” He expresses trustful hope that God will continue to “preserve me against the wrath of my enemies” by the power of God’s mighty hand (v. 7).

The final verse likewise begins in trust: “The LORD will fulfill his purposes for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever” (v. 8a). Still, behind the psalmist’s brash confidence there lingers uncertainty. His insecurity surfaces with the last line, though he continues to speak with surprising boldness: “Do not forsake the work of your hands” (v. 8b).

How many of us would dare to speak as if commanding God? We would expect, at the least, “Please, O Lord, do not forsake.” Perhaps we can presume an attitude of request rather than command, given the psalmist’s stated posture of prostration before the temple (v. 2), the symbol of God’s presence.

The poet’s concluding plea is instructive, for we also face ups and downs in life. We may rejoice when overcoming an obstacle, but we know that it’s not all peaches and cream from there.

We will face more difficulties in life, and we will need to continually trust in a God who is loving and faithful, a God who cares for those who are downtrodden.

As we do so, perhaps God will remind us that there are others more unfortunate than us. Perhaps we can be the means of God’s blessing by reaching out our own hands to uplift others who may have given up hope, and who need the touch of hope. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 13, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:12-34

Amazing Hope

If you were asked to state the deepest grounding of your faith in Christ, what would it be? Do we hold to our faith because our parents told us so, and that's good enough? Is it because the messages we've heard in church were convincing, or simply because the traditions have endured for so many years?

Many choose to believe because they fear the prospect of death or hell, and they want to cover their bases. Blaise Pascal, a 17th-century French mathematician who also wrote about philosophy and religion, famously posited a logical argument for belief in God.

Pascal acknowledged that we cannot prove God's existence, but he argued that we should live as if it is true. If we choose to believe God exists, but die and experience nothing beyond, we will have lost nothing beyond some temporal pleasures while on earth. But, if we choose to believe in God and experience heaven when we die, we will have gained everything.

The logic isn't perfect, and many have argued against it. In any case, one who chooses to believe on the grounds of Pascal's logic isn't expressing real faith so much as placing a bet. Why do we believe? For many people – the Apostle Paul foremost among them –

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. (1 Cor. 15:13-14)

the foundational reason for belief is the resurrection of Christ.

Argument one (vv. 12-19)

With this lesson we return to our weeks-long focus on the closing chapters of Paul's letter that we know as 1 Corinthians. Paul deals with many different issues in the lengthy letter, some of them rather petty and others of deeper significance. Few matters are more significant than questions about resurrection, and in chapter 15 Paul lays out a series of arguments for faith in Christ, all based on his belief in the reality of resurrection.


In the first 11 verses, Paul points out historical evidence for Christ's resurrection, which he considers to be "of first importance" (v. 3). He cites Jesus' appearances to Peter, then the other disciples, and ultimately more than 500 others, most of whom were still alive (vv. 5-7). Finally, he speaks of how Christ had appeared to him through his vision on the road to Damascus (vv. 8-10, compare Acts 9).

The convincing testimony of many eyewitnesses to Christ's resurrection had led others to faith: "so we proclaim and so you have come to believe" (v. 11). These verses also appear in lectionary readings for Easter, and we have studied them more closely in that context. [DD] While vv. 1-11 emphasize the historical reality

of the resurrection, vv. 12-34 stress its theological significance.

But why does Paul have to defend the resurrection? Perhaps he felt it necessary to oppose Gnostic ideas that identified Jesus' spirit as being separate from the human Jesus. Gnostics believed that while the spirit of Christ ascended, the human Jesus remained dead. This led to an attitude that the spirit alone matters, and what we do with the body is of no significance.

Like other good debaters, Paul often used hypothetical statements and their logical results to give weight to his arguments. Here he uses a series of logical "if...then" statements to make his case that all Christians will experience a resurrection, and to posit that as a necessary corollary of one's faith in Christ.

Paul employs six quick "if ... then" statements in vv. 12-19, in two repetitive cycles.  Having defended the reality of resurrection, he concludes that if we have hoped in Christ for this life only, we are of all people to be most pitied (v. 19).

The resurrection was the very ground of Paul's future hope, and it seems he could not imagine an authentic faith in Christ that did not include the hope of resurrection with Christ.

But, *is* resurrection the only reason for belief? The Hebrew people did not always expect a rosy afterlife. Only late in the Old Testament period, influenced by Greek and Persian thought, did the Israelites begin to expect anything other than a shadowy post-mortem existence in a place they called "Sheol." Qoheleth, the writer of Ecclesiastes, clearly doubted that there was

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any difference in the fate of humans and animals (Eccl. 3:19-21).

Old Testament theology promised earthly blessings as rewards for faithful obedience to God (see Deuteronomy 28). In contrast, Jesus called followers to a life of service with no promise of earthly reward, but with the hope of eternal life.

Is that all that matters? Believers would do well to ask if achieving heaven is our only reason for choosing to follow Christ. For many people, the answer would be a resounding “Yes,” which accounts for the popularity of evangelists who sell the gospel like fire insurance and the number of absentees on church rolls.

Could it not be worth it to follow Jesus, to live with joy and in the knowledge that our Jesus-centered lifestyle influences the world in positive ways, even if we have no guarantee of an afterlife? Are we really to be most pitied if our reasons for following Jesus are broader than the hope of living forever? It’s a question worth asking ... but not a question that Paul was asking.

Argument two (vv. 20-28)

Paul follows his opening rhetorical volley with two analogies from Jewish tradition, then branches into an extended parenthesis with a more theological argument.

The first analogy speaks of Christ as “the first fruits of those who have died.” In Hebrew life, the “first fruits” offering marked the beginning of the spring harvest season. Comparatively, Paul sees Christ’s resurrection as the “first fruit” and the assurance of a harvest of believers yet to be raised (v. 20).

The second analogy, in Paul’s terminology, compares the first man, Adam, and the first new man, Christ.

Paul believed all had descended from Adam and thus shared the consequences of Adam’s sin (v. 21). **U** Thus, he argues that if the effects of Adam’s sin could result in death for all who followed him in rebellion against God, then Christ’s redemptive work would result in life for all who followed him in obedience to God: “as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (v. 22).

Paul then combines the two ideas by emphasizing the order in which the resurrection will take place: Christ rose first, “then at his coming all those who belong to Christ” (v. 23). After this, he says, we will enter the new and eternal age where all enemies are conquered and God rules over all, with death being the last enemy conquered and all things being in subjection to God (vv. 24-28). **U**

With what might be a quotation of Ps. 8:6 in vv. 27-28, Paul offers a rather convoluted argument that while God has put all things under Christ, “all things” does not include God’s own self. **U**

Argument three (vv. 29-34)

Paul’s next argument grows from an apparent practice in which Corinthian believers, like contemporary Mormons, were being baptized in behalf of the dead. Perhaps they had attached a magical or mystical meaning to baptism, hoping the vicarious ceremony would have a tangible impact on others.

Paul, surprisingly, offers no negative judgment on the practice, but simply uses it as an illustration for his argument. “If there is no resurrection, why get baptized for the dead?” (v. 29).

Finally, Paul gets to the heart of the matter. It appears that many Corinthians had become far too worldly, and Paul argued that belief in

a bodily resurrection is essential, not only as the hope of good to come, but also as a motivation for good in this present life.

In vv. 30-32a, Paul describes the suffering and dangers he has faced (and continues to face) as a servant of Christ. If there is no hope of resurrection and a better life beyond this one, why open oneself to such suffering? Why bother to serve? Why practice self-denial?

If there is no resurrection, Paul argues, suffering for Jesus makes little sense. If this life is all there is, why not live it up as some of the Corinthians were doing? “If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die” (v. 32a). Perhaps Paul is recalling the words of Qoheleth, who suggested a similar *carpe diem* philosophy no less than five times (Eccl. 2:24, 3:12, 5:18, 8:15, 9:7). If this life is all there is, why not live it up?

But there is a resurrection, Paul insists – and faith in the resurrection should impact how we live in the present. Believers should be careful of the company they keep, for “bad company ruins good morals” (v. 33b, also known from the Greek poet Menander). The hedonistic lifestyle of Corinth was having too much of an impact on the church.

If we believe only in this world, Paul contends, we will live only for this world. If we believe in a world to come, we are more likely to live toward that world, and not just for this one. So, Paul says “Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more!” (v. 34).

The text demands that we ask how Paul’s argument resonates with us. How focused on temporal pleasures are we? Does our belief in a future resurrection (or the lack of it) have any impact on the way we live? And does this deserve further contemplation? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


Feb. 20, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:35-50

Amazing Thoughts

How often do you contemplate the various doctrines or beliefs associated with your branch of Christianity? While most Christians hold some basic beliefs in common, more peripheral doctrines can vary widely.

If you stop to think about it, what teachings matter the most to you? For Paul, no doctrine was more central or essential than the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which he believed paved the way for the resurrection of believers, too. Some Corinthian Christians had questioned Paul's teaching. Some doubted that humans could experience resurrection. Others were confused by the conflict in beliefs.

To promote a clear understanding of resurrection faith, Paul focused on that topic throughout chapter 15 of the letter we call 1 Corinthians. [DD] He began by citing historical witnesses to Christ's resurrection (vv. 1-11), then launched into a series of arguments that believers, like Christ, would experience resurrection from the dead (vv. 12-34). In today's text, Paul attempts to explain the nature of the resurrection for human believers. 


Resurrection questions

It is helpful to remember that Corinth

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor. 15:49)

was a leading city of Greece, and Paul was writing to people who lived within that culture. From the time of Plato (4th century BCE), many Greeks believed that all persons possessed an immortal soul, which resided in a temporary and corruptible body. Some of the Corinthians, perhaps under Greek philosophical influence, or through the teachings of the Gnostic heresy, had come to believe that resurrection was a matter of spirit alone.

Paul contended that the resurrection was more than spiritual: he was convinced that believers would experience a type of bodily resurrection, too. Ancient Hebrews did not hold a concept of an "immortal soul," but believed that the dead maintained a tenuous connection to their decomposing bodies, even as they descended into a shadowy existence in an underground abode called Sheol.

Ideas about resurrection began to emerge in the postexilic period, and by the first century, many Jews had come to believe in a future resurrection associated with the arrival of a messiah – though the Sadducees famously did not (Matt. 22, 23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27). Some Jews, especially the Orthodox, still anticipate a resurrection. 

Paul believed that Christians should think of life after death as a gift of God that included some manner of physical resurrection, not just a spiritual immortality.

As he wrote, Paul was also contending with some early Christians who believed the resurrection had already occurred, but only in the sense of new birth in Christ, an idea reflected in 2 Tim. 2:17-18.

Other believers had adopted early Gnostic ideas that humans consisted of a body that was inherently evil, and a soul that was inherently good. If the two were not connected, they reasoned that one could enjoy any bodily pleasure without affecting the soul. Paul disputed the view in 1 Cor. 6:12-20 and insisted that libertines did not know a thing about God (1 Cor. 15:30-34).

Without the resurrection, Paul believed, there is no faith with a future. Other religions and philosophies may provide a certain sense of satisfaction or joy with the present life, but faith in the resurrected Christ can make the future meaningful, too.

Paul held that the resurrection of Christ was the irreducible basis of the gospel. He argued that if we believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be, that he died for our sins and rose again to conquer death, then all the fullness of the Christian hope follows. Our present life and our future life are grounded in Jesus' own resurrection life.

The Fourth Gospel, written long after Paul's death, attributes a similar teaching to Jesus. On the night of his betrayal, knowing that the time of his death was near, Jesus comforted his frightened disciples with words they would not understand until later: "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).

If Paul had known of that tradition, he surely would have quoted it.

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Instead, he continued to rely on a series of logical arguments that believers, like Christ, would rise from the dead.

Old and new (vv. 35-44a)

Few people would deny that the earthly body in which we live will not last forever, even if we go to the extent of cryogenic freezing in hopes of a future revival, as some have. In Paul's day, many considered the notion of a bodily resurrection to be patently ridiculous. Thus, some determined to enjoy bodily pleasures for as long as they could.

Paul knew that people would question how a bodily resurrection could take place. "But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?'" (v. 35).

Paul saw the question as sarcastic and responded with a sharp interjection: "Fools!" In trying to explain what the resurrection would be like, he offers the analogy of a seed. When a seed is placed in the ground, it "dies" to its old nature as a seed (v. 36): it surrenders its nature as a seed in order to become a growing plant. Farmers know that they plant seeds, but something very different comes up (v. 37). Likewise, they plant varieties of seed, expecting them to produce different kinds of plants (v. 38).

Any farmer knows that a buried seed becomes something different as it grows. In the same way, Paul insists, our dead and buried bodies can become something different through the resurrection. Paul points to the reality of different types of bodies: plants and animals, fish and birds, insects and humans, each arising from differing seeds (v. 39). Biblical writers commonly referred to human sperm as "seed" that could grow when planted in a fertile womb, and children could also

be spoken of as "seed."

As we see differences between living bodies on earth, Paul said, we also observe differences between earthly bodies and heavenly bodies (vv. 40-41). The earth is not like the sun or the moon, or the stars, all of which differ further among themselves. Paul's point is that one cannot just look at a physical body, knowing it will die, and infer that all life is over. There are different types of bodies. There are different kinds of life.

"So it is with the resurrection of the dead," Paul said. "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (vv. 42-44a).

Paul's readers would not have been able to explain how a mustard seed was transformed into a large plant, but they knew that it happened. Paul hoped they could also accept the mystery that a dead and decomposed body could one day be resurrected into a new kind of body.

Physical and spiritual (vv. 44b-50)

Paul moves on to assert that the presence of the physical body argues for the reality of a spiritual body (v. 44b). This requires a leap in logic and an acceptance of Paul's concept of Adam as the first man created (Genesis 2), and Christ's incarnation as the last "Adam."

"The first man, Adam, became a living being," Paul said, while "the last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (v. 45). In other words, the creation story concerning Adam introduces humankind's physical body, while the resurrection of Christ initiates the possibility of a spiritual body.

This, Paul argues, is the natural course of things: "it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (vv. 46-49).

Thus, Paul assures his readers that Christ's physical/spiritual nature is a model for all believers: Jesus is the "first fruit" or pattern that believers will follow in life, death, and resurrection (cf. 15:20, 23). In Paul's argument, physical bodies are perfectly designed for life in this world, and at the resurrection, God will provide new bodies designed for life in heaven. We cannot know exactly how that will happen or what it will be like.

Paul expected his readers to accept this by faith, even without full understanding. For him, it was enough to know that the glories of heaven could not be experienced in earthly bodies. "What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (v. 50).

But Paul fully believed there would be an eternal inheritance, so he trusted that God would provide an appropriately imperishable, spiritual body to experience it. As in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul believed that, though we may see dimly now, we can live with faith and hope that one day we will see all things clearly. We may not be as certain as Paul just how all things will work out, but we can trust that God holds the future, and live with confidence toward whatever comes next. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 27, 2022

2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2

Amazing Growth

Have you ever begun studying a passage of scripture, but found it so impenetrable or confusing that you just skipped on by in search of something easier to grasp? We want the scriptures to speak to us, and we may grow frustrated when the message is unclear. Today's reading can be just that sort of text, but some background will help us understand what Paul is going on about with his discussion of Moses' veil, blinded people, and divine glory. 📖 While the Revised Common Lectionary reading is 2 Cor. 3:12–4:2, most scholars find 3:7–4:6 to be closely connected. We'll focus on the lectionary reading, but also give attention to the surrounding verses.

Removing the veil (3:12-16)

The first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians center on what Paul believed it meant for him to serve Christ and the church despite great difficulties, and how others should also minister in Christ's name. 📖

In the early chapters of the epistle, Paul felt compelled to defend himself and his version of the gospel against others who had taught a competing vision. It's likely that some of these were so-called "Judaizers" who taught that believers must continue to observe

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

the Jewish law in addition to trusting Christ.

Paul criticized them as "peddlers of God's word" (2:17) who relied on letters of recommendation to boost their authority (3:1), while he relied only on God and the way lives had been changed through his ministry, including in Corinth (3:2-3). His competence did not grow from himself or from any letter, but from the Spirit (3:4-6). Paul then offered a curious interpretation of Exodus 34:29-35, comparing himself with Moses – to Moses' detriment.

The Exodus account says that when Moses returned from Mount Sinai after spending 40 days in God's presence, his face shone so brightly that it frightened the Israelites. Still, according to the story, Moses spoke with both leaders and people long enough to "command them everything that Yahweh had said to him on Mount Sinai" (v. 32). That could have taken quite a while. Perhaps he remained barefaced so the glow would be understood as a reflection of God's glory and thus add to the authority of his teachings.

Afterward, however, Moses covered his face with a veil, apparently to avoid spooking other people in everyday interactions. When he "went in before the LORD to speak with him," he would remove the veil, but

when around other Israelites, he kept it on. Encounters with God presumably took place in the "tent of meeting." 📖

Paul forces an idiosyncratic interpretation on the text, claiming that Moses was not hiding his face to avoid startling people, but because the divine glow on his face was fading, and he didn't want the people to notice. Nothing in the Exodus text suggests that the shine on Moses' face diminished over time, but Paul reads it that way to set up a comparison.

The word "glory" is key to this passage, and Paul uses it 15 times in chapters 3–4 alone. It indicates more than a dazzling radiance, but carries the theological connotation of divine presence. Paul wants to compare the glory of the "ministry of death" – his term for the law, with the glory of the "ministry of the spirit" that came through Christ. He sees the glory of the law as not only fading but also obsolete, while the ministry of the spirit was continuing to abound (vv. 7-11).

Since Moses hid his face so the people would not witness the fading glory of the law, Paul says, the Hebrews' understanding was also veiled and their hearts were hardened, making them unwilling or unable to see the glory of Christ (vv. 12-14). This happens when they hear "the reading of the old covenant," he says. Though we commonly speak of the "old" and "new" covenants, this is the only time "old covenant" appears in scripture.

For Paul, the reading of the law continued to cast a veil over people's minds, preventing them from seeing that "in Christ it had been set aside" (v. 14). But when "one turns to the Lord,"

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however, “the veil is removed” (vv. 15-16).

Paul did not question the legitimacy of the law or the “old covenant,” but he considered it to be transient, fading until it was fulfilled in Jesus. The metaphor of the veil serves two purposes: Moses’ use of it to hide the fading glory (according to Paul), and as a symbolic blindfold that prevented Hebrews from seeing the glory revealed in Christ.

It is likely that Paul’s metaphor of sight reflects his personal experience of having persecuted Christians in his former zeal for Judaism until he met Christ in a blinding light on the road to Damascus. He could not see again until a church leader named Ananias prayed for him to receive the Holy Spirit, after which “something like scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored” (Acts 9:1-19).

Being transformed (3:17-18)

Paul’s experience with the Spirit of Christ set him free from blindness, both physical and spiritual. Thus, he could say “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (3:17). Scholars debate whether “Lord” in this verse refers to Christ or to God as father, but we should not let later Trinitarian terminology distract us from Paul’s point. He routinely referred to God, Jesus, Christ, the Lord, Spirit, and Holy Spirit in exchangeable ways. 📌

We do not connect with God through physical means, but through the Spirit, whether we think of the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ. Paul’s intent may be to draw a historical connection between the divine Spirit that was reflected in Moses’ glowing face, and the Spirit that could free both Jews and Gentiles from blindness so they could

see clearly.

Paul challenged the Corinthians to look toward God “with unveiled faces.” Though we see “as though reflected in a mirror,” those who contemplate the glory of God “are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (3:18). 📌

Paul seems to be arguing that those who spend time engaged with the Spirit of God will be transformed, even as Moses’ face was transformed, so that we reflect more and more the image of God, becoming more of what God made us to be, more of what Moses and Jesus showed us how to be.

Have you ever known a believer so devoted to God that you could see it in their face or sense it in their presence? We may not radiate light as Moses or Jesus did, but we can exhibit the presence of God in our lives.

When we see the moon, flying high and shining brightly, we know that the orbiting object produces no light of itself, but reflects the light of the sun. Similarly, we may generate no intrinsic spiritual radiance, but we can reflect the light of Christ through the mirror of our lives. We need not fear that our face will become so transformed that we will be forced to wear Moses’ veil. Rather, the radiant smile and gentle compassion shown in the face of one who walks closely with Christ are more likely to attract others in the same way that moths are drawn to a porch light.

Proclaiming the truth (4:1-2)

With 4:1, Paul shifts gears as he returns to defending himself and his understanding of the gospel against those who taught otherwise – especially any who claimed that Christians must also follow the Jewish law.

Paul had not attained his position because he had previously followed the law: he affirmed that his confidence in God and involvement in the ministry had grown in response to the mercy Christ had shown to him. Grounded by grace, he could say “we do not lose heart” despite opposition from within the church, and persecution without (4:1).

Boldly, Paul insisted that he practiced no ministerial shenanigans as some did, and had remained true to God’s teaching, refusing to “falsify God’s word,” as he believed others had done. Speaking only the truth as he understood it, he felt confident in commending himself to everyone, trusting in their conscience or judgment to accept his message as the true gospel (4:2). Though unstated, the implication is that the Corinthians should accept both his leadership and his teaching.

If Paul’s message seemed veiled to some, he said, it was because “the god of this world” had veiled their understanding, though he proclaimed it for their sakes (4:3-5). Moses’ meeting with God had caused his face to shine, but his alone. Paul believed his encounter with Christ and filling with the Spirit caused the light of Christ to shine through his life and ministry so that others could also access and share the light of Christ (4:6).

Have you ever been challenged to defend your relationship with God – whether you were a true disciple or something less? Could you do so with the same confidence Paul demonstrated in today’s text?

It’s not “This little light of mine” that we are called to share, but the endless light of Christ’s presence within, shining through our imperfections so we can join in living and singing the challenge to “Let others see Jesus in you.” **NFJ**

George W. Bush (2001–2009): Part 1

By Bruce Gourley

On Sept. 11, 2001 two hijacked airliners flew into the twin, 110-story-tall World Trade Center towers in New York City — the second one filmed live by television cameras. A horrified nation watched as smoke and fire poured from the towers, trapping thousands of people working in the buildings.

Pressed by flames, some people jumped out of windows to their own death. Emergency responders, heroically climbing upward in the unstable buildings, worked furiously to rescue as many people as possible.

Playing out on live television, the South tower, followed by the North, collapsed within two hours of the first plane strike, the searing images burned into the conscience of a nation. Nearly 2,800 lives were lost — office employees and emergency responders alike — pulverized in the debris.

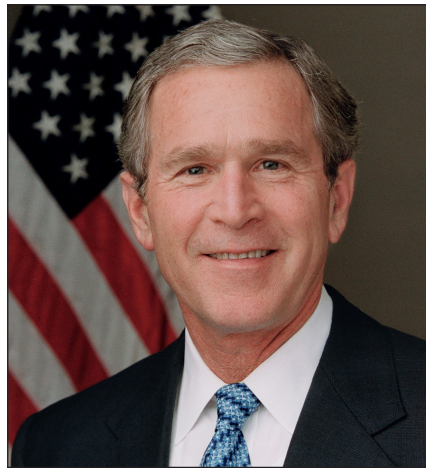
Compounding the tragedy, a third hijacked plane slammed into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killing 184 people. A fourth plane plowed into the ground in Pennsylvania, killing all aboard. Brave passengers had overpowered the hijackers of that aircraft, also destined for the nation's capital.

Later that day President George W. Bush spoke to the nation: “Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts.”

FOUNDATIONS

“[Terrorists] can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America,” said Bush. “America was targeted for attack because

This is the 43rd article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for *Nurturing Faith Journal*, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.



Official White House photo of President George W. Bush, President of the United States.

we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.”

Bush asserted, “And no one will keep that light from shining.”

“Today, our nation saw evil — the very worst of human nature — and we responded with the best of America,” he continued. “with the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could.”

Vowing action, Bush declared: “The search is underway for those who were behind these evil acts. I have directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice.”

“This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace,” he added. “America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world.”

Three days later — after the terrorists were identified as Islamic extremists — Bush, in a memorial address at the National Cathedral, spoke of the “world created as a moral design” by God, while “grief and tragedy and hatred are only for a time.”

KINSHIP OF GRIEF

A “unity of every faith and every background ... has joined together political parties and both houses of Congress,” Bush proclaimed. “It is evident in services of prayer and candlelight vigils and American flags, which are displayed in pride and waved in defiance. Our unity is a kinship of grief and a steadfast resolve to prevail against our enemies.”

He closed with religious words: “On this national day of prayer and remembrance, we ask Almighty God to watch over our nation and grant us patience and resolve in all that is to come. We pray that he will comfort and console those who now walk in sorrow. We thank him for each life we now must mourn, and the promise of a life to come.”

Bush continued, drawing from Romans 8: “As we've been assured, neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth can separate us from God's love.”

He asked God to “bless the souls of the departed, ...comfort our own, [and] always guide our country” — ending with, “God bless America.”

BACKLASH

On Sept. 17, amid a backlash of anger on the part of many conservative Christians toward Islam, Bush again spoke to the nation.

“The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam,” he insisted. “That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don't represent peace. They represent evil and war.”

In the public eye President Bush called for unity, stood shoulder to shoulder with American Muslim leaders, and visited a mosque — the first sitting president to do so. He also hosted a Ramadan event at the White House.

But even as he preached harmony, the president had other plans on his mind.

The shocking terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 — commonly referred to as simply “9/11” — occurred as America stood upon an ideological precipice: A pluralistic, diverse, and increasingly secular culture faced growing hostility in the nation’s capital.

Overhead, dark clouds of ideological anxiety remained from a contested 2000 presidential election in which Bush, loser of the popular vote, won by the slightest of electoral margins tied to a controversial decision by a conservative-dominated Supreme Court.

His unusual election victory heralded the arrival of a new political era: In the six presidential elections from 2000 to 2020, Republicans would lose the popular vote in all instances except for 2004.

CULTURE WARS

White evangelical Christians — dominant in rural America — form the largest Republican voting bloc. Many are bent on replacing America’s inclusive democracy with an exclusive Christian theocracy.

They proved central to Bush’s contested 2000 victory, establishing a political blueprint for successive Republican presidential nominees. But their success came at a cost to civility.

Having descended into hatred and religious extremism in opposing Bill Clinton’s presidency, the Christian Right during the 2000 presidential campaign had found their man in the person of Bush, the governor of Texas-turned presidential candidate, and a United Methodist church member.

During the primary season, South Carolina Southern Baptist pastor Allen Phillips claimed “conservative evangelical Christians identified with Gov. Bush” because “he has the experience of knowing Jesus Christ as his savior.”

Yet, Democratic candidate Al Gore, along with Bill Clinton — both Southern Baptists — gave evidence of the same born-again experience. Why did claims of knowing Jesus count only if the candidate were a Republican?

Having immersed himself in the world

of conservative evangelicals during his father’s presidential campaigns, the younger Bush understood that claiming Jesus was secondary to a strong conservative stance on social and cultural issues.

George W.’s campaign mailings to evangelicals focused on what mattered to them, pitching the Texan as a “proven conservative leader to defend family and life.” Code words for anti-homosexuality, anti-abortion and white privilege politics, defending “family and life” represented the heartbeat of the Christian Right-driven Republican Party.

But Bush took no chances during the primary season, his campaign team working to cast doubt about the religious faith of John McCain, his Republican opponent and an Episcopalian. One Republican leader said “McCain was so defined in negative terms by the Christian Right” that Christian constituents repeatedly asked, “Is it OK to vote for McCain?”

Demonizing McCain and Bush’s Democratic rivals was the brainchild of campaign strategist Karl Rove, a fellow Texan.

“His Christian faith is a weapon of devastating agency, but he never discusses it; no one knows if his politics are religious or politics are his religion,” political journalist Ed Vulliamy wrote of Rove.

Representing “fierce conservative Christianity ... with roots in Ronald Reagan’s time” and “devoted to achieving raw, unilateral power,” Rove understood that in order to “govern on behalf of the corporate Right, they would have to appease the Christian Right” on social issues, said Vulliamy.

“Rove was the hub of a Texan wheel connecting the [Bush] family, the party, the Christian Right and the energy industry,” he added, an alliance stretching all the way to the Middle East’s vast oil reserves.

ROOTS

Each road to the White House is unique, and Bush’s was no exception. Unique, too, was Bush’s spiritual journey en route to the nation’s highest office.

Born July 6, 1946 in New Haven Connecticut, George W. seemingly lacked nothing as a member of a prominent, moneyed and connected New England

family. During his childhood Bush’s paternal grandfather, Prescott Bush, served as a U.S. Senator from Connecticut.

Despite New England roots, his father, George H.W., upon graduating from Yale, moved his family to Texas where George W. grew up, prior to returning eastward to attend Yale himself. An MBA from Harvard followed.

Moving back to Texas, Bush in 1977 married schoolteacher and librarian Laura Welch. In time the couple raised two children, Barbara and Jenna.

Beneath the storybook surface, however, George W. — an oil businessman and key player in building a taxpayer-subsidized baseball stadium for the Texas Rangers team — suffered from alcohol abuse.

Not until conversations in the 1980s with famed evangelist Baptist Billy Graham — a friend of the Bush family — did the future president begin turning his life around by recommitting his “heart to Jesus Christ.” Along the way Bush departed his family’s Episcopal Church and became a Methodist, the faith denomination of his wife, Laura.

Well-connected in Texas, Bush soon recognized the power of evangelical voters. Ambitious, he courted and won their support.

Wayne Slater, *Dallas Morning News* Austin bureau chief, watched Bush in action as he successfully ran for governor in 1994.

“I saw George Bush in church settings — and he was a master,” said Slater. “He was marvelously successful in talking their language, reinforcing their values, and appealing successfully to the kinds of people who not only would vote for him, but would tell their neighbors to vote for him. Not only organize phone banks for him, but would call prayer lines and talk about George Bush as a campaigner.”

Opening state coffers to support Christian nonprofits in Texas, Governor Bush won the accolades of white conservative Christians disdainful of church-state separation. Then, prior to his inauguration to a second gubernatorial term, the governor had a vision.

To a few close Christian friends, including Richard Land, then president of Southern Baptists' Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, Bush confided: "I believe that God wants me to be president." And in the year 2000, it came to pass.

CHURCH-STATE

In his presidential inaugural address Bush spoke words reflective of his certainty of his God-ordained victory:

"Our unity, our union, is the serious work of leaders and citizens in every generation. And this is my solemn pledge: I will work to build a single nation of justice and opportunity. I know this is in our reach because we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in his image."

Bush continued, projecting a foreign policy of strength "based on the values that gave our nation birth," code words from his white evangelical world, shorthand for the (false) belief that America was created as an expressly Christian nation, chosen by God above other nations.

"We will build our defenses beyond challenge, lest weakness invites challenge," he declared with certainty.

Christian nationalism stirred beneath the words of his domestic agenda.

"Together, we will reclaim America's schools, before ignorance and apathy claim more young lives," he said, a nod to those white conservative evangelicals still angry at integrated public schools and continually demanding government-subsidized Christian education in its stead.

"We will reform Social Security and Medicare, sparing our children from struggles we have the power to prevent," Bush continued, referring to his plans for crippling the government's role in protecting impoverished senior citizens' lives and health, in favor of privatizing the nation's safety nets for the benefit of large corporations.

"And we will reduce taxes, to recover the momentum of our economy and reward the effort and enterprise of working Americans," he added — proving political spin for cutting taxes on corporations and the rich (Ronald Reagan's failed "trickle-down"

economics) at the expense of the poor and middle classes.

Signaling an assault on the nation's historic separation of religion and state, Bush decreed: "Government has great responsibilities for public safety and public health, for civil rights and common schools. Yet compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government. And some needs and hurts are so deep they will only respond to a mentor's touch or a pastor's prayer. Church and charity, synagogue and mosque lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an honored place in our plans and in our laws."

IDEOLOGY

Echoing Ronald Reagan's call for personal responsibility and freedom rather than government assistance for and protection of the most needy, Bush affirmed: "America, at its best, is a place where personal responsibility is valued and expected."

All told, Bush's initial speech was arguably the most religiously-infused inaugural address in history, yet devoid of any hint of the federal government as an enabler of societal justice and well-being. In Bush's worldview, conservative Christianity was America's ideological foundation.

Having publicly signaled his ideology and agenda in this inaugural address of Jan. 20, 2001, Bush — affirmed by Christian nationalists as God's chosen one — quickly set to work on making America and the world more godly.

Two days later he reinstated a ban (previously lifted by President Bill Clinton) on foreign aid to groups performing or counseling abortion. Seven days later, with the stroke of a pen, Bush tore down a section of the historic "wall" separating religion and state.

Deeming government no longer responsible for demonstrating compassion to disadvantaged Americans, Bush declared that from now on "when we see social needs in America, my administration will look first to faith-based programs and community groups, which have proven their power to save and change lives."

Hence was born the "White House Office of Faith-Based and Community

Initiatives," an avowed religiously inclusive government office, but designed primarily to benefit the Christian Right.

On March 29, Bush, dismissing the reality of climate change, pleased his evangelical and corporate base by rejecting the Kyoto Protocol, a plan designed to curb the worst of the catastrophic future effects of global warming by reducing industrial pollution emissions.

In June, Bush followed through with his debt-inducing tax cuts for the rich. And in August he halted federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, hampering the search for cures for some of the world's gravest and most deadly diseases and illnesses.

But then came 9/11 — entangling domestic and foreign interests in a toxic slew of politics, capitalism, religion and Islamophobia.

RESPONSES

For decades America had exploited the Middle East in a thirst for oil. Since the 1990s the U.S. had pushed for an oil pipeline from Turkmenistan in Central Asia and across western Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean.

But talks with Afghanistan's ruling militia, the Taliban, ended following the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, for which Osama bin Laden — leader of an extremist Islamic group, Al Qaeda — was held responsible.

Having identified Al Qaeda as responsible for 9/11, Bush on Sept. 20, 2001, declared: "Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."

On October 7 — backed by a coalition of European nations long at odds with bin Laden — America attacked Afghanistan, protector of bin Laden. The same day bin Laden taunted the U.S. in a videotaped message.

Voicing his own brand of religious fundamentalism, he said: "Here is America struck by God Almighty in one of its vital organs so that its greatest buildings are destroyed. Grace and gratitude to God.

America has been filled with horror from north to south and east to west, and thanks be to God. What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted.”

On the home front and in order to prevent foreign terrorists from reaching U.S. soil, the Bush administration created a Department of Homeland Security to surveil immigrants and travelers — including American citizens — by collecting, retaining, and using massive amounts of data, including political and religious leanings.

Invading Afghanistan but unable to locate bin Laden, Bush soon cast his gaze across the broader Islamic world.

Identifying Iraq and Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil” (alongside North Korea) harboring weapons of mass destruction, the president in his January 2002 State of the Union address asserted a right to wage “preemptive” or “preventive” war, an unprecedented and provocative stance that became known as the “Bush Doctrine.”

Without evidence and to the consternation of the United Nations, the president set his sights on Iraq, yet provided no concrete evidence of weapons of mass destruction in the nation that had not been involved in 9/11. His biggest cheerleaders were Christian nationalists.

BLAME

Prominent conservative evangelicals never took Bush’s post-9/11 public ecumenical overtures seriously. They knew better — and played along.

Two days after 9/11 fundamentalist leader Jerry Falwell, appearing on fellow Christian nationalist Pat Robertson’s 700 club, set the tone by blaming fellow Americans for the terrorist attacks.

“I really believe,” declared Falwell, “that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way — all of them who have tried to secularize America — I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’”

One month later, conservative pundit Ann Coulter, a writer for the *National*



Photo of President George W. Bush provided by History in HD.

Review, declared, “We should invade their [Islamic] countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity.” Christian nationalists cheered, but the *National Review*, a more mainstream conservative publication, quickly fired her.

But Bush in some respects agreed with Coulter, according to sympathetic biographers Peter and Rochelle Schweizer in their book, *The Bushes: Portrait of a Dynasty*.

“George sees this as a religious war,” a Bush cousin confided, according to the Schweizers. Believing Muslims “are trying to kill the Christians ... we as the Christians will strike back with more force and more ferocity than they will ever know.”

For their part, the Schweizers portrayed Bush’s conservative evangelical faith, including daily Bible reading, as providing the president with “moral” clarity and vision.

Morality, on the other hand, was of little concern to the men who shaped Bush’s politics. While Rove with the support of Christian nationalists masterminded the president’s corporatist domestic social and economic agenda, Karl Wolfowitz — an extremist hawk, foreign diplomat, and Middle East expert who had served as Under Secretary of Defense during George H.W. Bush’s presidency — allied George W. with Christian nationalists on foreign policy.

Under the elder Bush, Wolfowitz and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney molded the Defense Department into their hawkish image. Unsatisfied with merely shaping the present, Wolfowitz turned his gaze to the future.

Quietly he developed a controversial strategy for reshaping post-Cold War America for a new century. Through global military might the U.S. could deter “potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.”

Clinton’s election as president in 1992 sidelined the hawks’ plan for the Defense Department, but Wolfowitz plowed ahead in formalizing the ideology of his “Project for a New Century.”

On the eve of the 2000 election Wolfowitz observed that his Project needed “some catastrophic and catalyzing event, like a new Pearl Harbor” to see fruition. He set his sights on “the unresolved conflict in Iraq,” where Saddam Hussein, having outlasted George H.W. Bush’s otherwise-successful offensive in driving Iraqi forces out of Kuwait, remained in power.

Sept. 11, 2001 was Wolfowitz’s — then Deputy Secretary of Defense — Pearl Harbor and Christian nationalists’ opportunity to slow the advance of Islam, the world’s fastest growing religion.

WAR

Addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2002, Bush threw down the gauntlet. Iraq remained an existential threat, he decreed.

Allowing the Iraqi regime to continue with its weapons of mass destruction would ensure “far greater horrors” for the West than 9/11, he argued. A stark choice confronted the world: Iraq as a

terrorist nuclear power, or reform and the incorporation of American-style, capitalistic democracy not only in Iraq, but also “throughout the Muslim world.”

“Neither of these outcomes is certain,” Bush gravely informed his international audience. “We must choose between a world of fear and a world of progress.”

“We cannot stand by and do nothing while dangers gather,” he continued. “We must stand up for our security and for the permanent rights and the hopes of mankind. By heritage and by choice, the United States of America will make that stand.”

Received with mixed reviews abroad, Bush’s line in the sand was more popular at home. Relentlessly the president portrayed his calls for war on Iraq as connected to 9/11.

Saddam Hussein was an Islamic terrorist with ties to Al Qaeda, the group behind the 9/11 attacks on America, he insisted. An anxiety-riven American public proved easily persuadable.

Many mainstream American Christian leaders disagreed, however. General Secretary Bob Edgar of the National Council of Churches, representing 36 Protestant and Orthodox denominations, immediately called Bush’s determination to wage war a “march down the path to Armageddon” — a reference to the biblical final war above all wars — that “cannot be morally justified.”

All told, some 51 prominent heads of Protestant and Orthodox churches, along with Roman Catholic clergy, formally counseled Bush to reverse course.

“Rather than attacking Iraq, we urge that your priority in the Middle East be an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire and peace settlement,” they declared. “As do many in the world, we look to the United States government to set an example for the international community.

“As Christian religious leaders responsible for millions of U.S. citizens, we expect our government to reflect the morals and values we hold dear — pursuing peace, not war; working with the community of nations, not overthrowing governments by force; respecting international law and

treaties while holding in high regard all human life.”

On the other hand, most conservative white evangelical leaders deemed Bush’s plan a “just war.” As Christian nationalists, they believed a Middle East war would hasten the prophetic coming of Christ to redeem the world from liberals and infidels. Some turned the biblical Gospels on their head, framing war as love. Chuck Colson, indicted Watergate co-conspirator turned Christian nationalist, argued that “out of love of neighbor then, Christians can and should support a preemptive strike” on Iraq to prevent Iraqi-based or -funded attacks on the United States or its allies.”

Bush again wrapped himself in God’s will, claiming that “God told me to end tyranny in Iraq.” God’s will or not, a war against Iraq required the approval of the United States Congress.

In October 2002, under intense pressure from the president and the Department of Defense, the Congress complied. Embracing spurious intelligence created by the Bush administration, a bipartisan Congress approved Bush’s war plans, allowing the president to attack Iraq if that nation failed to disarm itself of chemical and biological weapons. Even so, some religious leaders remained unconvinced.

OPPOSITION

In early March 2003, with the UN opposed to President Bush’s war plans, a papal emissary, Cardinal Pio Laghi — a longtime friend of the Bush family — visited the president to discuss Iraq.

Laghi asked Bush for evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, an unresolved issue weighing on the minds of many Americans. Bush expressed certainty, but had no evidence.

“Do you realize what you’ll unleash inside Iraq by occupying it?” Laghi asked. “The disorder, the conflicts between Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds.” Bush disagreed, insisting that democracy would emerge in the Middle East.

Seeking to change the subject, the president noted that the Vatican agreed

with his anti-abortion position. That is not the issue at hand, the cardinal pointed out.

U.S. Catholic bishops also urged Bush to “step back from the brink of war.” So, too, did some African-American Christian leaders.

Bishop Adam J. Richardson, president of the Council of Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, represented many in voicing opposition: “I think that, from my perspective, the right-wing faction of Christianity is doing Christ a disservice by attempting to back their jaundiced views with scripture, trivializing the Bible in public view and making a mockery of the best traditions of biblical scholarship.”

The Council on American Islamic relations warned that innocent civilians would die and the Middle East be destabilized: “Any American invasion and occupation of Iraq will fuel anti-American sentiment and would thereby harm our nation’s image and interests in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world.”

American Muslims, living in both worlds, many serving in U.S. military forces, and overwhelmingly moderate in their religious beliefs, expressed conflicting outlooks on the war. Opposing terrorism, many nonetheless worried about the larger ramifications of America warring against yet another Muslim nation.

The Muslim American Society argued it would not be a just war and would generate more, rather than less, terrorism. On the other hand, American Jewish groups, concerned about threats to Israel from Arab nations, largely supported the war on Iraq.

But apart from white Christian nationalists, Americans’ religious voices did not matter: God had anointed George W. Bush to reshape the Middle East for the benefit of the United States. Pacifistic liberals and the “irrelevant” UN could go to hell.

And so it came to pass: With God’s blessing, Tomahawk cruise missiles — launched from American fighter bombers and warships — screamed toward Iraq, a nation likewise claiming God’s blessing. The battle of the gods had begun. **NFJ**

Running off Without Jesus

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The most troubling oddity of Americanized Christianity is how easily expendable Jesus has become. And, sadly, his absence often goes unnoticed and unnoted.

Gospel writer Luke's report on a youthful event in Jesus' life can be said about much of Americanized Christianity today: "Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day" (Luke 2:43-44, NIV).

Jesus has not forsaken Americanized Christians. He's been ignored, left behind, and often replaced with lesser, even conflicting priorities.

Tragically, many professed believers — "thinking he is in their company" — have come up with a way to avoid Jesus while still calling themselves Christians. Often they even claim a higher faith than others. Yet, they switched the tags and shifted to a different target.

Jesus' call to "follow me" has been replaced by fidelity to a political ideology of self-interest and self-preservation that is cheaply wrapped in bad theology and poorly labeled as "biblical."

"Believing the Bible" in this way — even as it conflicts with the life and teachings of what's-his-name — has become the substitute test of faith for much of Americanized Christianity today.

According to the Gospels, Jesus gives

various responses to what it means to inherit the Kingdom of God. Not one of those responses involves affirming a doctrinal or political checklist. Nor does he ever say, "Believe the Bible."

Instead, Jesus stated that all the laws and prophets are wrapped up in just two great commandments: Love of God and others.

He speaks of the heaven-bound faithful as those who care selflessly for powerless persons in need, noting that in doing so they are actually treating Jesus in that way.

There's nothing in the Gospels about reciting a properly worded "profession of faith" and then moving on with one's self-interest — or signing one's name to a list of some organization's selective "right beliefs."

Too many professing believers treat Jesus as simply an escape mechanism from hell — and then toss aside what he called his followers to be and do. Americanized Christians often emphasize their "rights" over Jesus' call to denying oneself.

With these highly politicized and so-called "biblical worldviews," much of Christian America is running away from Jesus en masse — some moving so quickly out of fear or uncritical, misdirected allegiance that they haven't noticed his absence.

Their WWJD bracelets were long tucked away in the junk drawer.

There is a tragedy at least equal to outright rejecting Jesus: that is, claiming

his name and then not noticing when he has been left behind — traded for a fear-based religious/political allegiance similar to what drove the efforts to eliminate Jesus long ago.

Apparently, the widespread claim to be Christian while ignoring Jesus — or just not noticing his absence — fools some people.

But this is not going to end well for the very institutions of faith that foster such false allegiance — or downplay the actual teachings of Jesus in an effort to avoid institutional losses.

But many people from both outside and inside the church see what is happening. They notice the glaring absence of Jesus within Americanized Christianity and are seeking authentic faith elsewhere.

Church leaders must face a hard and pressing question: Is a Jesus-absent form of "Christianity" worth preserving?

Jesus is really hard to ignore — and even harder to follow as long as "my rights" and "my power" and "my self-interest" trump the larger, encompassing call to love God with all one's being and one's widely-defined neighbor as oneself.

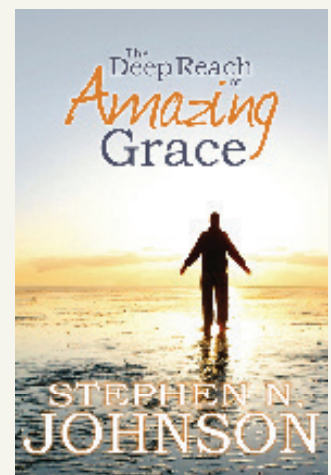
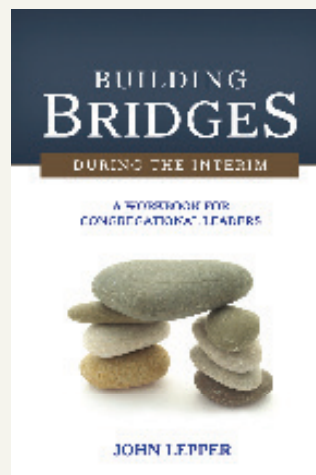
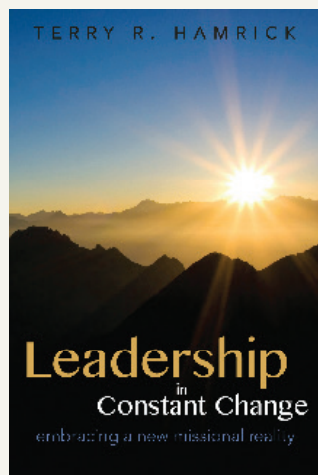
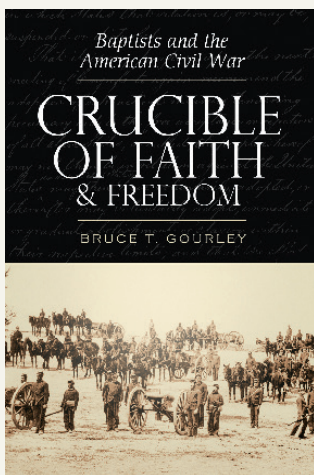
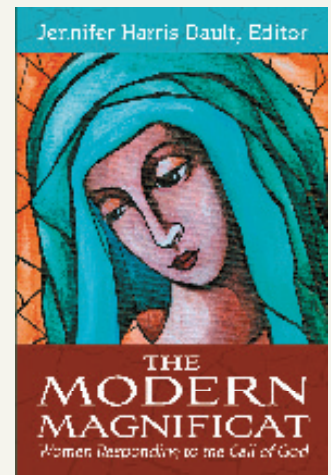
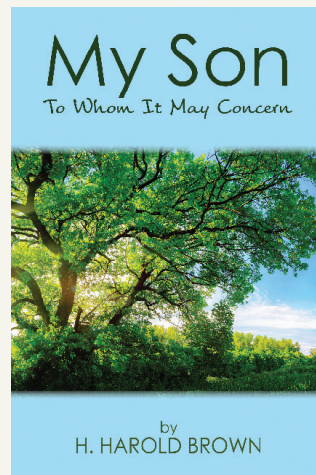
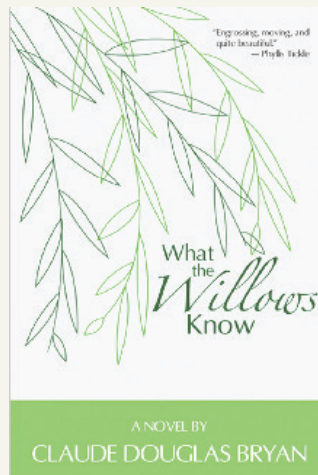
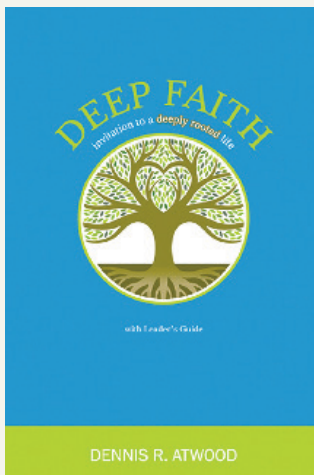
The path of faithful "followship" requires taking notice of when our steps depart from those of Jesus. **NFJ**

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



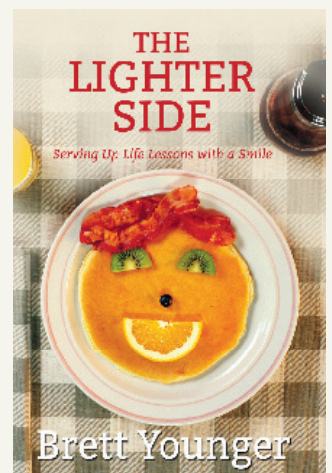
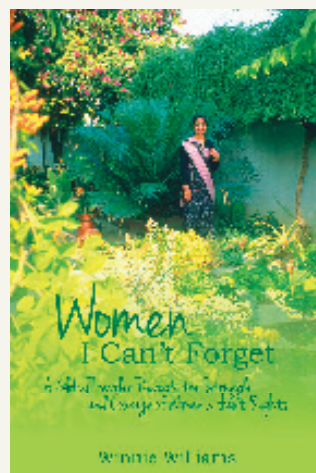
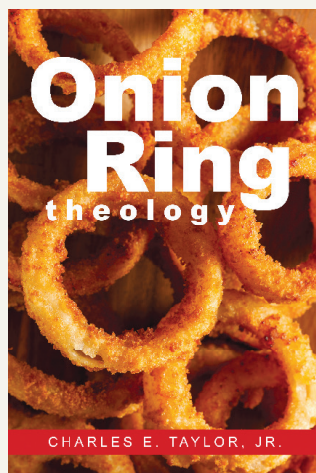
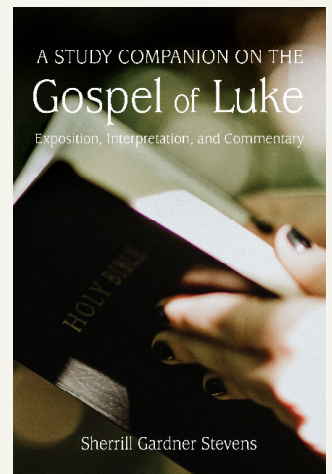
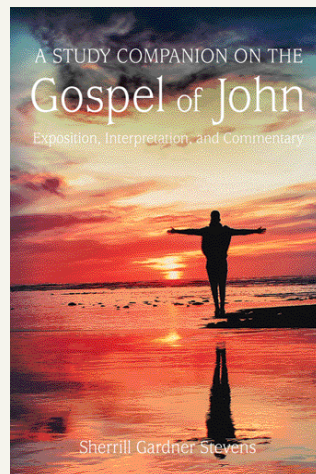
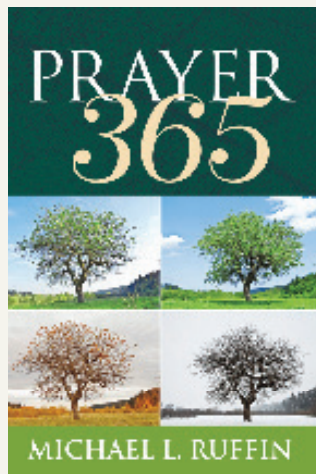
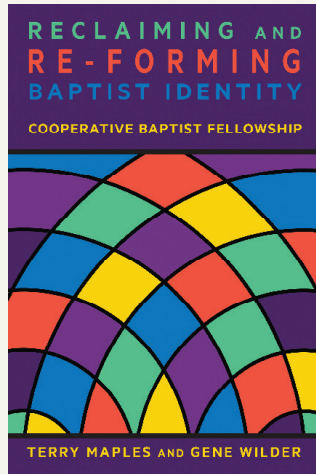
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MAKING SPACE

With sensitivity, congregations can include persons with autism

BY JAMIE NASH

My worst fear came to fruition. A psychologist diagnosed our son with autism. Deployed 3,000 miles away, sitting in the base chapel, I was devastated by the news.

It wasn't that I didn't know it was autism. The symptoms were there; I just didn't want to accept it.

God wouldn't let me go through that, I thought. I questioned everything about my faith, including "Why me?"

Because I tried to live according to biblical principles, I thought my fears wouldn't happen to my family or me. But I had unrealistic expectations about my faith.

This experience started my wife and me on a life journey and a mission to see our Christian communities gain new awareness about autism.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, is "a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges." It is called a "spectrum disorder" because there is a wide variety of symptoms and behaviors.

A saying I found to be true is this: "When you meet one person with autism, you have met one person with autism." Autism shows up differently in each person. Some will have textbook symptoms. Our son has some, such as pointing with his



middle finger, playing by himself while around other kids, and repeating the same action consecutively.

Interacting with children with autism has shown me how different and similar it can be. One kid might talk well and be very social, but have repetitive behaviors.

There is no medical test — such as a blood test — to diagnose autism.

A series of behavioral and developmental tests are administered to come to a conclusion. My wife took our son to medical doctors and a psychologist for confirmation of our suspicions.

She sat there with my mother in the medical office to receive the news. Listening on the phone in a distant location, I went numb. All I wanted to do was hold my wife and comfort her. Yet I couldn't even do that.

Friends tried to comfort me with encouraging words, but I cried so much. Though very active in the base chapel, it was hard to preach and teach the Bible. How do I say God can heal and do miracles when I needed one desperately for my son?

However, I believe some of the best sermons and teachings are birthed out of

painful situations. I didn't want to be there, but I had to finish my deployment and get home to help.

Two months later I did, and the real work began. I learned all I could about autism so that I could be a better dad.

What really bothered me were all the hopes, dreams and expectations I had for him. I imagined us doing father-and-son things together. I wanted to see him playing sports, going to college, getting married and having his own family.

At that time I thought life was over for him. But I sold my son short. I didn't even know what type of person he would be. I allowed things that hadn't been determined yet to torture my mind.

The CDC says that 1 in 54 children have been diagnosed with autism, but there are surely more. Children in lower income areas and minorities are least likely to get diagnosed in a timely manner.

Early diagnosis, however, is important. There are therapies and medication that can help, but there is no cure for autism. It is important to talk to your child's doctor if you have concerns about ASD.

PARTNERS

My wife and I met in college through a mutual friend. We were dating other people at the time and didn't begin a relationship until after I was commissioned into the U.S. Air Force.

We made our long-distance relationship work, and got married after a year and a half of dating. We knew God had brought us together. After four years, we started enlarging our family.

I told my extended family we would have a boy first, and I was right. When my wife was pregnant with our son, I used



AUTISM

to pray over him all the time. I had my pastors, friends and family praying for a healthy delivery, healthy baby, no disease and no autism.

We were elated about our new addition to the family. My wife is a wonderfully analytical person who stays on top of everything important to our family. So she noticed our son wasn't meeting certain developmental milestones.

He wasn't talking at 15 months old. But the first sign of autism we noticed was our son's desire to line up his toys.

If you messed with his perfect line of cars, he would get extremely upset and have what is often called a "meltdown." He also color-coordinated his building blocks.

When we would hang out with our friends who had children the same age, we could clearly see that our son was way behind developmentally.

We invested serious time into speech and physical therapy. Yet we were in denial because we believed (by faith) that he would turn a corner and catch up.

He slowly started to meet some of his milestones, but I denied the obvious symptoms. I didn't want to believe what I was seeing.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, right? I hoped and prayed harder than before and anointed him with oil while he slept. One Sunday, I took him to the church altar for prayer. I even had the pastor lay hands on him.

I thought I was doing everything right. But my theology was challenged

during this early phase of our journey.

His diagnosis caused us to make changes. My wife's full-time job became taking our son to doctor's appointments and therapy. We are blessed with supportive networks of family and friends.

After a few years, we started to get into a rhythm with our son. Life became a little more manageable, and we decided we should have another child.

Having two children with autism is very rare (a chance of only 2–18 percent). Though reluctant, my wife decided we should try.

We found out soon after that we were expecting another boy. Immediately fear grabbed both of us since boys are more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls.

It was a tough pregnancy for my wife, but our son was born healthy — weighing nine pounds. We expressed our concerns to our doctor and were quick to pay attention to our baby's milestones.

Like clockwork, our second son hit some of his milestones. He talked pretty quickly, but had trouble with walking. We had to get braces for his feet.

He was very smart. But at 18 months old he began showing signs of autism.

We asked God some really "great" questions: "How could this happen to us twice?" "Really God? What did we do to deserve this?" "Come on, God. That is not fair."

However, we are the parents of two wonderful sons with autism. I wish I could

say that we were better the second time around, but it took an emotional toll on us as we watched our second son decline as he started getting older.

FAITH COMMUNITIES

We were not prepared for the challenges we would have when we went to worship with our fellow Christians. Here are three things we've learned that churches — and families with special needs — might consider:

1. *Christian communities need training on how to work with families with special needs.*

As a military family, we moved every two to three years to a new base and looked for a Christian community. Often, we chose a church based on its ability to work with our special needs children.

One of the most disappointing situations was the inadequacy of support in faith-based communities. People with disabilities can be stigmatized in the church.

The church tradition I grew up in believed in miraculous healings based on strong faith. If it didn't happen, the answer was that you did not believe strongly enough.

We enrolled our oldest son in a Christian preschool, but within three weeks had to take him out because the staff was unwilling to work with him. It was the first time we felt rejection in a Christian

community, but it wouldn't be the last.

Our children couldn't sit in the sanctuary because the music was too loud for them. Both were sensitive to sound and taste. When we put them in children's church, they couldn't sit still nor follow instructions.

Our children didn't have the skill sets to communicate their problems to us, but they were doing their best with what they understood. I once watched kids make fun of my son because he wouldn't talk. He just made a whining sound when something was wrong.

My heart broke when I saw this. The teacher stopped the kids from teasing him, but it still hurt to see this. It made me wonder what was happening when we weren't around.

2. Be sensitive to the specific needs of families.

One church we attended saw our pain and actually made a ministry for our special needs children. Again, I was deployed.

My wife made her way to church, but it was a struggle. The church didn't have children's worship that Sunday, and my wife couldn't take our son into worship because he was afraid of the sanctuary.

My wife was going to leave, but someone offered to help. The church then started a special needs ministry. Finally a

church stepped up and created a space for my family.

The people there made my family members feel like they were part of the church community. And that ministry remains strong today.

It was through the rejection and the lack of assistance that my wife started the Autism Faith Network that specializes in autism awareness in faith-based communities. The challenges our family faced birthed this ministry into existence. We have found purpose through our pain.

My wife saw a need that had to be addressed. She has been working diligently for five years creating products to help religious communities become sensitive to families with ASD members. She has been using social media platforms to network and spread the word widely.

3. Places of worship need to be accessible.

Christian communities cannot overlook persons and families with special needs. Some people simply don't go to church because they know the congregation has not made room for them to be there.

From the parking lot to the pulpit we must demonstrate that all are welcomed. It can be an enormous undertaking for some churches, but it can be done. It must be done.

We shouldn't be ashamed to have a church filled with people who have disabilities. It is not a negative reflection on our faith. It's a good thing to see diversity across all spectrums welcomed to the Christian community.

What we say has to match what we do and what we see. This is easier said than done. It will not happen if we are not willing to try. It will be tough.

Many faith communities are doing a wonderful job making space; we can learn from those leading the way. Financially, it will cost, but we have to demonstrate the love of Christ to all people.

GOOD LIFE

My wife and I have been through some incredibly tough times together. I couldn't imagine a better person with whom to fight the good fight of faith.

Our boys are wonderful young men. I can't wait to get home from work and see them. Their teachers let us know they are a joy to be around.

They give me hope. I don't know what the future holds for them, but I know they will be OK. My boys are far from perfect, but I couldn't imagine them any other way than they are now.

They are beautiful people. I've learned so much from each of them. How they see the world and interact with it reminds me of how wonderful life can be.

Both have their challenges, and the youngest has been diagnosed with Lennox Gastaut Syndrome — a very rare form of epilepsy with no cure. (I'll save that one for another story.)

It can be difficult being parents of children with special needs, yet also very rewarding. We have our high days and low days. But finding help from a community of faith makes a big difference. **NFJ**

—*Jamie Nash retired from the U.S. Air Force in 2015, and is a student at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology. He lives in the Atlanta area where he is a high school Air Force JROTC instructor and serves as an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Intern with Good Faith Media.*

'THE AUTISM PASTOR'

When we moved to Georgia, we found a nice faith community and settled in. We also found a good place to worship and were elated to see that congregation was adept at working with special needs children, especially those with ASD.

We learned about Lamar Hardwick (known as "the autism pastor") and became interested in his story. Diagnosed with autism at age 36, he is a pastor and a family man.

How about that!

Hardwick is the author of *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (2021, IVP). The book is "a practical and theological reconsideration of the church's responsibilities to the community of people with disabilities."

My wife's riveting interview with this pastor caused my hope to grow. I was reminded to not worry about things that haven't happened yet.

Our children's futures aren't determined by my fears. Their futures are theirs to determine. My role is to love and stand by them. Pastor Hardwick has been instrumental in helping us find needed hope.

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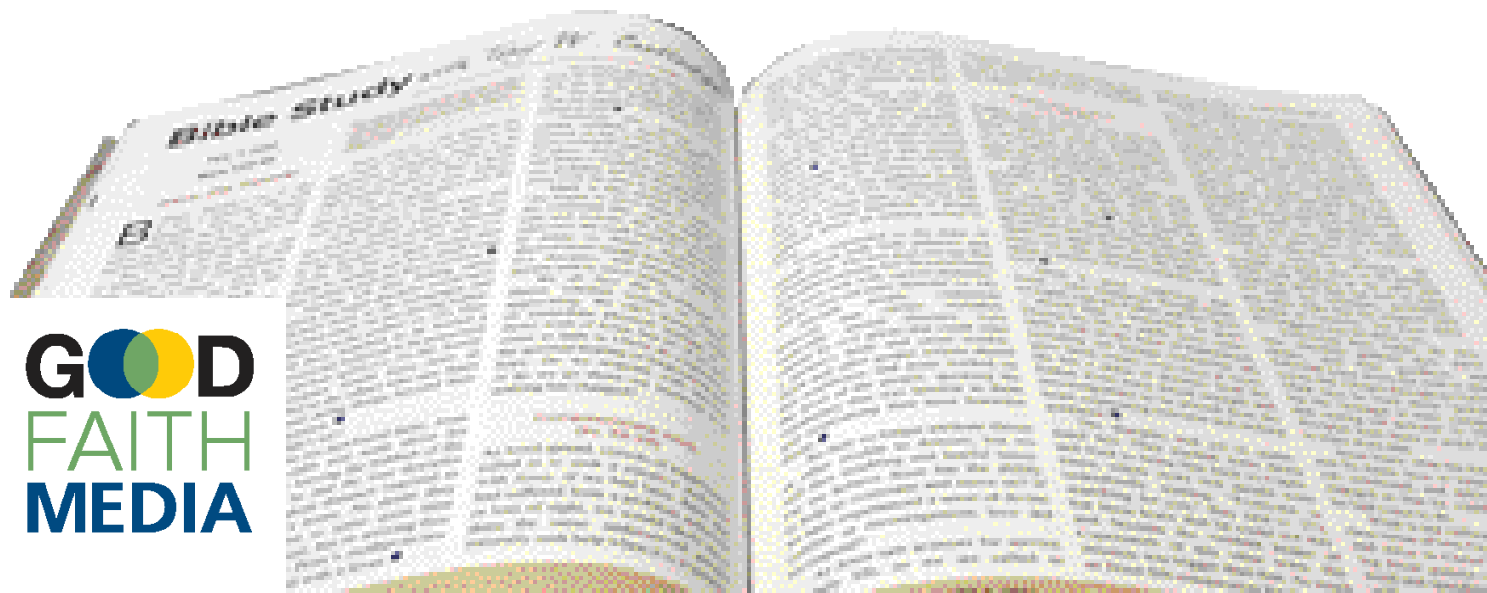
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GOOD
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Love, Sex, and Humanity

Why one book of the Bible is often ignored
— and what is missed

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Have you ever heard a sermon from the Song of Songs, or even participated in a Bible study that mentioned it? Among the 900 or so texts in the Revised Common Lectionary's three-year cycle, it shows up just once, and then is rarely chosen.

Let's face it: the little book scares people, so much that the Song of Songs barely made it into the Bible. It contains eight chapters and 117 verses, but not one of them mentions either God or Israel.

It has zero religious themes and not a single prayer. It says nothing about the covenant or the law.

Instead, the Song of Songs is frankly, exotically, erotically focused on human love, passion and intimacy with no specific mention of being married — or of sin, for that matter.

The song begins with "O let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1:2), and it ends with "Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!" (8:14).

A troublesome book

So how did that get into the Bible? The rabbis were not united, but ultimately followed the famous Rabbi Akiva, who said:

"Heaven forbid that there should be division in Israel about the holiness of the Song of Songs, for there is not one day in the whole of eternity that equals the one in which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest." (Mishna

Yadayim 3:5).

Two primary factors contributed to the book's ultimate acceptance. One is that a late editor attributed the poems to Solomon, who reportedly had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and was said to have written 1,005 songs (1 Kgs. 4:32, 11:3).

All of those numbers are exaggerated, but they gave Solomon quite the reputation as a poetic lover. The Song does mention Solomon a few times, but always in the third person, with someone else talking — or perhaps fantasizing — about him (3:6-11, 8:11-12).

The first chapter speaks of the lover as a king (1:4, 12), perhaps figuratively, but elsewhere he is portrayed as a shepherd or commoner who has to sneak around to see his lady fair — unexpected behavior for a monarch who had more wives and concubines than he could name.

Solomon could hardly have written the Song, but associating the book with him gave it an appearance of authority. The second thing making the popular poetry acceptable for scripture is that rabbis began to interpret the Song as an allegory, with the passionate lovers standing in for God and Israel.

Early Christian interpreters also struggled with the book, but simply stretched the allegory to a love relationship between Jesus and the church, sometimes pictured as the bride of Christ.

We can see how someone who is uncomfortable with sex in scripture could imagine the connection, and one can always argue for multiple layers of meaning in a text. But have you actually read the book? It's graphic. It's passionate. It's sexy. It is clearly not the kind of relationship that most of us think about having with God

or with Jesus.

Does everything in the Bible have to be about God and Israel, or Christ and the church? Can we grant that the scriptures can teach us helpful things other than the way to salvation?

The book of Proverbs is full of practical advice, and not all of it religious. Could it be possible that God wants us to know that we are created as sexual beings, and that is worth celebrating?

Could it be that the Song adds a note of needed balance to less positive messages about sexuality in the Bible?

A broader look

Consider the whole: The Song of Songs is a loose collection of from five to 50 different poems, depending on how they are counted. It does not tell a unified story, though some scholars have labored mightily to discern a cohesive plot and to identify speaking parts.

We can't be sure how the Song functioned in Israel's life and worship. Were selections used in weddings, or sung before special occasions, or recited for pleasure?

Today, Ashkenazi Jews read the Song on the Sabbath before Passover, and many Sephardic Jews read it on the eve of every Sabbath.

We can't fit the Song into a neat package any more than we can define love and tie it up with a bow. Perhaps it is best to regard it as a straightforward collection of fervent love songs that were passed down through the years and later collected in the form we now have, probably during the postexilic period.

The songs often speak not only of love, but also of forbidden love, of love that



Dante Gabriel Rosetti's "The Beloved," from 1865-1866. Image from the Tate Museum in London.

cannot be expressed in the public square, or of relationships that don't fit cultural norms. Several of the poems speak of lovers who are mismatched by society's standards, but who overcome obstacles to be together.

That theme would have had special resonance during the postexilic period, when many people were caught up in Ezra and Nehemiah's sometimes violent campaign to outlaw and annul intermarriage between "pure" Israelites who had been in exile and any of the ethnically mixed people who had not.

In that sense, the Song of Songs is an ancient version of "Romeo and Juliet" or "West Side Story."

The Songs celebrate the discovery of love, sexual awakening, and the ardent desire of couples who declare their passionate commitment to each other. The lovers

are not interested in casual sex or one-night stands, but long for a stable and open relationship.

In chapter 8, the woman says "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a signet upon your arm, for love is as strong as death, passion fierce as the grave" (8:6). That suggests deep devotion.

The Song includes poems in which both the man and the woman describe their partners, either from the top down or the bottom up (4:1-8, 5:10-16, 6:4-10, 7:1-5). They speak in metaphors that appeal to the imagination.

He sees hair cascading like mountain goats running down a slope, cheeks as red as pomegranate halves, breasts that bounce like fawns, and a garden of lilies below. She sees eyes white as milk, arms like jeweled gold, a torso of ivory with sapphires,

and legs like alabaster columns (5:10-16). Clearly, they were into each other.

In contrast to the patriarchal dominance portrayed elsewhere in scripture, the female lover plays a positive and powerful role in the Song. She is not a passive target of the man's desire. Rather, she appears just as bold as he in describing what she admires, what she wants, and how she plans to get it.

The maiden speaks of taking her lover to her mother's house and into her mother's bedchamber, alluding to female power and autonomy. The frequency with which she speaks suggests the distinct possibility that a woman could have written at least parts of the Song of Songs — and thus part of the Bible. Isn't that an interesting thought?

A love that cannot wait

Let's take a closer look at a fuller version of the one tiny text included in the lectionary: Song 2:8-13. The breathless poetry of chapter 2 describes an encounter involving a young woman and her beloved.

She describes herself as "A rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys" (v. 1), while the man calls her "a lily among brambles" (v. 2). We could call her "Lily."

She describes her beloved as "a gazelle or a young stag" (v. 9): the name "Buck" would fit his character.

The maiden declares to "the daughters of Jerusalem" that her beau is a rare find, "like an apple tree among the trees of the wood" (vv. 2-3). Apple trees that bear good fruit require careful cultivation, so finding one in the woods would be rare indeed.

And what about her beloved apple tree? "I sat in his shadow," she says, "and his fruit was sweet to my taste."

The image of shade suggests both protection from the sun and the delight of a secretive location. In the shade of her beloved, she offers a figurative description of their happy and obviously sexual encounter: "his fruit was sweet to my taste."

The notion of taste leads to v. 4, where the metaphor shifts to a "banqueting house" — literally, a "house of wine" — as a setting for the feast of love they share.

She asks for raisin cakes and apples to sustain her (v. 5), but her greatest desire is to be in her beloved's arms: "O that his left hand were under my head and that his right hand embraced me" (v. 6, in a PG-rated translation).

Enamored with amorous thoughts, the young woman calls on her girlfriends to swear that they will not "awaken or arouse love until it delights" (literally), or perhaps, "until it is ready" (v. 7, NRSV). This seems to be a caution that one should not move too quickly, before the time is right.

But she believed the time had arrived, as the woman exults in the sound of her beloved's voice and the sight of his approach (v. 8). Like a gazelle or a young stag (v. 9), she says, he comes "leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills."

Not surprisingly, sure-footed stags and gazelles were associated with male virility in the ancient Near East. The maiden is so anxious that she stands waiting at the window.

We get the impression that he has come secretly, trusting that she will be watching. With v. 10 the woman recites the words of her beloved.

He calls her to "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land" (vv. 10-12).

With the passing of winter rains, when the planting was done, springtime offered a window of opportunity for other pursuits (v. 11). Kings led their armies to war in the spring (2 Sam. 11:1), and that same freedom brought the man to his sweetheart, declaring that spring had arrived, and it was time for love.

He calls for his beloved to come away with him. He speaks of flowers and birdsong, fig trees and fragrant vineyards — lush outdoor settings for romance (vv. 12-13).

He pleads anxiously for her to come outside as a dove flies from its nest. He wants to see her face and hear her voice, "for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely" (v. 14).

The speaker in v. 15 is unclear, but apparently concerned about those who might oppose or interfere with their romance. "Catch the foxes," one of them urges, "the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom."

Foxes appear several times in the Hebrew Bible, and always in a negative sense (Judg. 15:4, Neh. 4:3, Ps. 63:10, Lam. 5:18, Ezek. 13:4). The couple believes the time is right, their vineyard is blooming, and they don't want any metaphorical foxes to ruin it.

Why would anyone threaten their blossoming love? Other parts of the Song point to possible ethnic or class differences. In 1:5 the woman says she is "black but beautiful," attributing her dark skin to being forced to work outdoors as a vine-keeper.

In chapter 5 she goes out at night in search of her beloved, but is caught by the night watchmen, and even beaten. Something about their relationship went against societal expectations.

Love didn't come easy, but the couple was determined to overcome. "My beloved is mine and I am his," she says. A variation of that resolute affirmation appears three times in the Song (2:16, 6:3, and 7:10).

The woman insists that she and her beloved belong together. With a description of intimacy barely veiled in metaphor, she says "he pastures his flock among the lilies" (NRSV) or alternately, "he grazes among the lilies" (NET, v. 16).

The woman clearly hopes they will spend the entire night together — "until the day breathes and the shadows flee" — and sleep is not her interest. "Turn, my beloved," she says, "be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft of the mountains" (v. 17).

If we miss her drift, we are not paying attention — or reading through willful blinders.

A gift that should be honored

There it is, there in the Bible, as shocking as some may find it.

So, what do we do with such a frank and erotic description of love between two people, especially two people who don't appear to be married, and may not be allowed to be? Why is this in scripture?

Should we see it as an unusually spicy allegory, reading the text as a story of God and Israel on a honeymoon in the wilderness, or of Christ and the church after the wedding feast?

If someone else had not suggested such a view, would you ever have caught that meaning in this very passionate poem? The allegorical approach may please the prudish, but the interpretation has to be imposed on a text that does not invite it.

Could we read this text, and the



An unnamed wood carving from Cuba. Photo by Tony Cartledge.

remainder of the Song, as a welcome biblical endorsement of the wonder and beauty of love, passion and sexual encounter as being among God's most beautiful and praiseworthy gifts to humankind?

This question matters, because the church, through the years, has been afraid of sex, and because of that, afraid of women.

Sexuality is powerful, it is appealing, and those who have led the church through the years — nearly always men — have sought to stifle and control it, sidelining or oppressing women along the way.

Beyond matters of gendered dominance, some church leaders have also promoted Ezra and Nehemiah's position that matches between people of different ethnic backgrounds should be forbidden, despite the Song's inclusive love stories. For many years, it was illegal.

People speaking for the church have likewise insisted, and many still do, that the only acceptable understanding of sexuality is found in traditional heterosexual roles, and anything else was likewise made against the law.

The traditional "solution" to the scary subject of sex has been to insist on rigid rules about acceptable intimacy.

Some churches continue to promote so-called "conversion therapy" for young people who believe their God-given sexuality varies from the norm, even though the practice has been shown to be harmful, tearing people down rather than building them up. A recent study showed that people subjected to such programs have 92 percent greater odds of lifetime suicidal ideation.

But that is not the church's only concern with sex. Some churches promote such a strict purity culture that they connect a young person's entire sense of self-worth with their virginity.

We can understand the ideal of chastity before marriage: it's one of many standards we may aspire to, but often don't live up to. Falling short in many areas may not bother us much, but failing to meet the ideal of chastity is often portrayed a permanent stain that can ruin one's life.

For all its good intentions, programs



A ring and necklace with an inscription from Song of Songs 6:3. Photo by Tony Cartledge.

such as "True Love Waits" have pressured untold thousands of young teenagers to make solemn vows of chastity well before most of them have even been tempted to do otherwise. The burden of enforcement, for the most part, is put on the young women.

As young people mature physically and their hormones rage, they may not live up to that embedded ideal, resulting in overwhelming shame that can follow them for years. Any therapist can witness to how often they have dealt with it.

Feelings of guilt may also lead young adults into marriages that are doomed to fail. They have been led to believe that the only way to keep God happy is to marry the first person they have sex with: they have magically become "one flesh" and are thus spoiled goods for anyone else.

Those who fail to remain "pure" often fall away from the Christian community altogether, seeking to avoid constant reminders of shame and failure. Is that what the church should be about?

Could it be that the Song of Songs can teach us something here? Could it be a witness that sexuality is a sacred and deep-seated part of our identity that needs to be affirmed, to be examined, and to be expressed in ways that build people up instead of tearing them down?

Such recognition does not grant us a free pass to go out and do whatever we want, or to offer such passes to our youth, but it does mean we should be able to

engage the subject with grace so we can grow into the sexual aspect of our human being without undue shame. It is a crucial part of learning to love ourselves and live fully into becoming the people God created us to be.

The Song's celebration of love, even when it goes against the church or society's grain, is a reminder that there is no one way to own and express our sexuality, whether we are married or single, in a relationship or not.

What we cannot do is ignore our sexuality: we must make choices about what we do with it. Even a voluntary vow of chastity for religious service is recognition of the power of sexuality and a conscious commitment to channel it in other ways.

If we learn anything from this text, let it be this: God made us as human beings, as sexual beings, and God made all things good.

As in every area of our lives, our calling is to appreciate God's good gifts and use them in loving ways that promote our own growth and relate to others in ways that build them up for the good of all.

This ancient text is a celebration: the protagonists of the poem consider each other to be rare and cherished finds to be loved and enjoyed. Surely that kind of passionate devotion has something sacred about it, something worthy of poetry and song — and even of scripture. **NFJ**

PAINTING A DIFFERENT PICTURE

Artist seeks to ‘transform injustice’ through striking images

AN INTERVIEW
BY STARLETTE THOMAS

“Transforming Injustice!” is a watercolor series for a watershed moment in history.

Due to camera phones and increased national news coverage, many people are taking another look at the senseless deaths of African Americans at the hands of police officers. Kathy Manis Findley is one such person.

A retired Baptist minister, avid blogger and artist, she is using her brush to paint a different picture, focused on injustice and white privilege. Her blogs and artwork can be found at kalliopekathryne.com.

Recently Kathy and I discussed her work and what she hopes it bears witness to. The following interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

NFJ: What does it mean to transform injustice, and what role does art play?

KMF: Society has continually tried to reform racism. It seems that failing at reforming so many times would teach us that we don’t need reformation; we need

transformation.

We cannot simply protest against racial injustice or pray for its end or demand that our systems change. The evil of racial injustice must be transformed, both within each individual heart and within the systems that have continually perpetuated racial division and hate.

As for art, it can bypass the outward and go deeper into our spirit where emotions live. Art can enhance a transformative process in us because the art could stir us, rearrange our inner responses to injustice, and open the door to the place where we can be transformed.

Art can incite our passion and our compassion.

NFJ: What gave you the idea for the series, “Five watercolor paintings portraying scenes of protest and cries of lament”?

KMF: The idea emerged out of Alliance of Baptists’ prayer vigil on Zoom. We prayed and lamented. We listened to the seemingly unending list of names of murder victims.



After the reading, the leaders offered what I can only call “an invitation.” They asked us to type in the chat session what we would do personally to stand against injustice.

Recovering from a recent kidney transplant, every act of advocacy I thought of was met with, “I can’t do that.” But then

I asked myself, “Well, then, what can you do?”

Immediately, I typed into the chat that I would create a series of five watercolor paintings that would capture some of the tragedies and emotions of the horrendous season we were living.

NFJ: This series centers around the death of George Floyd and the world’s response. Why does his death hold so much meaning for you?

KMF: I am the white mother of a black son and the grandmother of three black grandsons. Floyd’s brutal murder at the hands of a white Minneapolis police officer has deeply affected not only my commitment to racial justice, but also my mother’s heart.

I recall a conversation we had with Jonathan when he was 17. I had asked him about racism he had experienced.

“Mama,” he said, “you have no idea! The police stop me all the time. I wasn’t speeding or doing anything. I stopped at a stop sign, and a police car pulled up beside [me and my friends]. We didn’t know what was going on.”

“The two officers pulled all of us out of the car and pushed us to the ground, face down with our legs and arms spread out while they searched us and the car. Nothing was in the car except our basketball uniforms.”

Instantly, my heart began to ache. I



“Transforming Injustice!” A Watercolor Series
Watercolor #4: “They’re Still Not Hearing Us!”



“Transforming Injustice!” A Watercolor Series

Watercolor #3: “Refiner’s Fire!”

felt the burning sensation of anger rising from within me, and I started weeping.

NFJ: Each painting includes an opportunity for lament, meditation and prayer. What do you want this series to say to participants?

KMF: I hope the series will be more than art appreciation. Primarily, it is designed to create honest dialogue among white people, and perhaps that dialogue will enable participants to look more deeply within themselves and the racist parts of themselves.

They would participate in racial identity caucusing groups and be challenged to confront the effects of internalized racial superiority. Identity caucusing groups for black and brown participants will enable them to create a safe space for confronting

the effects of internalized racial oppression. The time for in-depth dialogue, meditation, lament and prayer for both groups will move them to a deeper place, in the soul where inner transformation can begin.

These spiritual components in the curriculum set it apart from other racial justice studies for congregations.

NFJ: What is ahead for this series?

KMF: If the curriculum catches on and is being used in congregations, I would like to edit it and create two separate versions so it is more specifically relevant for each caucusing group. I have entertained the idea of recruiting test groups willing to spend five sessions to lead the curriculum, with the ability to consult with me throughout the study.

The full curriculum is available at [\[opekathryne.com/transforming-injustice\]\(http://opekathryne.com/transforming-injustice\). An introductory video and downloadable guides are available at that site too.](http://kalli-</p>
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The five modules focus on provocative words and phrases like empower, transcend, set free, liberate, evolve, release, unbind, unchain and transform. With these words and phrases as catalysts, the “Transforming Injustice!” leader’s guides include the paintings, narrative, dialogue prompts, scripture, prayers of lament, guided reflection and jpeg files of full-page art that can be printed or used virtually.

Leaders are invited to download one or all five modules in the “Transforming Injustice!” series. Persons may also reach me (kathymfindley@gmail.com) for questions, consultation about the series, or to invite me to join them virtually to speak/Q&A or facilitate all five study modules. **NFJ**

FAITHFUL & ENGAGED

Reflecting on a long, shared ministry journey

BY JACK GLASGOW

A 22-year-old, first-year seminary student interviewed with a committee from Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C., in September 1977. An Atlanta native and Georgia Tech graduate with no ministry experience — and at that point about two weeks of theological education — he doubted the interview would lead to much.

The committee traveled 18 miles to the seminary and interviewed multiple candidates that night. The young would-be minister worried that, even if he was called to the church, it might not be good for his grades in Greek class.

On the first Sunday in October the seminarian was unanimously called as part-time minister of youth and education. The position involved working with children, youth and Sunday school, and assisting Pastor Charles Edwards in caring for the congregation. Taking 18 semester hours and working 25 hours a week seemed reasonable at the time.

HESITATION

The young minister had only one hesitation. He called his pastor back in Atlanta to express his concern: “I like the people, but they seem more Episcopalian than Baptist to me.” The church worshiped in a liturgical manner quite foreign to his experience.

As communion was served that first Sunday in October, he discovered the church had women deacons, a possibility that had never crossed his mind with his church experience limited to traditional Southern Baptist churches.

“You really need to get some ministerial experience,” his pastor wisely counseled. “The Zebulon church is giving you the chance.”

He explained Charleston and Sandy



Creek traditions and said liturgical churches that included women in ministry could indeed be Baptist, adding: “Plus, you won’t be there long, three years at most.”

Well, I was the seminarian and my pastor was right about the experience in ministry being just what I needed. However, he could not have been more wrong about my tenure.

I have served ZBC for more than 44 years — 40 of those as pastor. My retirement will begin the end of January 2022.

TRANSITION

I could not have enjoyed my four years as a staff minister more. Charles Edwards was a marvelous mentor. The youth group was an exceptional group of young people who taught me every bit as much as I taught them.

Adults of the church embraced me and appreciated my ministry. Had I not stayed at Southeastern Seminary for a fourth year, working on a Master of Theol-

ogy in Christian ethics, I am sure I would have left Zebulon Baptist in 1980.

But in the spring of 1981 Dr. Edwards left for Winston-Salem and the church asked if I would serve as interim pastor through the summer. I agreed and had my first experience at preaching every week.

As I learned, I enjoyed the pastorate with its meetings, visits, hospital calls, weddings, funerals and outreach. I wondered if my life plan might be changing from a desire to get a Ph.D. and teach to a new openness to be a pastor.

The Pastor Search Committee had visited some great candidates. But in the fall of 1981 they were unanimous in asking me to be their pastor on a permanent basis. Transitions from staff to pastor do not always go well. So I set the bar high.

If this could not be a unanimous church decision, I privately decided to say “no.” I did not want to serve a divided church. The call was without dissent and I guess, “the rest is history.”

Forty years of serving as pastor of Zebulon Baptist has been a delightful journey. I love the Church — the body of Christ — and my local church, the good folks at ZBC. No congregation could have been more open, affirming and accepting of pastoral ministry and leadership.

There were times I came close to saying “yes” to another congregation to become their pastor. But each time the call to stay was always stronger than the call to leave. There have been no regrets about staying with one congregation for 44 years.

Even now, my retirement plans were not made due to a lack of passion and energy for ministry. I simply felt the Lord leading me to set a finish line for my ministry here — one that would motivate me to sprint to the end.

I did not want to keep being pastor in any reduced or diminished way. I wanted to leave the church strong and thriving.

The real question in most minds, I imagine, is “How did you do it? How did you end up staying in one place from 1977 until 2022?”

There are many parts to that answer. I will start with one that is likely the most significant: I have loved these people, and they have loved me.

I have tried to emphasize to the staff that this congregation will embrace your ministry if they are sure you love them. This congregation has stood with me through the deaths of both my parents — who were in their 50s — with cancer; through a painful separation and divorce; and through my growing pains and mistakes.

They have celebrated with me my wedding to Barbara, my significant anniversaries, the birth of children and grandchildren, and many other life milestones. I have loved them through their times of grief, brokenness, disappointment, illness and fear. We have celebrated together the holy days of the church, the ordinances of the Lord’s Supper and baptism, groundbreakings and first days in new facilities, weddings, births, graduations and funerals for the saints.

We loved one another at the beginning of this long journey; we have loved one another to the journey’s end.



COMMUNITY

It has helped to serve a growing church in a wonderful location. Zebulon is a small suburban town east of Raleigh. It is a diverse community and a good place to live.

There have been significant changes on our campus over four decades. Not a single building that was here when I came in 1977 still stands. We have purchased a residence, an empty lot, a funeral home, and the largest part of a shopping center that was anchored by a Piggly Wiggly.

The size of our land holding has tripled. We have built beautiful facilities — a children’s and youth education building, a sanctuary, and that renovated shopping center for offices, adult education and fellowship hall with a kitchen. Our planning processes, capital campaigns and building new facilities have been times of growing commitment and ministry expansion.

There is no way that I could have done the same job for 40 years. The work changes with changing times. The congregation has always embraced vision processes that help us adapt ministry to the times and situation in our community.

I have served as pastor in seven-year cycles — a couple of years of intentional discernment followed by four to five years of carrying out the discerned vision and a

little time for reflection and evaluation.

I was always less concerned about decisions going my way and more concerned with decisions being made by a healthy process. There have been staff members I wanted that we did not call; some I was reluctant to hire that we did; and even some huge decisions made I simply was not on board with yet but the church supported.

In the early decision-making process I opposed buying the shopping center. I thought we were extending our debt too far. The church not only bought the building, but they also ended up naming it for me. (I do question their judgment on that one.)

But the process was open and transparent, and I was soon on board. I think that, ultimately, the church made the right call. Their willingness to design and embrace our unique ministry with its Administrative Deacons, Congregational Care Deacons and Ministry Team Deacons — as opposed to a more typical committee structure — is a testimony to their willingness to be innovative and adaptive.

It has also helped that I admire this church. When did this small Baptist church ordain its first women deacons? 1939! When did they decide on an open baptism policy? 1937!

Why did they do this? Because they

thought it was the right thing to do.

I admire their love of beautiful and Christ-centered worship through the liturgical year. They have inspired me to be creative and passionate about worship and preaching.

Since 1989 they have allowed me to work with my wife as our minister of music and senior adults. The partnership has worked wonderfully. Forty years in and I still love the worship ministry.

LEADERSHIP

So much of my denominational service — working to oppose the Southern Baptist Convention’s fundamentalist takeover in the 1980s, trying to preserve the North Carolina Baptist Convention in the 1990s, participating in the creation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in that decade, and giving leadership to CBFNC and CBF Global in the past two decades — has been in no small part my standing up for this very principled congregation.

Zebulon Baptists are Christians with courage and conviction. It has been a privilege to represent them and stand up for them.

They have also given me their full support to do this type of work. That has energized me and made it much more enjoyable to have such a long tenure. They have been proud for me to be an officer of the state convention, to serve on CBF Coordinating Councils in North Carolina and nationally, to be moderator of both organizations — and to serve on, and in some cases lead, the boards of marvelous organizations such as the Baptist Joint Committee, Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith and Good Faith Media.

They have been equally willing for me to invest in the community — speaking to athletes at pre-game meals, leading the booster club, serving on the economic development team and helping on various short-term community assignments.

I appreciate the congregation’s commitment to serving its community and being strong ministry partners with CBF and CBFNC. I like that persons in our community think of Zebulon Baptist as a first place to turn when they have needs.

I like our significant investment in local work: Boys and Girls Club; a thrift store; a domestic violence ministry; a health clinic for the uninsured or underinsured; a school readiness ministry for parents and preschoolers; Meals on Wheels; Habitat for Humanity; and significant partnerships with local elementary, middle and high schools. It was easy to feel that our ministry was making a difference through the years.

The congregation has provided me working relationships with exceptional lay leaders and wonderful staff ministers over the past 40 years. How lucky I was to have as back-to-back youth ministers, Renee Owen and Chris Aho, now both serving with CBF. They are representative of the quality we have enjoyed on this staff.

Working with lay leaders has truly been a pleasure. I say with sincerity quite often that my best friend is our moderator — because those who have given significant leadership to our congregation have without exception been trusted friends with whom we could share leadership in a spirit of respectful collaboration.

REFLECTION

Now that my time here is coming to a close, I find myself reflecting on this experience. What biblical character has this unique story resembled? Have I been like Peter, Paul, David, Abraham or Joseph?

Interestingly, I tell our people that I resonate with the Moses story in that I feel I have led them these 40 years through the wilderness. We have shared so much on this journey. We have made mistakes. We have experienced ministry success.

But we never reached Canaan. It has not been the Promised Land — not yet. That is Joshua’s work — the work of the woman or man who will be my successor.

My ministry began with a denominational takeover and a political “Southern Strategy” that included politicizing our Baptist family. I have served the church through decades of theological and political arguments, with the lines between the politics and the theology increasingly blurred.

For 40 years churches have strug-

gled, declined, and lost the confidence of many, especially young people. We have taken backward steps on race relations, social justice for all persons, and providing economic hope for the poor.

The culture has become increasingly uncivil. Political divisions widen. Media sources make the divide worse and the anger more intense. Yet God has led us through the wilderness.

It has been my privilege to journey with an imperfect, yet amazing congregation. We have walked safely and sometimes very effectively through this wilderness. Along the way I believe we have learned to love our God and our neighbor more and better.

What else could one ask of a 40-year journey? I certainly could not envision the “bell lap” of this distance run being during a pandemic. But the past almost two years have been a wonderful time of ministry.

Zebulon Baptists have remained faithful and engaged. Staff and lay leaders have been resilient and incredibly hard-working. We have sought from the beginning to provide as much ministry as possible for our congregation while doing it as safely and responsibly as we could.

What a special opportunity it is to lead a church you dearly love through the uncharted wilderness of COVID-19. We have learned how to make hard decisions that must balance risk and return. God has blessed us and protected us.

I was actually taken back when reviewing our church’s annual letter and noting we had 29 additions in the past 12 months, with 17 transfers of membership and 12 professions of faith. I saw that our giving increased and reflected on our mission and ministry highlights.

The last year may have been, surprisingly, the best one. We have walked well through this wilderness called COVID. Thanks be to God! **NFJ**

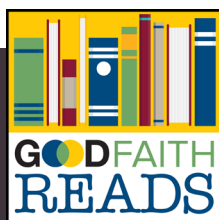
—Jack Glasgow is pastor of Zebulon (N.C.) Baptist Church and chair of the Good Faith Media Governing Board.

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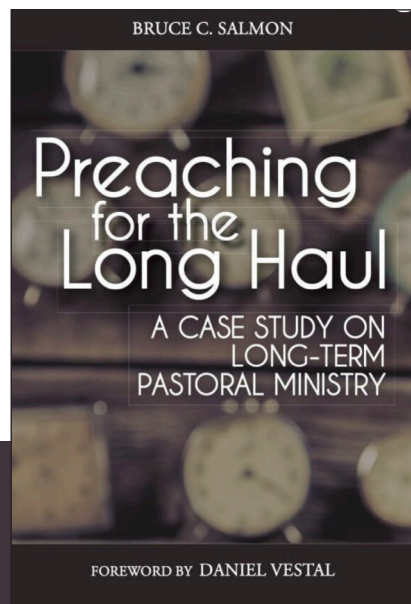
The biggest challenge for some pastors is the preaching. How does one come up with something “new” to say every Sunday? Yes, the Bible is a vast trove of sermonic material, but the same preacher Sunday after Sunday struggles to interpret a fresh vision of biblical truth that stimulates the mind and touches the heart.

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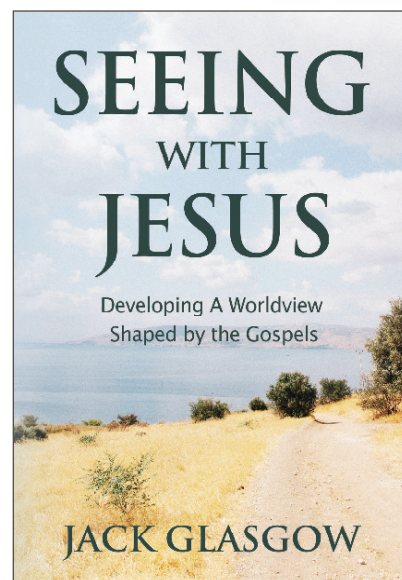
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This book (available at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore) is made possible through a Baugh Foundation gift to support the continuing development of the Jesus Worldview Initiative.

Questions Christians ask scientists

How do faith and science — which seem so different — come together in your daily practice of the Christian life?

BY PAUL WALLACE

As a physics professor and pastor, I am always moving between the college and the church, between the science building and the sanctuary. I have physics days, and I have Jesus days.

But I do not contain two distinct separate halves. I have no hard analytical half that awakens on physics days while my softer, more loving half snoozes — and I have no compassionate pastoral half that shows up on Jesus days while my fact-happy half takes the day off.

Faith and science intersect in my life all the time. To explain one way this happens, I'd like to tell you about a fellow named Samuel Hubbard Scudder, an entomologist who worked in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1874 he composed an essay titled "Learning to See" in which he told a humorous story of his first interactions with perhaps the greatest American scientist of the time, zoologist Luis Agassiz, at Harvard University.

Scudder was a newly-enrolled graduate student who wished to work under Agassiz. He entered the great professor's office and told him of his plans. After a short chat Agassiz agreed and asked, "When would you like to start?" Scudder replied, "Now."

Pleased, Agassiz reached into a jar of alcohol, pulled out a dead fish, and laid it in a tray before Scudder. "Now look at this fish," he said, "and in a little while I will ask you what you have seen."

Scudder was to use only his hands and eyes. Optical instruments such as magnifying glasses were forbidden. The professor left the aspiring scientist alone with the very ordinary and very dead fish.

"In 10 minutes I had seen all there was to see in that fish," writes Scudder. So he stood up and began searching for the



professor, but he was not to be found.

Unsettled but not knowing what else to do, he returned to the fish and spent the rest of the morning investigating it, picking it up, looking at it from every angle, poking his finger

down its throat, even counting the scales at one point. After some time he began to find the fish loathsome.

Noon arrived and Agassiz had still not returned, so Scudder placed the creature in its jar and went to lunch, smelling of fish and yellow alcohol, and came back after an hour. The professor had been there, someone said, but had gone for the afternoon.

So Agassiz devoted two more hours to the fish. He had just started drawing it when Agassiz walked in.

"Well, what is the fish like?" Agassiz asked, and listened as Scudder outlined what he fancied was a rather detailed description of the fish's gills, eyes, lips, fins, teeth, tail, and so forth, based on his several hours of observation.

"You have not looked very carefully," Agassiz said with obvious disappointment. "Look again!"

Scudder, desperate now, returned to the fish, which at this point he described as "hideous." After a few more hours he spoke again with Agassiz, who was again disappointed. "You have not seen the fish," he said.

Eventually Scudder settled down and fully devoted himself to the project. In the end he spent three full days paying attention to the poor dead fish, and he never stopped discovering new things about it.

This simple act of paying attention lies at the foundation of all science, and it requires that we set aside what we think the

world is like, what we'd rather be doing, and any personal agendas we might have. It requires that we open ourselves to what lies present before us.

All the scientific work I have done, from the nuclear lab to the NASA conference room to the physics classroom, requires that I pay attention: to data, to nature, to patterns. It also demands that I pay attention to colleagues and students, for the act of paying attention, so essential for scientific work, is not limited to the non-human world.

When I was in college I hung out a lot in the student center. Some Baptist students discovered I was not a Christian, so they tried to turn me into one.

I made an easy target, sitting there with my coffee and my physics books. It became a game. They would sit down and try to argue me into believing in God and their religious system, whatever it was, and I refused.

It was fun, arguing. I could go for hours, and in the courtroom of my mind I won every argument every time.

One day a new Christian person sat down with me and I could not argue with her. Her name was Elizabeth. I could not argue with Elizabeth, and that wasn't because she was good at arguing but because she didn't care about arguing. She had no interest in arguing with me, so she didn't.

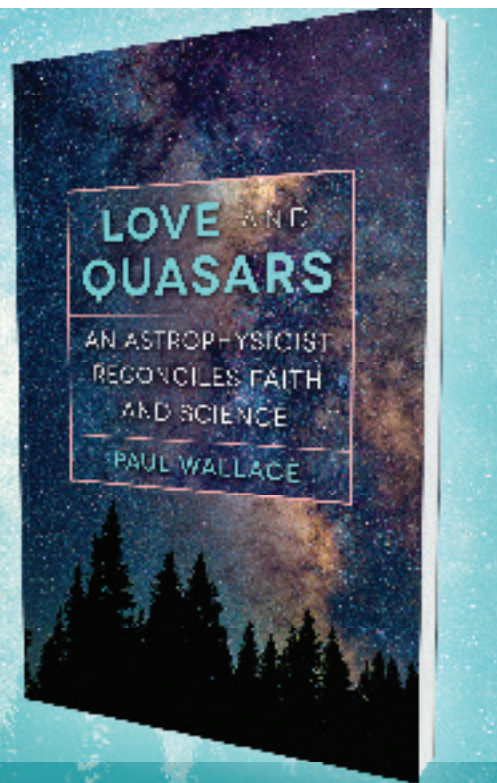
"The practice of paying attention is the first act of scientific inquiry and the first act of religious life, and on my good days this is a distinction without a difference."

LOVE AND QUASARS

AN ASTROPHYSICIST RECONCILES FAITH AND SCIENCE

“Wallace offers absolute fidelity to the sciences while speaking authentically to people of faith.”

—MIKE McHARGUE



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What she did was pay attention to me. She played no games and attempted no sales jobs. She did not try to convert me.

It was a pretty pure thing—two bright open eyes and one bright open mind, right across the table, looking at me through the coffee steam.

I don't know if you have ever had the experience of someone really paying attention to you, out of the blue and without warning, but I can tell you it's a little disarming. It's a little baffling.

It's a little bewildering. It's a little irresistible. There is no gift like the gift of one's full attention.

It was a gift because she simply offered herself to me. She had no schemes, no need to be right, no need to turn me into a Christian. She was interested in me so she paid attention to me, and this year we celebrated our 30th anniversary.

When I am at church, whether teaching or leading worship or listening to a parishioner, I strive to pay attention to others in the same way Elizabeth paid attention to me. I try to love others in that same way, because to pay attention is to love.

Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asked, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye” (Matt. 7.3-5).

On the day he walked into Professor Agassiz's office, Samuel Scudder was already a successful student of zoology. He thought he knew what a fish looked like. Maybe the log in his eye was his overconfidence, or his impatience, or his desire to impress his new mentor.

Maybe he had personal plans for those three days and wanted to be done with the dead fish. But such logs only kept him from seeing what was in front of him.

I try daily to remove these same logs — my ego, my desire to get on to the next thing, my need to impress other people — so that I might think clearly about science and theology.

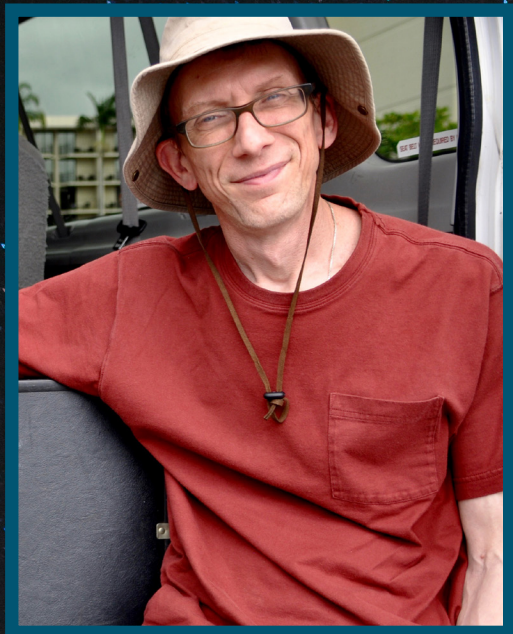
When they tried to convert me to Christianity, my fellow students came at

me with their own logs: their desire to be right, their need to win me for Christ and prop up their own view of the world, their impulse to do good. But these agendas blocked their view of who was sitting right there in front of them.

The fundamental act of both science and faith is to be present with what or who is before us, to really see them, and to remove the logs from our eyes so that we may see the world clearly. The practice of paying attention is the first act of scientific inquiry and the first act of religious life, and on my good days this is a distinction without a difference. **NFJ**

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.

BRINGING A BOOK TO LIFE!



Astrophysicist/minister Paul Wallace is compiling, editing and expanding on his popular column, "Questions Christians Ask Scientists," that appears in each issue of *Nurturing Faith Journal*.

The result will be a new book published next year by Nurturing Faith — the book imprint of Good Faith Media.

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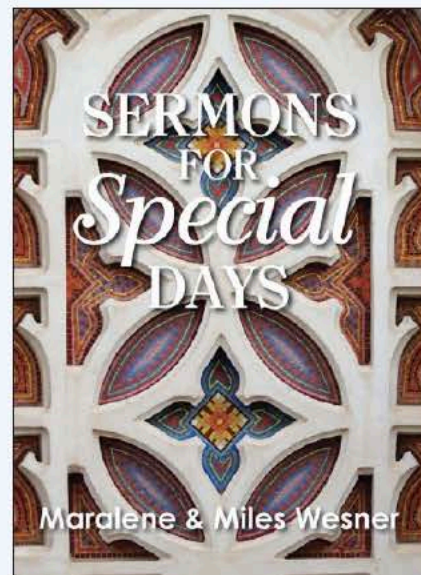
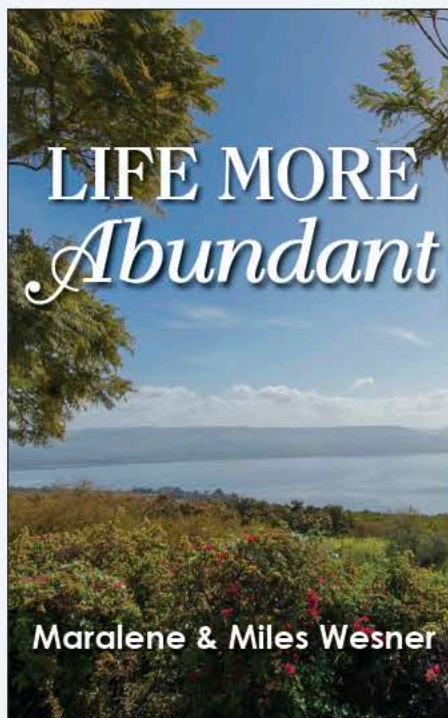
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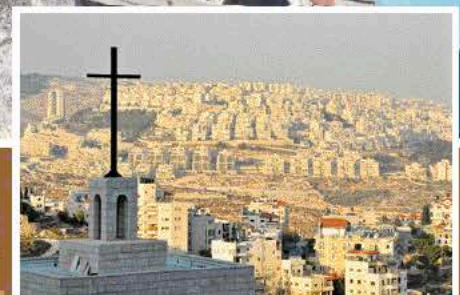
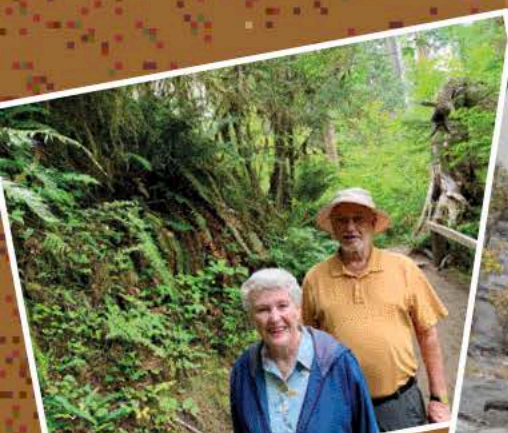
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