

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2021

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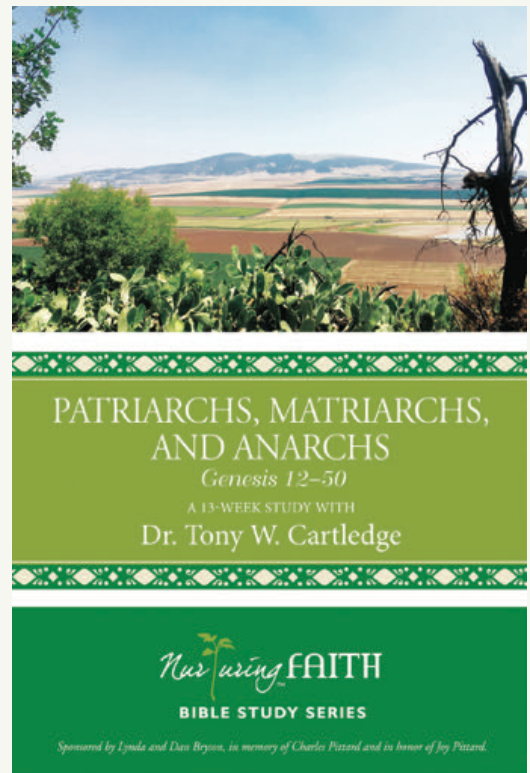
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Nurturing Faith Journal provides relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

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

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

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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. David Turner, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., and former Nurturing Faith board chair, at Olympic National Park in 2019. **Another Good Faith Experience to the Pacific Northwest is set for July 23-30, 2022.** Check out upcoming experiences at goodfaithmedia.org/group-experiences.

‘ON THE EDGE’

Through education, ministry and publishing, the Wesners keep turning on lights

STORY AND PHOTO
BY MITCH RANDALL

IDABEL, Okla. — Maralene and Miles Wesner are Oklahoma educators who have shared their passion for learning and teaching with countless students and churches across the Southern Plains for more than half a century.

Maralene describes her life with her husband Miles as “living on the edge.”

While not sure what to think about her opening comment, I quickly realized I was in the presence of greatness.

MAVERICKS

For more than five decades the Wesners have lived and worked in Idabel, Okla., where they taught in public schools and universities. In addition to their full-time employment, Miles served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Tom, in the southeast-most community in Oklahoma, for more than 50 years.

When asked about such longevity in one location, Miles broke into a wry smile and simply quipped, “We don’t like to move.”

From their humble and quaint home in southwest Oklahoma, the Wesners not only shaped the lives of their students and parishioners but also have influenced thousands of children all around the world.

After attending Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, the couple moved to Idabel in 1957. Knowing their propensity for always pushing boundaries, they made a decision early on that would shape the future of their lives and so many others,

“We are mavericks, so I knew we needed to make a living doing something else,” said Maralene. “I did not want to be at the mercy of a church.”



“Jesus taught people how to think, not what to think.”

As fierce advocates for education, the decision for a vocation was simple: They would become teachers.

Maralene taught in public schools, while Miles taught psychology at a local university.

PHONICS

Early into their educational careers, Maralene noticed something troubling about her students. They were struggling with phonics.

In that period of time, teaching phonics was a simple process of repetitive exercises called “See and Say.” Maralene knew educators could do better for their students.

So, these two educators, the Wesners, began working on a new method for teaching phonics. Combining the latest teaching techniques with the new technology of audiovisuals, they developed Educational Electronics, Inc.

The program was an instant success — producing immediate results for students. Using colorful and creative audiovisuals, students remained engaged in the learning process.

Yes, students were actually having fun while they learned.

The program was so successful that an Oklahoma City company bought the concept to begin distributing it across the state. As the popularity of the program expanded, the program was used by educators all across the U.S. It even made it as far away as Costa Rica.

HOOKED

Because of this revolutionary way of teaching and learning phonics, Maralene was named Oklahoma Teacher of the Year in 1975. She was the first kindergarten teacher ever honored with the award.

Because of her disdain for meetings and public events, Maralene’s school superintendent made Miles promise she would attend the ceremony. They attended together, appreciative of the recognition.

When the owner of the distribution company died, another company swooped in to purchase the entire program. Readers likely have heard of that company — called “Hooked on Phonics.”

That’s correct: Maralene and Miles were the precursors to the world’s most famous educational method for teaching phonics.

However, the Wesners’ passion for education did not stop at the classroom doors. They took their deep desire to implement higher standards of education to church.

DISCIPLES

One of the couple’s favorite Bible verses comes from Hosea 4:6, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”

“Jesus did not preach; he taught,” said Miles. “The church is not charged with going out to make clones, but disciples.”

“That means students,” Maralene clarified.

The Wesners believe the church is in decline today simply by getting away from the example of Rabbi Jesus.

“Jesus taught people how to think, not what to think,” said Miles.

The Wesners believe so strongly in that concept, they implemented it into the ministry at the Baptist church in Tom. They collaborated on creating the weekly sermons — with Maralene as the primary writer while consulting with Miles.

She joked: “We were always talking about the sermons. I would write and edit them in longhand. I would often have to corner Miles when he was not busy, like in the car or bathtub.”

Together, they have created a plethora of incredible sermons over the course of their 50 years in ministry.

Being educators, however, they did not stop after Miles preached on Sunday mornings. Maralene would lead a discussion group on Sunday evening, assessing and talking about the sermon.

Parishioners were told they were not expected to agree with everything the Wesners said in the sermon, so they wanted

to give members a chance to dialogue about it.

On one occasion, the local Baptist director of missions attended the Sunday evening class. After the discussion and hearing parishioners’ questions, he jokingly responded: “Wow, I never realized you were supposed to think in church.”

Of course, that is exactly what Maralene and Miles expected of their students.

When asked about their favorite part of ministry — both in the classroom and in the church — they gave the same response: “When the light goes off in someone’s mind.”

There is nothing better than seeing students “get it,” they said. Once they “get it,” students often pursue education for the rest of their lives.

PUBLISHING

Maralene and Miles have entered into a publishing collaboration with Good Faith Media to make available numerous volumes developed from their many years in education and ministry.

Their first book, *Sermons for Special Days* (Nurturing Faith, 2021), is a collection of 51 sermons from the dynamic duo — created throughout their careers for special moments on the calendar.

This book is, as future volumes by the Wesners will be, available from the online bookstore at goodfaithmedia.org.

The couple considers a most important sermon each year to be the one delivered on graduation Sunday. With family and friends from the community present to celebrate the graduation of their students, Maralene and Miles seek to empower these new listeners with the ability to think for themselves in pursuit of faith.

In other words, on those Sundays they try to turn on the light for all who are present.

After a lifetime of educating students and churchgoers, Maralene and Miles continue to see the “lights” they have encouraged to shine brightly in the world. So many students and parishioners have benefited from their creativity and passion.

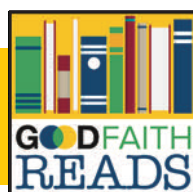
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Worth Repeating

“Where we love Jesus, **barbecue** and you”

Motto of Holy Smoke BBQ in Huntsville, Texas, that supports the ministries of New Zion Missionary Baptist Church next door (*Texas Monthly*)

“Never have so many people spoken so loudly and so long about something of which they know so little.”

Pastor Willy Rice of Clearwater, Fla., in a sermon to the Southern Baptist Convention, addressing Critical Race Theory (Chris Astle)

“I love it when preachers with state of the art sound and light systems and satellite uplinks and podcasts and Twitter feeds and Facebook pages and wireless mikes and designer sneakers rail against the evils of modernism.”

Consultant and former pastor John Hewett (Facebook)

“As followers of Jesus, we are for all people everywhere — without exception... A life of following Jesus of Nazareth and nationalism cannot co-exist.”

Jason Elam, host of *The Messy Spirituality* podcast (patheos.com)

“Our problem is not difference, nor even disagreement, but disdain — a settled, scoffing contempt toward the other.”

Pastor and author Duke Kwon (Twitter)

“Spiritual maturity is marked with a deep capacity for wonder.”

Pentecostal theologian and author Cheryl Bridges Johns (Twitter)

“I saw the political realm encroaching closer into evangelicalism. It was almost as if the two were not separable.”

Christian artist Lecrae, speaking on The Experiment Podcast about “the political gains and lost faith of evangelical identity” (*The Atlantic*)

“Despite stereotypes of atheists as pugnacious, insular, critical, and/or antitheist, it appears as though they hold less animosity toward Christians than Christians hold toward them.”

Social psychologists David Speed and Melanie Brewster, writing in *Secularism & Nonreligion* regarding findings from the 2018 General Social Survey (RNS)

“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*

“The model for Christian manhood isn’t a warrior. It’s a farmer... The farmer motif is foundational because cultivation and care for creation is what it means to image God.”

Author Wendy Alsup (Modern Reformation)



UNPACKING TRAUMA, UNEARTHING SELF

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Don't leave Jesus hanging

By John D. Pierce

Many of us inherited a faith that — even more so today — tends to restrict what is called “the gospel” to Jesus’ death and resurrection, which calls for a one-time affirmation.

All the divine revelation leading to those events — including Jesus’ many recorded words and deeds — gets treated as niceties, but nonessential.

That perspective conveys the notion that Jesus just needed to hang around and do some stuff before getting to his sole purpose in coming to earth. Everything before his death is often treated like a warm-up act.

Therefore, this portrayal of the coming of Christ into the world makes it easy to downplay the life-altering demands of what Charles Stuart, author of *Reclaiming the Forgotten Gospel of Jesus*, calls the “complete gospel.”

A reduced and incomplete gospel only requires us to sign up for an easy, transactional version of salvation — based merely on *believing* that Jesus died and was resurrected, and therefore removes our sins and grants us access to a good eternal destination.

A deep imbibing of this Gospel Lite by so much of Americanized Christianity allows for waving one’s ticket to Gloryland while ignoring, or at least downplaying, all that Jesus revealed between the manger and the cross.

It is as if Jesus never said (or really meant) such things as “follow me,” “deny yourself,” “take up your cross,” and “love

God with all your being and others as you love yourself.”

This mini-version of “salvation” calls more for walking a church aisle just once rather than continually walking in the Way of Christ. Signing the last page of an evangelism tract offers a better-negotiated deal than signing up for a lifetime of living in the radically loving ways that caused Jesus to be rejected.

Oh, there were some lessons on being nice to others that Jesus passed along for us to consider — though often with exemptions not found in the Gospels.

While not intentionally said aloud, the advancement of this incomplete gospel suggests Jesus’ overall life and teachings are optional, or at least secondary in “professing one’s faith,” rather than the essence of Christian living.

The result of this limited, belief-only faith is that those claiming the strongest Christian identity and allegiance are often the ones least likely to treat others in the way Christ did and called his followers to do so.

This defective reduction of the gospel results from replacing the primary call to follow Jesus with a requirement to “believe the Bible” — with the stated essential beliefs not coming from Jesus, but from those seeking personal and political power.



In fact, with this shift comes the abusive opportunity to redefine Christianity apart from — and often at odds with — all that Jesus revealed and called his followers to be and do.

And yet, within church circles today, there is usually considerably less criticism of this clear departure from the following of Jesus than there is of those who point it out.

When being “Christian” is reduced and redefined as “believing the Bible” it is ripe for manipulation into the self-serving, fear-based, religious-political ideology so prevalent today — construed by those with an agenda unlike what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

It is worth asking what kind of “gospel” are we hearing — and advancing in our churches, organizations and individual lives. How complete is it?

Is it really good news? If so, for whom?

How does it square with *everything* Jesus said and did — as part of God’s fullest revelation to humanity?

Creating or settling for an incomplete gospel — a pejorative definition of Christianity — often comes from the rebranding of Jesus as exclusively for “us” and “our kind.” Divine grace and favor are tied to ideological agreement rather than sacrificial living as faithful disciples.

The full revelation of Christ is God’s gift to us. Let us not leave Jesus hanging in response to his full and life-giving call to follow him. **NFJ**

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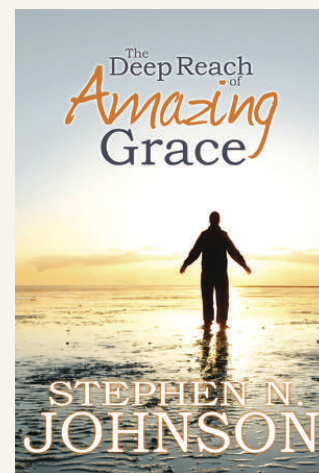
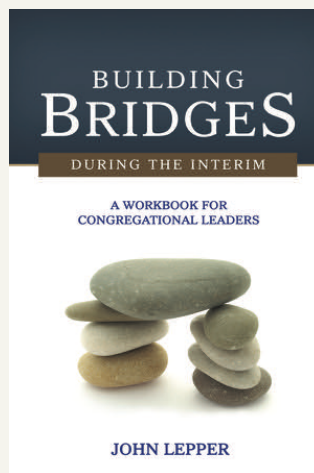
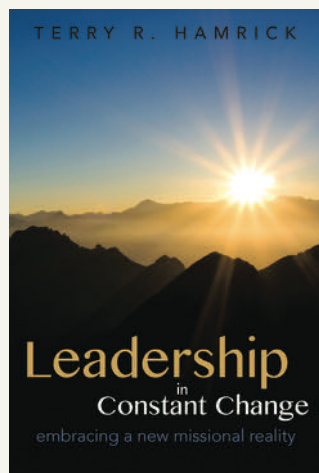
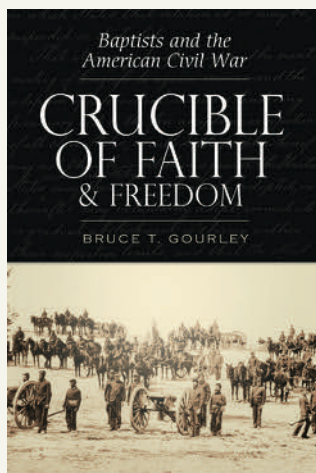
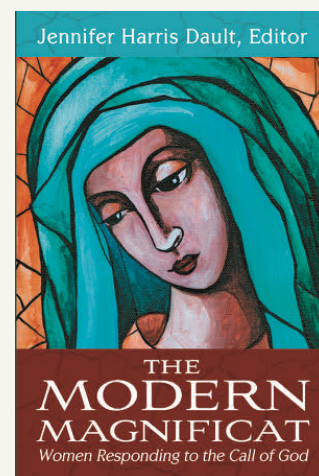
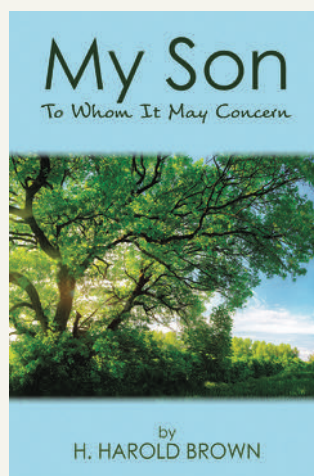
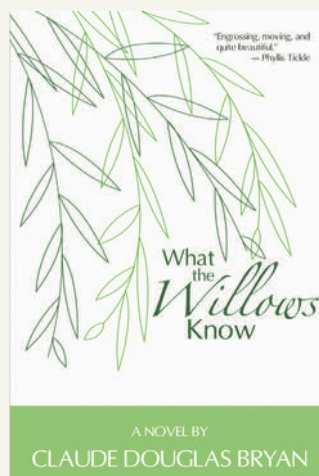
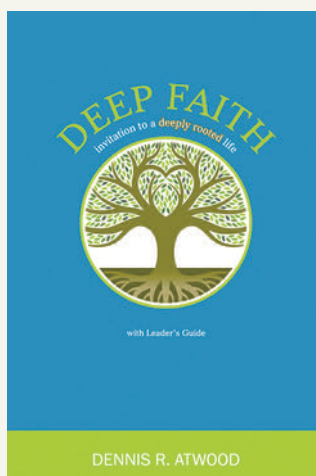
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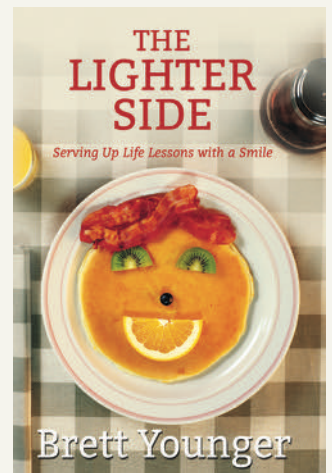
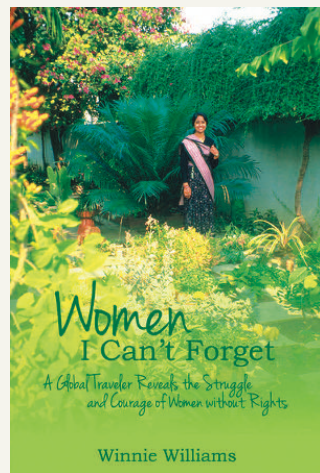
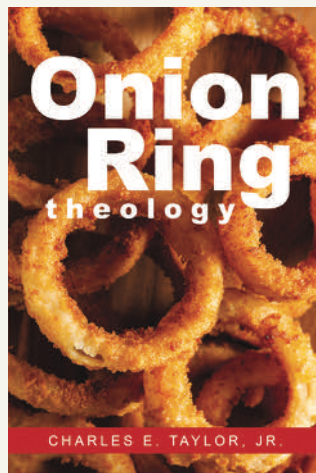
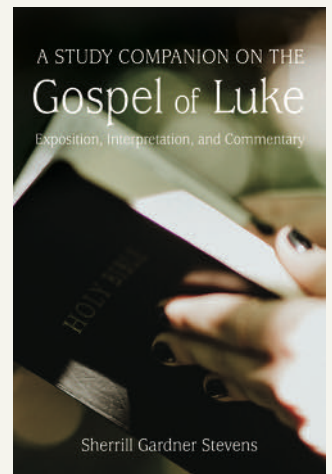
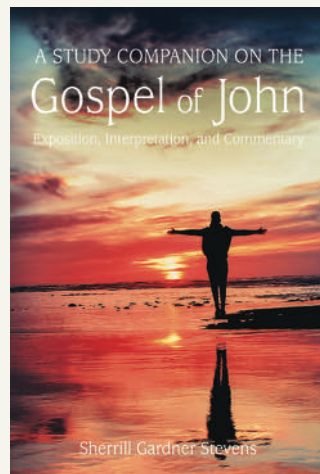
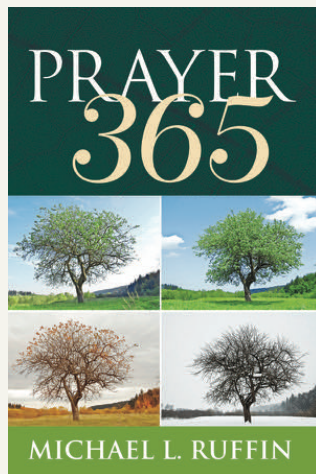
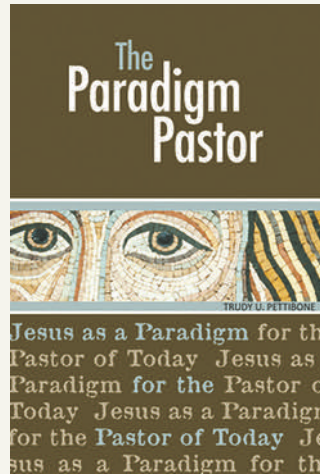
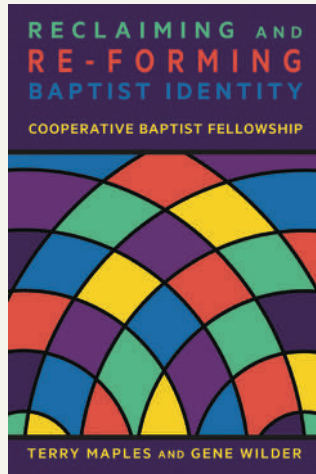
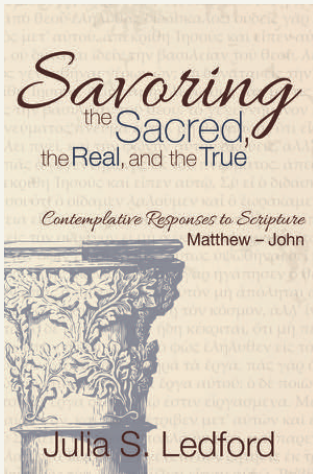
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SPELUNKING SCRIPTURE

Getting below the surface to find fresh biblical truths

Editor's note: Bruce Salmon, author of *Preaching for the Long Haul* (Nurturing Faith, 2019), is now writing a series of books titled *Spelunking Scripture: Exploring Important Passages of the Bible*. The first two volumes, one on Christmas and the other on the Letters of Paul in the New Testament, have just been published and are available from the online bookstore at goodfaithmedia.org.

BY BRUCE SALMON

“All scripture is inspired by God,” wrote Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. But, obviously, some passages of the Bible are more important than others.

Leviticus, for example, was written as a manual for Levitical priests who served in the Temple. It contains laws for sacrificial rituals, the duties of the priestly office, distinguishing between clean and unclean, instructions for religious ceremonies, and all manner of arcane commands.

From a Christian perspective, it would be difficult to argue that Leviticus is of equal value with most of the New Testament, or with many other Old Testament books. But, of course, Leviticus has value to us.

WHICH COMMAND?

Jesus quoted from Leviticus when asking, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Matt. 22:26).

Then he responded by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5 — “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” — to affirm the greatest and first commandment.

Then Jesus added a second commandment — “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” — by quoting from Leviticus 19:18.

That same chapter of Leviticus offers this command: “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges

of your beard” (19:27). However, it is not difficult to argue that loving one’s neighbor as oneself is more important than the trimming of one’s hair or beard.

During my 33 years as pastor of Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Md., I preached almost 1,500 original Sunday morning sermons based on texts of scripture. Only six of those sermons were based on texts from Leviticus.

Not surprisingly, I preached from the Gospels in almost half of those 1,500 sermons. That was because I considered the life and teachings of Jesus to be of most importance.

That is not my assessment alone. Lectionary texts include a gospel reading for each Sunday. Often congregants are asked to stand during worship when the gospel text is being read.

The Lectionary itself is testimony that some passages of scripture are more important than others.

PASSAGES

After the Village church building was destroyed by fire in January of 2000, it took 34 months to rebuild. When we entered the new building in November of 2002, there was a lot of blank wall space in the narthex.

I purchased two large wooden plaques

inscribed with passages of scripture. One contained “The Lord’s Prayer” from Matthew, and the other displayed verses from “The Love Chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13.

There was more wall space to fill, so I contacted the company that had produced these two scripture plaques to inquire about others. But those were the only two of that size.

I asked the company personnel if they could make other plaques of the same style and size with scripture passages I selected. They said they could.

So, I began to ponder what verses to display in our church. That is, I was trying to determine what I considered to be among the most important passages of scripture.

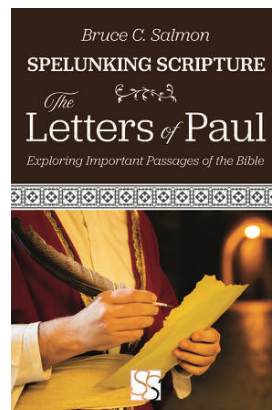
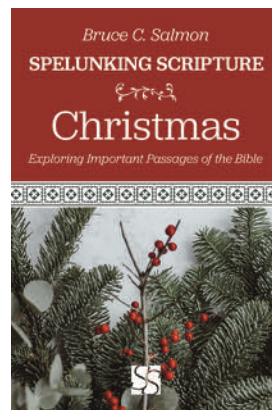
Ultimately, I came up with three: “The Greatest Commandments” (Matt. 22:37-39), “The Least of These” (Matt. 25:31-40) and “The Great Commission” (Matt. 28:19-20).

I considered John 3:16 for another scripture plaque, but I was running out of money and wall space. So, those three scripture passages from Matthew were inscribed on large wooden plaques and added to the two already hanging on the narthex walls.

SERMONS

After retiring in 2018, I began reviewing all the sermons I had preached the previous 33 years.

That review was part of a larger literary project that resulted in my book, *Preaching for the Long Haul: A Case Study on Long-Term Pastoral Ministry* (Nurturing Faith, 2019).



An appendix in the book contains a year-by-year catalogue of the title and text of every sermon I preached on a Sunday morning from 1985 through 2017. The selection of sermon texts was a de facto declaration of which passages of scripture I considered to be important.

One year I decided to preach from the assigned Lectionary texts. Even with three or four texts to choose from, some Sundays I struggled to find a scripture passage that spoke to me. Thus, the sermons for those Sundays were arduously conceived.

After a year of Lectionary preaching, I returned to selecting scripture texts more randomly according to the Christian year, or to what was going on in our church or in our culture or in my life or the lives of our parishioners.

Selecting scripture texts in that way is not as tidy as following the Lectionary, but it helped me to write sermons that I hoped would be scriptural and relevant. My goal always was to move beyond what the text said then and to determine what the text says now.

STUDY

That is also the purpose of Bible study: to move beyond what the text says to what the text means. This is the premise of a Bible study approach I have called “spelunking scripture.”

We move beneath the surface level of reading scripture passages to seek to explore what those passages might mean for our lives.

“Spelunking scripture” involves identi-

fying important passages of the Bible, and then exploring those passages more deeply by seeking to discover not only what they said to the original readers but also what they might say to us.

Years ago I wrote a book, *Storytelling in Preaching*, founded on the conviction that sermons could be improved through the skillful use of stories. Stories can draw connections between passages of scripture and life today.

In a similar way, Bible study can be enhanced by stories that explore ways scripture passages might speak to our situation. This type of Bible study involves more than exegesis of the text.

Of course, we need to understand the background of why the text was written and to whom it was intended. But then we need to seek to understand its relevance for life today. Clearly, some passages of scripture are more relevant for us than others.

The aim of most Bible study books is to explain what the Bible says. The focus is on the “what” question of biblical interpretation. “Spelunking scripture” moves beyond the “what” question to the “so what” question.

It is important to know “what” the Bible says. The “so what” question moves biblical interpretation to ask, “*So what* does this passage say to me?”

It moves from the theoretical to the practical, from biblical literacy to life application. Just as spelunking involves a personal exploration of passages of underground caves, “spelunking scripture” involves a

personal exploration of important passages of the Bible.

BOOKS

The first two volumes in a series of Bible study books under the rubric “Spelunking Scripture” are newly published. They have the subtitle: *Exploring Important Passages of the Bible*.

The Christmas book has Bible studies on passages about the birth of Jesus. The one on the Letters of Paul includes Bible studies on important passages from Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy.

Each book devotes a chapter to each selected passage. After explaining the context of each passage, I offer three sermons that I preached on those verses.

The sermons seek to move from the “what” to the “so what.” Often stories are used to make connections between the text and our contemporary circumstance.

At the end of each chapter are questions/suggestions for discussion/reflection. Thus, the books are designed both for group study and individual reading.

What are the most important verses of scripture for you? I invite you to join me on spelunking expeditions to explore beneath the surface of some of the most important passages in the Bible. **NFJ**

—Bruce Salmon retired from the pastorate of Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Md., after 33 years. More on his approach to “spelunking scripture” can be found at spelunkingscripture.com.





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Should the pastor know?

BY LARRY HOVIS

Recently my wife and I each had elective, outpatient foot surgery. I didn't think we should bother our pastor by telling her about what seemed like relatively minor surgery.

Shouldn't we leave her alone to tend to other more important needs? My wife disagreed.

"There's no such thing as minor surgery," she said. "And wouldn't it be better that she hear it from us, rather than through the church grapevine?"

She was right. It's probably always better to err on the side of sharing both physical and spiritual needs with the pastor.



A struggling marriage, a wayward child, a job loss — all of these things and more are matters the pastor should know about. How else can the church provide emotional and spiritual support if the person charged with overall spiritual care is left in the dark?

In that vein, there is great debate over whether the pastor should know how much money each family gives to the church. Most laity, and probably a majority of pastors, believe the pastor should not know that information.

I've changed my thinking on this topic and would like to provide three reasons I believe the pastor should know what members give to the church: biblical, pastoral and practical.

BIBLICAL

Jesus talked about money and possessions more than any other topic except the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. He said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be" (Matt. 6:21).

He knew there is an inextricable connection between our relationship to money and the things money can buy, and our spiritual health and growth. Money and possessions can either be a hindrance to our spiritual growth or can promote our spiritual growth.

And while our relationship to money and things is about much more than what we give to the church, how we handle that portion of our treasure can be a strong indicator of our relationship with God.

PASTORAL

A person's giving to the church is often an indicator of something deeper. That deeper issue can be interpersonal or relational.

If a person's giving drops significantly, it could mean a vocational or family crisis. It could reveal a weakening of that person's relationship to the church.

If a person's giving increases significantly, that can be a sign of positive developments — vocationally, financially or even spiritually. If the pastor is aware of changing giving trends, pastoral care can be offered.

Just as we love all our children equally, but don't love them in exactly the same way, pastoral care to congregants needs to be tailored to individual situations.

Those in financial distress may need

one expression of pastoral care. Those who have above-average wealth may need another.

Biblically speaking, the former are on stronger spiritual footing, "Blessed are the poor" (Luke 6:20), while the latter are in greater spiritual peril, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24). Each needs pastoral care, but in different ways.

PRACTICAL

I served four congregations as pastor before moving into denominational work. In all but my first church — a small, rural congregation — I was expected to be the primary fundraiser. In one church, my annual performance review was based, in part, on the church's financial situation.

In the church where I now hold membership and have served on the finance committee, lay leaders look to the pastor to raise revenue to finance the church's ministries.

In every other non-profit organization, including the one I lead, the executive director knows his or her donor base. He or she knows how much each donor gives.

Pastors are handicapped as fundraisers without this information. If a pastor is expected to raise funds for the church, the pastor should have access to contribution information.

So, should the pastor know how much members give to the church?

It's an uncomfortable concept for many church people. But I've changed my thinking on this topic.

I hope you will give this argument fair consideration. It may be a matter of spiritual and organizational health for your church. **NFJ**

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



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Get more info at: cbfnc.org

Journey for Home



Cooperative Baptist Fellowship North Carolina



Are we tourists, travelers or pilgrims?

BY BILL WILSON

In our Lilly-funded *Project Thrive* endeavors, the Center for Healthy Churches has outlined seven key traits of thriving churches. One of those, unsurprisingly, is “missional focus” — meaning the ability to keep the congregation focused on its highest priorities.

It also comes as no surprise that the vast majority of churches we engage with have grown fuzzy in their focus on their mission, and have drifted from their core reason for being.

For many, clarity about why they exist has been lost in the busyness of what they do and how they do it. One of the first steps in regaining energy, passion and forward movement is to help them reconnect with and focus on their core mission.

Churches are prone to wander because we Christ-followers are prone to wander. The burgeoning distractions of the day combined with our shorter attention spans create churches that dabble in their faith journey rather than genuinely embark upon it.

Many of our church conversations and activities have little to do with the mandates Jesus gave his followers that were drawn up as a blueprint for the church in Acts 2.

Recent engagements with churches have me nervous about where our people get their ideas about our reason for being. It's as though we've traded Acts for a political platform, or wacky theologians, or the rantings of an online conspiracy website.

Clarity of mission is our friend, and the sooner we focus our full attention on this question of why we exist, the better. That focus requires mindfulness.

Mindfulness implies intentionality and purpose of intent. It means slowing down and taking in our surroundings. It means



dropping our air of superiority and haughtiness. It means pulling back, pondering and discerning.

It means asking honest and hard questions about what we are doing and why we are doing those things. It means being open to the possibility of change and adaptation.

Mindfulness is contrary to our cultural drive toward mindless repetition, performance and self-absorption. Everything about our life pushes us away from mindfulness. Yet, if we fail to seek clarity around our missional calling, we run the risk of simply traveling through life and missing the opportunity to be transformed by living life as Jesus intended.

My son, Ryan, preached a sermon a few months ago about the Transfiguration ([youtube.com/watch?v=d5WgetE1350](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5WgetE1350)). He quoted travel author Rick Steves about “the spiritual act of travel.”



While not a theologian, Steves outlined his hierarchy of travelers. The first level is the “tourist,” who regards all travel as a form of consumption, always looking for the best “Instagram spots.”

Steves wants to reform these vacation-goers, lifting them at least to the second tier of “traveler” — those willing to become “cultural chameleons” who immerse themselves in other places and ways of life.

The most heightened experience is the “pilgrim,” who seeks to find God through travel and discovers inner personal truths along the way. If tourism is about consumption and traveling about immersion, then according to Steves, pilgrimage is about transformation.

Ryan also quoted Diana Butler Bass, from her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us*: “Being a tourist means

experiencing something new; being a pilgrim means becoming someone new,” she writes. “Pilgrimages go somewhere — to a transformed life.”

Thriving churches realize that racing back to their pre-COVID approach to ministry is a wasted opportunity to gain some essential clarity about purpose. Instead of operating as tourists or travelers — who skim the surface of what a congregation could be — what if we looked upon this next chapter as an opportunity to take a pilgrimage?

Might we take a more mindful approach to who we are, why we are here, how we got here, and where we are going? It will mean being much more thoughtful and deliberate about everything.

Many churches are awakening to the fact that the landscape of congregational culture has changed before our eyes. Many people who were marginal attendees pre-Covid will not be back. Many regulars will be showing up less frequently. Some who never connected in person are waiting online to see if we have anything to offer them other than being a spectator at our worship service.

“Church on demand” is our new reality, whether we like it or not. We face a nation less and less interested in institutional religion, while still being curious about Jesus. Yet, political loyalty seems to drive our thinking more than the priorities of Jesus.

This new landscape is begging for us to begin a pilgrimage. We are facing a world that is unfamiliar to us. We can race through it, dabble in it, or immerse ourselves in it and learn from it, while maintaining our unique perspective on it.

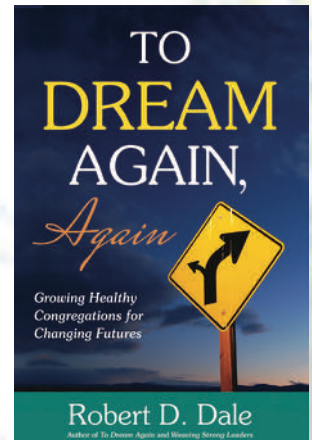
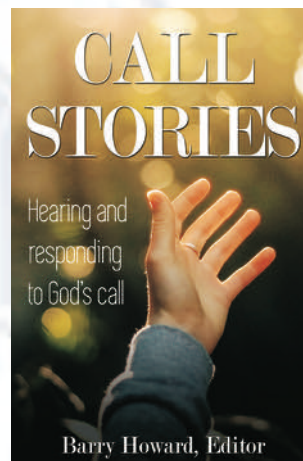
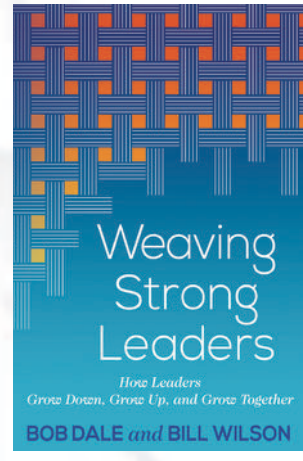
I firmly believe the Holy Spirit is looking for those who want to join in that holy endeavor and become salt and light to a bland and blind world. I hope you will set off on your pilgrimage soon. **NFJ**

—Bill Wilson is founding director of the Center for Healthy Churches (chchurches.org).



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Mountaintop or midwife? Reimagining God's calling

By Alyssa Adalpe

In my teen years, I lived in India as the child of missionaries. The way my parents tell it, theirs was a calling that was nudging them long before they met. Upon meeting, and then starting a family, they could no longer ignore “it.”

So my parents served with a nomadic group that worked construction jobs throughout the subcontinent. In asking, “How can we make your lives better?” they found big needs for medical care and education.

I saw my parents come to life in their work: Dad problem-solving, connecting people and resources, and my mother serving as a trained nurse.

She would gently place a thermometer in a woman's mouth, patiently explain a diagnosis and ease the patient's anxiety.

During tsunami relief, I saw her tend to those in deep grief after the loss of life and livelihood. She did not know the language of South India but, as learned in any pastoral care class, presence is as important or more so than any words.

I wanted to do that. I wanted to sit by people as they made hard decisions while knowing they were not alone. I wanted to ease the anxiety of a person experiencing something that I had experienced and knew they would survive too.

While I could not help bring new life into this world the way my mom could, I knew I wanted to bring to life something that brought me life the way her calling did — something God-sized and good.

So I waited for the elusive call that many spoke about, but I never could quite pin it down for myself. I waited in sanctuaries, with hands folded in the correct prayer position, waiting for a bright light to appear with an angelic chorus. Surely I'd look up to it innocently and accept “the call” from God unlike that flaky Jonah.

At some point I even accepted that it could come from a weird-looking talmudic cherub with hot coals in claw — not as quaint, but I'd take it.

I would then wait for the voice who knew me by my actual name to tell me exactly what I was supposed to do. Then I would be escorted away by a floating cloud from heaven onto whatever it was I was meant to do.

Almost every hike to a mountaintop was a big letdown because I didn't have that “I saw God” experience I'd heard about. Instead there was just heavy breathing and promises that I'd get outside more.

I sang the “Jesus is my boyfriend” praise music at college worship gatherings, hoping if I sang “You're the only one I need” enough times, God would speak to me in a clear Morgan Freeman voice.

Thinking back, I feel a bit foolish because most people I know don't think of calling in that way. For mentors and friends, it was not always the route of seminary to pastor or any typical church job. At times their lives took them on journeys they never expected.

But the common theme was “yes” —

yes to a new opportunity, yes to a new way of thinking, yes to leaving a table that no longer served them, yes to new things.

While I did not hear God in a sanctuary or on a mountaintop, I had mentors and friends who recommended books and who paid attention to what brightened my eyes. They invited me to ask myself “yes or no.”

Maybe calling was not a clear heavenly voice, but something organic and messy — those invisible threads pulling in a direction toward the world that God envisions. Rather than being linear or fairytale-like, perhaps it was more like the creating of a tapestry of a KINGdom that each of us is created to work toward.

I believe that more than ever now as I navigate what is next for me after leaving church work for at least a season.

A seminary professor once asked our class what would it look like if we thought of calling more in terms of an invitation — our being invited to participate in unimaginable ways in what God is doing in the world.

Maybe that's why Jesus used little things in his stories to describe the bigness of the KINGdom — asking us to consider what was already around us and within us. My friend and mentor Tere said perhaps it is like each of us “midwifing” God's image into existence through seeking joy and delight in another.

I can't help but think that a God who birthed mountains and trees and us, and then was birthed among us, can use us to birth a new world made of joy and delight through a series of our saying, “Yes.” **NFJ**

—Alyssa Adalpe lives in Washington, D.C., and is a contributing correspondent for Good Faith Media.



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Responsible theology is ongoing, open-ended

By John R. Franke

As writer of a column titled “Theology in the Pews” who serves as theologian-in-residence at a church, I frequently have occasion to answer the question, “What, exactly, is theology?”

Of course, many different answers to that simple question are on offer in the history of the Christian tradition — and it continues to be a matter of considerable debate in the present.

From my perspective, the work of theology always involves three elements that are in constant interaction with each other: God, ourselves and other people. Each of these must be a part of any responsible articulation of theology and, taken together, they point to the open-ended character of all theology.

One of the most basic assertions of the Bible is the difference between God and us, known as the creator-creature distinction. For instance, in Isaiah 55:8 we read that the thoughts of God are not like our thoughts and the ways of God and not like our ways. There is a categorical difference between God and ourselves.

In the New Testament, 2 Peter 3:8 declares that for God a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Christian tradition has concluded from these and many other texts that the infinite God who created human beings is radically different from finite creatures.

This “infinite qualitative distinction” means that humans are simply not able to understand the truth of God as God understands it from the divine perspective.

Now to be sure, God has spoken to us in acts of revelation, but because of the limitations of our finitude, God has made allowances for us and spoken to us in ways we can understand.

John Calvin said that in the act of communicating, God “lisps” to us the way a

parent does to a child. This means that even revelation has inherent limitations.

Early church theologian Irenaeus put it like this: God is light, but unlike any light that we know.

We can say this of all the metaphors and descriptions of God in the Bible. They give us genuine understanding of the nature and character of God but are always inadequate in comparison to the actual reality of the divine.

Another aspect of human finitude is our inherent situatedness. Each of us, no matter how knowledgeable, thoughtful and informed we may be, experiences the limitations of the particular circumstances of our lives.

We live in particular places, speak particular languages, associate with particular people and have particular experiences. These experiences and contexts are not universal.

Other people have different experiences. This means that the human reception of God’s revelation and the response to it are always reflective of particular circumstances.

This helps us to understand the diversity we find in the Bible as humans in different settings offer varied responses to divine revelation.

Because all theology is reflective of the particular social circumstances from which it emerges, it is not universal. It is always reflective of the goals, aspirations and beliefs of a particular people, a particular community.

No statement of theology can speak for all. Theology emerges in the context of a particular community of faith and seeks to bear witness to God and God’s purposes

in the world from the specific historical and cultural setting in which it is lived.

The late African-American theologian James Cone put the matter succinctly: “One’s social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions.”

For example, he wrote that while he respected the early Christological formulations that emerged from the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon and did not want to detract from them “one iota,” we also need to understand that “the *homoousia* question is not a black question.”

According to Cone, Black people do not ask if Jesus is one with the Father; instead, they ask if Jesus is walking with them in the midst of their troubles.

This serves as a reminder that whatever our theological conclusions happen to be, they are never alone. They always come to being in the midst of the conclusions of other people who are also thinking about God, Jesus and the Bible, often in circumstances that we cannot understand or imagine.

Putting all of these elements together means that responsible theology is an ongoing and open-ended enterprise — involving God, ourselves and other people — in which we seek to understand and participate in the purposes of God for the world.

We remain open and never stop learning, from God and each other, as we work to be continually more faithful witnesses to the good news of God’s love for the world. **NFJ**

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



Who's afraid of Critical Race Theory?

By Starlette Thomas

Critical Race Theory is the new buzzword. Join it with socialism and Marxism; it has been falsely associated with the latter. This season we're not fighting against Antifa, coming to destroy our cities during times of civic unrest.

No, there's a bogeyman hiding underneath children's desks, waiting to scare them about U.S. history — or so the story goes. No one has ever seen it, though.

This culture war started two years ago with *The New York Times* publication of "The 1619 Project," a long-form journalism project to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans enslaved in America.

Its creator, Nikole Hannah-Jones, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary. The project centers the African and later African-American experience in the national creation narrative.

It moved Critical Race Theory from lecture halls in academia to television screens in living rooms. "The 1619 Project" became a curriculum offered to schools, and that's when Critical Race Theory entered the public consciousness.

It's been around for more than 40 years. However, I'm 41 years old and didn't learn about it in school. The subject didn't come up in elementary or middle school or high school nor in my college, graduate, or doctoral studies.

I have a B.A. in English with a concentration in African-American Studies, a Master of Divinity degree with a concentration in Black Church Studies, and just completed my coursework for a Doctor of Ministry degree that focuses on ecclesiology. The words Critical Race Theory never came up.

Yet, they have been on the lips of pundits, politicians and pastors alike. GOP-led states are adopting legislation seeking to ban the usage of Critical Race

Theory in America's classrooms as if it were found in the preschool learning corner, had hit someone on the playground or was offered as an AP course for high school students.

Reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic and race — that last "r" must have been silent, and there are many people who want it to stay that way. Why? Because it challenges the American myth of exceptionalism.

Critical Race Theory explores various beliefs regarding race, including these:

- Race is a sociopolitical construct that created a caste system based on the physical appearance of human beings.
- Racism is systemic and supported systematically in America.
- Racism privileges socially colored white people and positions so-called people of color on the lower rungs of society.
- People of color are stereotyped as dangerous, abrasive and aloof, and then victimized by the legal system.

Critical Race Theory also asserts the reality of intersectionality, the belief that persons are not one-dimensional characters and are unable to be reduced to one box, one social category or another.

Finally, there is the belief that persons should tell their own story. That last one is really scary.

Herein lies the problem as Manifest Destiny, the cultural belief that the U.S. was destined by God to expand territorially and therefore justifies crimes against humanity, remains the dominant narrative, the colonizer's side of the story.

If we start with the stealing of land, the murdering of indigenous people and the

forced removal of those who remained, then America couldn't tell the story of its rugged individualism.

If we start with American slavery, as "The 1619 Project" does, then America could no longer tell the story of when it pulled itself up by its bootstraps.

Some persons argue that telling these stories demonizes socially colored white people and makes them feel bad about themselves and their history. But what about Confederate monuments and the fight to keep them in public view? They tell a story too.

Ironically, the story that America wants to tell is predicated on First Nation people and African Americans not telling their own stories. More than 400 years later, we still don't know how to talk about the sociopolitical construct of race or the founding of America without changing the story. Because this is not about Critical Race Theory.

We can pick on words or we can pick apart the privileges, the social benefits given to European Americans in exchange for whiteness. We can talk about our willingness to accept perks that take away from the well-being of others and, as Christians, what this bears witness to.

Add to this the stories we tell about Jesus, starting with his appearance and how that contributed to the social righteousness of whiteness — not in theory but in practice.

What we cannot do, however, is expect persons to believe that Critical Race Theory is the problem — that naming the injustices and calling attention to social favoritism is the issue that needs to be addressed.

Who's afraid of Critical Race Theory? No one. That's just a story we tell ourselves to sleep better at night. **NFJ**

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



The Sweet Smell of Church

By Brett Younger

I offered an inspiring benediction:

May God take your hands and work through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your eyes and see through them.

May God take your ears and bear through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.

Then a thoughtful church member asked: “What about our noses? Why can’t God take our noses and smell through them?”

God has given us a variety of ways to engage, enjoy, and respond to the world. We talk about the gifts we see, hear and taste, but we don’t say much about the gifts we smell.

Smell is elusive, but everything that has a smell has its own smell. The complex mysteries of the aromatic point us to Mystery.

The world is full of scents, and the spiritual journey includes smelling them deeply. People who pay attention to the fragrances around them are more alive. Smell awakens us to the goodness of creation.

Father Thomas Keating writes: “The first experience of God in mysticism or as contemplative prayer is analogous to perfume. You smell what you smell. If roses are there, you smell them. If God is there, you enjoy it.”

Scripture points to the importance of smell. We do not want to be those who “have noses, but do not smell” (Ps. 115:6). Idols are “the work of men’s hands, wood and stone, which do not ... smell” (Deut. 4:28). Paul calls good gifts “a fragrant offering” (Phil. 4:18).

We think of God watching over us, but the Bible suggests God also smells us: “God smells pleasing aromas” (Gen. 8:21). God does not want to smell the incense of dishonest “solemn assemblies” (Amos 5:21).



Tasty smells cause us to salivate. Familiar smells bring comfort. The sense of smell alerts us to dangers such as gas leaks, fire, and bad sushi. We should enjoy the smell of babies, bacon, oranges, vanilla, coconut, fresh laundry, mowed grass, cinnamon rolls, and cookies baking.

Smell is processed in the part of the brain that handles memory. Particular aromas stir us in ways we can’t explain. The smell of crayons takes us back to Vacation Bible School. A campfire takes us to youth camp. Cigarette smoke takes us behind the high school gym.

Potpourri takes us to our grandmother’s bathroom. Glade air freshener takes us to our mother’s bathroom. Cotton candy takes us to the county fair, and popcorn to the movies. The proof of the banana pudding is in the smelling, as much, and maybe more, than in the eating. Researchers say 80 percent of the flavors we taste come from what we smell.

The sense of smell is one of God’s most subjective gifts, so subjective it makes sense that we have “eye witnesses” and not “nose witnesses.” We cannot always see what we smell. No one says, “Smell what I mean?”

Manufacturers add scents to products to make us feel good. They add fragrances to soap, skin cream, and detergent. Perfume houses market their products as the best

smell to attract a mate.

One of the problems with online church is that you cannot smell it. Churches have particular smells. Centuries ago, flowers were introduced to weddings and funerals to cover the odor of musk and mustiness. Most churches are closed up tight most of the week, so the smells permeate carpets and pew cushions.

Children’s Sunday school rooms smell like the goldfish and apple juice from snack time. Youth rooms smell like pizza. Adult classes smell like Sharpies.

Every church smells different. Scientists who know how to best use their education are working on digital scent speakers that will produce olfactory playlists or “smell tracks.”

Imagine the smells that could accompany your church’s online services: coffee brewing 30 minutes before worship begins, Lemon Pledge, hymnals — which don’t smell like other books — beeswax candles, freshly baked bread at communion, Easter lilies, greenery in December.

Breathe deeply. What scents come to mind? What fragrances point to what is holy?

May God take your noses and smell through them. **NFJ**

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

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

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



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



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

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 5, 2021

Mark 7:24-37

Something Surprising

The grocery store my wife and I patronize most often offers “BOGO” deals as loss leaders – “buy one, get one free.” The promotion typically works: if it’s for something we use, we’re likely to take two for the price of one.

Today’s lesson is a Bible study BOGO: two stories instead of one. They’re not identical, but they do have much in common.

A persistent woman (vv. 24-30)

The two accounts of healing in today’s lesson are sandwiched between stories in which Jesus feeds thousands of people and gets into a dispute with religious leaders. The movement of the stories also indicates a shift. While Jesus’ ministry leading up to the feeding of the 5,000 had focused on Jewish people, the healing stories and the feeding of the 4,000 that follow occurred in decidedly Gentile territories.

We get the impression that Jesus was tired, worn down by crowds who plagued his every step with questions and demands for healing. Attempting to get away from the crowds and find some rest, Jesus headed to the coast – but not the nearest one, and not even in Israel.

They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” (Mark 7:37)

Jesus “went away to the region of Tyre,” a good 50-mile hike to the northwest, an area known as Phoenicia, roughly equivalent to present-day Lebanon. There he took up lodging in a house and “did not want anyone to know he was there” (v. 24).

But “It was impossible for him to escape notice,” the text says. Even earlier in his ministry, Mark had noted that people were coming all the way from Tyre and Sidon to hear Jesus teach (3:8).

One person Jesus couldn’t escape was a persistent woman whose young daughter was very sick with an “unclean spirit.” Demons were the presumed source of many illnesses in the ancient world. Mark doesn’t say how the girl’s malady was manifested – only that her mother was desperate for a cure and determined that Jesus would hear her plea despite her identity as a local “Syrophoenician.”

When she got to Jesus, she fell face down on the floor and “begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter” (v. 26).

Jesus is portrayed as appearing less compassionate than usual. Matthew’s version (15:21-28) says Jesus ignored her at first and did not respond until the disciples complained that the woman would not stop shouting.

When Jesus spoke, it didn’t seem kind: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food

and throw it to the dogs” (v. 27).

Here “children” refers to the people of Israel, adopted through a covenant with Yahweh. Jesus indicated several times that his mission was to the Jews first – but also that it would go beyond the Jews.

But to speak of the woman and her daughter as *dogs*? Perhaps we can find hints of softness in the vocabulary. Overly zealous Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles as dogs, using a word for street dogs (*kuōn*). Jesus used the diminutive *kunērion*, “little dogs,” which described house dogs or puppies.

Ancient people also had pets. Many homes had beaten earth floors, and it was not uncommon to drop bones and other scraps on the floor and let the pet dogs clean them up.

People loved their dogs then as now, but they fed the children first, and the dogs ate what was left.

Even so, Jesus’ response sounds cold. Some have argued that Jesus was playing “hard to get” in order to test the woman’s faith, while others imagine he had not yet planned a Gentile outreach.

It’s also possible that Jesus was simply tired and a bit grouchy, further evidence that he did experience life as a human.

The woman would not go away, but pluckily responded: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Jesus may have smiled at the woman’s spunk. Maybe the Gentiles’ time had come, after all. In any case, he replied: “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter” (v. 29).

Matthew’s version of the same story has Jesus saying “Woman, how

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great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!” (15:28).

And so it was that a woman’s persistence resulted in gaining her daughter’s healing – and in touching the healer.

How often do we seek to help others or pursue a ministry goal with similar persistence? What difference could we make in the lives of others if we were as fully committed?

A lucky man (vv. 31-37)

Jesus’ journey back to the region around the Sea of Galilee is related as a surprisingly convoluted route, suggesting that Mark was not overly familiar with Palestinian geography. 📍 The setting of this story is somewhere in the region of the “Decapolis,” a group of 10 Roman cities. With the exception of Scythopolis, all were located east of the Jordan river. It was clearly a predominantly non-Jewish area.

In the story, a man who could neither hear nor speak well was brought to Jesus (v. 35). He may not have been totally deaf, for he later appeared to understand language clearly. 📍 Jesus had often healed people in the presence of others, but in this instance, he took the man aside, away from the crowd. Perhaps he thought the patient might gain more from the experience or better express his own faith in relative privacy.

More likely, Jesus may have been trying to keep the miracle out of the spotlight, so as not to draw unwanted attention to himself. Later, he told the man to keep it quiet.

Once they were alone, Jesus did three things that seem unusual. He had shown an ability to heal with the spoken word alone or without even seeing the patient, as in the previous story. Here, though, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears, then spat and touched the man’s tongue (presumably with the

saliva) before looking heavenward with a sigh and the command “*Ephphatha!*” (“be opened”). 📍 📍

Neither the use of saliva nor Jesus’ deep sigh should be interpreted as magical actions, though some ancient “healers” were known to use such practices. It seems more likely that the actions were similar to sign language designed to communicate Jesus’ care and his intentions.

In any case, the text says that “*immediately* his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly” (v. 35). The man’s ability to speak plainly suggests that his deafness had not been a lifelong affliction. He understood speech and did not need to learn how to talk. The tense of the word used to describe the man’s speech suggests a continuity of speech: he began to speak, and he kept on speaking.

Mark portrays Jesus as attempting to keep his true identity a secret for much of his ministry. For practical reasons, it was also important that he keep his popularity in check. If his reputation as a healer and miracle-worker had become too well known, he might have drawn unwanted attention from the governing authorities, who frowned upon large popular movements (compare what happened when John the baptizer became too acclaimed and too outspoken; Mark 6:14-29). This could be a primary reason why Jesus kept his disciples on the go, often traveling in wilderness areas.

As he had done on previous occasions (e.g., Mark 1:25, 44; 3:12; 5:43), Jesus counseled silence about the miracle (v. 36a). Since the text uses the plural (“he ordered *them*”), we must presume that Jesus’ instruction was directed toward the crowd and the disciples in addition to the formerly afflicted man. Such an order was fruitless, however. Good news will not be silent, and spectacular good news

demands to be told. Thus, “the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it” (v. 36b). The verbs are all imperfects, suggesting continuous action.

Jesus’ command to “tell no one” was limited to that time alone. Sadly, many believers act as it was directed to us.

Those who witnessed what Jesus had done, Mark says, were “astounded beyond measure,” or “exceedingly astonished.” 📍

What does it take to astonish us today? What movement of the Spirit, what exhibition of divine power is required to instill in us the same unquenchable desire to proclaim the mighty works of Jesus? Mark wants us to understand that the healing of the deaf man is not the point. Jesus’ greater struggle was to heal his followers’ spiritual deafness and blindness, so that their minds might be clear to understand the gospel, that their tongues might be loosed to tell the good news.

Jesus did not come to heal our physical ills alone, but to redeem us from spiritual sickness and death. His mighty acts, like his profound words, served as a means of both communication and compassion, pointing toward an ultimate redemption for all who believe.

Mark uses this and other stories to illustrate how Jesus’ hearers – including his disciples – exhibited persistent spiritual deafness, routinely failing to understand Jesus’ teachings or get the point of his miraculous works (compare Mark 8:18). Are there ways in which we are also deaf to the voice of Christ? Can you think of specific things we could do, perhaps analogous to Jesus’ use of fingers and saliva, to open our spiritual ears and facilitate greater attentiveness to God’s message?

And once we experience the message, will we “zealously proclaim it”? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 12, 2021

Mark 8:22-30

Something Confusing

Have you ever known something that you couldn't tell?

Perhaps a friend shared some family news with you, but swore you to secrecy.

Perhaps you have worked for a company in which you had access to proprietary information that you were contractually bound to keep confidential, even if you left the company.

People who work in high circles of government, especially in foreign affairs, are privy to sensitive information that must be held close to the vest.

Some secrets are simply a matter of preference, as when an expectant couple keeps the gender of their baby quiet until birth, or until a "reveal party."

Others are much more significant. Businesses keep new inventions or developments under wraps until they can file for protective patents or trademarks. Globally, every country believes its national security requires elements of secrecy on many levels.

Information can be dangerous when it gets into the wrong hands, and even more so when it gets distorted and blabbed about by people who don't understand the context or nuances or significance of what they have heard.

Could this have something to do with why Jesus often encouraged

He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." (Mark 8:29)

people to keep things quiet?

The author of Mark's gospel was especially keen on pointing out times when Jesus reportedly did a mighty work of power or revealed an important truth, then told the people with him to keep it quiet – as if they would.

Today's lesson involves two adjacent stories that might seem entirely unrelated except for that common thread: they both involve an unexpected call for secrecy.

Look, but don't tell (vv. 22-26)

Mark 8:22 begins a major section of Mark's gospel in which Jesus shifts from preaching and teaching around Galilee and ultimately sets a course for Jerusalem and the Passion. As Mark tells it, during that period Jesus continued to do mighty works as he focused on teachings about discipleship. 📖

The section begins with Jesus feeding 4,000 people with a few loaves and fish, followed by a confrontation with some Pharisees and then a boatful of disciples fretting over their lack of bread. Reminding them of the feeding miracles they had seen, Jesus asked "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (8:17-18). 📖

Those questions bring us to today's text, with a reminder that Jesus' disciples still had a lot to learn – or a need

to assimilate what they had seen into a deeper understanding of who Jesus was.

The boat landed at Bethsaida, a fishing village on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee, which the Fourth Gospel labels as the hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. 📖

Jesus was soon recognized, and someone brought a blind man forward and begged Jesus to offer his healing touch (v. 22).

Jesus led the man out of the village in a largely vain effort to avoid attention, for other people were clearly nearby. In contrast to some other miracles, this one seems to take place in slow motion. Instead of simply speaking a word of power, Jesus put saliva on the man's eyes – literally, "he spit onto his eyes." He then touched them with his hands, and asked the man if he could see (v. 23). 📖

"I see people," the man said, "but they look like trees, walking" (v. 24). 📖

Jesus touched the man's eyes again. This time he "looked intently" or "stared with open eyes," and his blurred vision came into focus: "his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly" (v. 25).

We can imagine how delighted the man must have been, and anxious to tell others about his experience. Jesus, however, told him to go directly home: "Do not even go into the village" (v. 26). The clear implication is that Jesus warned him to keep quiet, a charge he had previously given after healing a man with leprosy (1:43-45) and one who could not speak or hear (7:36).

Can you imagine being healed like that, and *not* telling anyone about it? But Jesus sought to deflect atten-

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tion from that aspect of his ministry. His mission would require more than physical healings.

In that sense Jesus was like a wealthy person who likes to help people in need, but does so quietly lest every poor person in town should beat a path to his or her door.

More importantly, however, Jesus wanted to avoid generating misconceptions about his identity. Many people were talking about him, but with no clear understanding. This contributed to a popular belief that he was the fiery prophet Elijah *redivivus*, come to defeat Israel's enemies and lead the Hebrews back to glory.

Jesus could not prevent such speculation, but he didn't want to feed it.

A second question comes to mind: Did Jesus need two attempts to heal the man properly, or was the second touch only for the man's benefit, perhaps to assure him that he could see properly once his eyes adjusted to the light and learned to focus?

This is something we cannot know, but we may surmise that there was a purpose in Jesus' actions, and in the author's decision to include the detail that a second touch led to clearer vision.

Mark is working on two levels: both physical sight and mental or spiritual *insight*. When his disciples expressed doubt about having enough food, he had asked "Do you have eyes, and fail to see?"

Both sight and insight may grow by stages, and the disciples still had some growing to do, as we see in the following verses.

Understand, but keep it quiet (vv. 27-30)

From Bethsaida, Jesus led his companions north to the beautiful and well-watered foothills of the Hermon range. 📍 The area was part of a Tetrarchy ruled by Herod Philip, a son of

Herod the Great. He had built a city there at a place called Panias, where the Greek god Pan was worshiped at a grotto from which the Senir spring flowed toward the Jordan River. Philip named the city Caesarea Philippi to honor both Augustus Caesar and himself, as well as to distinguish it from Caesarea Maritima on the coast. 📍

Jesus appeared to have avoided the city, going instead to the villages surrounding it, where he continued to teach his disciples. At some point, according to Mark, he sought to help them understand his identity and mission more clearly.

"Who do people say that I am?" he asked (v. 27). The disciples repeated popular ideas such as those related in 6:14-15. Some thought he was John the Baptist, risen from the dead, or that Elijah or another prophet had returned.

The reasoning had some basis. Malachi, the final book of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, closes with "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse" (5:5-6).

Many people thought John the Baptist had fulfilled the promised return of Elijah. According to Matthew, even Jesus spoke of John as "Elijah who is to come" (Matt. 11:14).

After John was beheaded, some thought he had returned as Jesus. Obviously, this would suggest that the baptism of Jesus by John so familiar to later readers of the gospels would not have been well known at the time.

It was important to get popular ideas about Jesus' identity out and on the table, but it was more important to clarify the disciples' thinking, so Jesus pressed the issue: "But who do *you* say that I am?"

The impulsive Peter, Mark says,

spoke up and declared "You are the Messiah" – or more literally, "You are the Christ" (v. 29). The Greek word *christos* means "anointed one," as does the Hebrew *meshiach*, which was transliterated as "Messiah."

The answer was correct, and we might expect Jesus to congratulate Peter, but "he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (v. 30).

Why, again, would Jesus want to squelch the good news?

Jesus knew Peter and the others did not fully understand the words they spoke. They were still enraptured by the popular notion that, as Messiah, Jesus would lead a revolt against Rome and restore Israel as an independent and powerful nation.

This is where the following verses (vv. 31-38) and the connection to the "second touch" comes in. When Jesus went on to tell them what to expect – that he would undergo great suffering, be rejected by the Jewish authorities, and be killed before rising from the dead – Peter hotly insisted that such things could not possibly be.

Peter and the others would require a second touch of teaching – and a third and a fourth, and more – to understand who Jesus was and what kind of mission he had come to fulfill.

Indeed, it was only after Jesus' resurrection that the disciples remembered things Jesus had told them, and they began to put two and two together in a way that helped them comprehend what Jesus was about.

In the meantime, since they did not yet understand, it was better that they keep quiet.

But what about us? How many touches did it take for us to grasp the truth that Jesus came to serve, not to rule, and that he calls his followers to do the same?

Or has the lesson truly sunk in?

Our actions will tell. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 19, 2021

Mark 9:30-37

Something Different

Do you like children? You may love sitting on the floor and playing with a little tyke. You may enjoy throwing a ball with one who's a little older, or even joining a tea party whose other guests include dolls or stuffed animals.

Then again, you may be quite happy leaving childcare to others.

It is helpful, from time to time, to remember that we all were children at one time. We experienced the wonder and fear and joy and the growing pains of childhood. Few of us would willingly go back to those days and start over, but there are some characteristics of children we would do well to appreciate, and to maintain.

Jesus said so.

Scary thoughts (vv. 30-32)

Mark 9 begins with the story of Jesus' transfiguration, a literal "mountaintop experience." After that heart-throbbing, soul-stirring, and uplifting episode, however, Jesus' followers found themselves on a troubling downhill track that was not of their choosing.

The transfiguration (9:2-13) served to confirm the apostles' belief that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God, as voiced by Peter (8:29). Things were

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me. (Mark 9:37)

looking up! Their hopes seemed to be coming to fruition.

As Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, returned to meet the other disciples, they found them in the midst of an argumentative crowd. A man had brought his son, who suffered from seizures and was thus thought to be demon-possessed, hoping the disciples could heal him. They had tried, but without success (vv. 14-22).

Jesus appeared impatient with what appeared to be a lack of faith on every side, though the boy's father memorably cried "I believe: help my unbelief!" Jesus healed the child with little apparent effort, further displaying divine power by raising up a boy who appeared to be dead (vv. 23-27).

Imagine, then, how confused the disciples were when Jesus took them aside for some private instructions on an unpleasant subject. Mark makes a point of saying that as they passed through Galilee, Jesus "did not want anyone to know it, for he was teaching his disciples" (v. 30).

If those who were closest to him would struggle to understand Jesus' teaching, we can understand why Jesus was careful about what he said and where he said it.

In this case, Jesus returned to a theme first broached in 8:31-34. Hard times and dark days were coming. Jesus told them straight out that he would be betrayed and killed – but would also

rise from the dead after three days (v. 31).

It's no wonder that the disciples "did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him" (v. 32). Only later, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit, could the first followers and later writers such as Mark begin to understand the significance of what Jesus had told them. 🇺

But has anyone ever fully understood it? Theologians have debated the inner workings of the atonement throughout church history. Did Jesus die to appease God's anger over human sin, or to pay some kind of ransom to the power of evil? Did his death serve to provide a moral example of self-sacrificial living for the church to follow? Different scriptures seem to understand it in different ways.

The disciples who walked beside Jesus were not concerned with theories of the atonement, but with the shock of hearing Jesus talk calmly about being betrayed and killed. Death seemed to them an unlikely road for a messianic king to follow. And resurrection – really? Such thoughts left them deeply troubled and confused. Wouldn't we be too?

When Jesus had first predicted his coming death, Peter rebuked him for what seemed to be a crazy idea (8:31-32). Jesus threw Peter's rebuke right back at him, charging that Peter was too focused on a human perspective, unwilling to accept what God had planned. 🇺

Today's text has Jesus repeat the prediction after the powerful experience of the transfiguration, and the disciples still did not understand.

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Perhaps their recollection of Christ's withering words to Peter contributed to their fear of questioning him about it.

Humans are good at coming up with our own ideas about how God should act, but God does not operate within boxes constructed by human thoughts or desires. It is not God's place to conform to our wishes, but our place to conform to God.

Little and big (vv. 33-37)

Jesus' disciples were afraid to question him about his shocking prediction (9:32), but as they journeyed south toward Capernaum, they freely argued with each other about which of them should be at the top of the pecking order (9:33-34).

We may wonder if the discussion might have been sparked by Jesus having chosen only Peter, James, and John to witness the transfiguration. Perhaps this led them to lord it over the other disciples, believing they were closer to Jesus and therefore more important.

Jesus apparently overheard their whispered dispute, but did not confront them about it until later, when he asked what they had been arguing about as they walked (v. 33). 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

The disciples knew that Jesus would be disappointed in their egocentric banter. Perhaps recalling his earlier teachings about true greatness (8:31-34), they were too ashamed to respond, and remained silent (v. 34). 🇺🇸

The teacher did not berate his students for their pride, but responded with surprising gentleness and by acting out a parable. He called for one of their hosts' children to come sit on his knee, and put his arms around the child. Without speaking the words, he showed them what a more proper attitude would be like: Here was a child who knew that she was a child. She did not presume to instruct her elders, but

accepted her role as the child of parents who were wiser than she.

Children were not always highly regarded in the Greco-Roman world, so Jesus' actions and later comments may have been surprising and would have certainly been memorable, though it may have been lost on the disciples. In the next chapter, Mark relates how they criticized parents who had brought their children to Jesus (10:13-16).

Holding the child, Jesus said "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35b). The child on his knee and Jesus himself were examples of obedience and humility and a right relationship between God and humankind.

But that was not the end of the lesson. The disciples should learn not only to see themselves as relating to Christ through childlike humility, but they also should extend a gracious and welcoming attitude toward others who were also children of God.

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," Jesus said, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (v. 37).

I cannot read this text without remembering the gentle spirit of Fred Rogers, who for 30 years displayed humility and childlike wonder of his own as he helped children everywhere learn that they were fully accepted in "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood."

Fred went to college with the intent of becoming a Presbyterian pastor. After seeing what passed for children's programming in the early days of television, however, he felt called of God to become a minister to children through the medium of television.

Fred had often been sick as a child, passing long days in bed with an active imagination. He was sometimes bullied, and he never forgot what it was like to be a child. He was passionate

about helping children understand their self-worth and the importance of being kind to others.

He consulted with child psychologists to ensure helpful content, and he completed a seminary education while also developing the program. Recognizing the value of his ministry, the Presbyterian church ordained him as an evangelist to children through the medium of television.

"Mr. Rogers" did not talk about Jesus on public TV, but he showed people what Jesus was like, embodying such grace and acceptance that he consistently made adults as well as children feel welcomed and loved.

That's what the kingdom should look like, Jesus told his disciples. With childlike humility, we are to welcome others as children of God. The remainder of the chapter (vv. 38-50), beyond the scope of today's text, continues the theme: the child served as a symbol for anyone who needs our help, whether with physical, emotional, or spiritual needs.

We must confess that we have often fallen short in this. We may have failed to welcome people whose ethnic background or whose economic standing or whose understanding of gender and relationships does not match our own.

Our rejection of those who do not conform to our ideals or comfort level has wounded many people who once sought refuge in the faith, but who found more hurt than healing.

The notion that humility and acceptance should be hallmarks of greatness in God's kingdom was troublesome to the Twelve, even as it may trouble us today. Our hunger for control or insistence on familiar traditions can obscure Jesus' call to lives of love and grace.

What is it that we talk about on the way as we live from day to day, and what would Jesus have to say to us? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 26, 2021

Mark 9:38-50

Something Serious

Chop off my hand? Gouge out my eye? Are you kidding?

We all have favorite Bible passages that we turn to time and again. And, if we're honest, we prefer to avoid other texts at all costs.

Today's scripture is one of those hard texts that brings a feeling of dread when we read it. Jesus said some very appealing things, but the gospels also accord to him some harsh and eye-raising statements.

We can't know if these words attributed to Jesus are exactly as he said them, or more reflective of early church traditions known to the author a generation after Jesus' time on earth.

Still, here they are in scripture, and among the Revised Common Lectionary's selected texts. If we're not afraid, let's see what we can learn from them.

Earnest acceptance (vv. 38-41)

Our text follows immediately on last week's lesson, where we find Jesus and the Twelve in Capernaum, perhaps at Peter's family home. Jesus had responded to the disciples' obsession with rank by taking a child into his arms and declaring that they should be less concerned about stoking their egos and more concerned with serving others.

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. (Mark 9:50)

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," Jesus said, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (v. 37).

The lesson appears to have been lost on the disciples, who remained focused on who belonged and who didn't. Perhaps Jesus' comment about accepting the child reminded them of a recent instance in which they had been less than accepting.

Whether simply reporting what they had done or fearfully hoping that Jesus would approve their actions, John said "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us" (v. 38). 🇺🇸

Perhaps the disciples had been jealous: recall that not long before, Jesus returned from the Transfiguration to discover an angry crowd where some of the disciples had sought to heal an epileptic boy by casting out the demon thought to cause his illness, and they had failed (vv. 14-29).

One way or another, we see ego at play: the disciples were reticent to accept other people who called on Jesus' name and did God's work, but who did not belong to their group.

We know nothing about the offending exorcist except that he was apparently successful in effecting divine healings. He may not have known as much about Jesus as did the disciples, but should that exclude him

from doing good things in Jesus' name?

Jesus advised them to leave the man alone, for "no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me" (v. 39). 🇺🇸

He went on to say, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (v. 40). One could quibble with the accuracy of that as a universal statement – a lack of opposition does not necessarily imply support – but in this case the man was in fact doing good work in Jesus' name. [See "The Hardest Question" online for more]

Jesus chose to see potential friends rather than enemies. He spoke well of the offending exorcist because he was sharing in Jesus' work.

To emphasize the point further, Jesus made it clear that one didn't have to perform miracles in order to support his mission: "For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward" (v. 41).

This may intentionally reflect on the earlier discussion about greatness. Jesus does not expect all followers to do great deeds of power, but showing kindness to others is a universal expectation, and also worthy of blessing.

We may smirk inwardly at the attitudes shown by the disciples in this story, but have we not seen similar exclusivism in our churches? Such attitudes may play out if we tend to keep the same people in leadership positions without giving others an opportunity to serve.

Our clannish nature may show in how warmly we welcome guests. Do we extend the same warm welcome

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to a youth from a different ethnic background, or to a same-sex couple, or to an obviously poor family as we do to a “traditional” family who drives up in a nice car?

Do we hold a dim view of believers in other churches that may worship differently, sing differently, pray differently, or even interpret the Bible differently? They may minister through a life devoted to pure evangelism, or through the kinds of social ministry symbolized by the cup of cold water.

This is not to say that church people and their leaders can’t be misguided and do real harm to society as well as to the kingdom, but that generally happens when they hold to strict views that lead them to exclude all who don’t support their particular point of view.

The point Jesus makes is that the work of the kingdom is bigger than any of us. There is a place for all of us, for our different gifts and interests and abilities. The work of Christ flourishes when his followers devote their energies to reaching the world rather than rebuking the different.

Strong words (vv. 42-48)

Jesus seldom got angry, but what really got under his skin was the ugly truth that religious people often do more harm than good. He once grew angry enough to rampage through the temple with a whip when he saw that a profit-driven group of merchants and priests had appropriated the Gentiles’ only place of prayer. And in today’s text he grew angry at the thought that his own disciples might lead others astray. 📖

Perhaps Mark wants us to assume that the child mentioned in v. 36 was still present when Jesus looked about with fiery eyes and told the truth about carnal Christianity. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these

little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck, and you were thrown into the sea!” (v. 42). 📖

Can you imagine Jesus saying such a thing? And that’s just a start. Read on: “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell...” (v. 43). He repeated the same thought for the case of an offending foot or a lustful eye, warning that self-focused people do not have the prospect of heaven, but bleaker prospects. 📖

Most modern translations do not include vv. 44 and 46 (found in the KJV), which are not contained in the best Greek manuscripts. In any event, they are both identical to v. 48, and add nothing to the text but fiery images of a place “where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”

It is highly unlikely that Jesus intended for his disciples to take him literally, for he knew the mind and heart of humanity well enough to know that we would all be handless, footless, blind, and worse if we chopped off every part of our bodies that was complicit in sin.

Through hyperbole, Jesus used physical imagery to call for spiritual surgery. It is our devotion to self – not our eyes, hands, and feet – that must be excised if we are to follow his way.

Likewise, the description of hell as a place where the worm never dies and the fire is not quenched can be understood as a metaphorical (rather than literal) reminder that those who reject Christ and oppose his work face a grim future. Life and hope do not await them, only death. 📖

Salty language (vv. 49-50)

The reference to fire led to another trenchant proverb: “for everyone

will be salted with fire” (v. 49). The meaning of this is not entirely clear. Some interpreters think it relates to fires of punishment from the previous verse, but it’s more likely a reference to suffering that all may face.

The larger pericope began with a reference to Jesus’ suffering (v. 31), and now it closes with an observation that the disciples would suffer, too.

The metaphor is mixed: it begins with the aspect of salt as a seasoning: one could translate v. 49 as “everyone will be seasoned with fire.” It then shifts to salt as a metaphor for genuine faith.

Every believer is seasoned through the trials of life. Trials may take the form of unexplained tragedy, active persecution, or the vicissitudes of life. Faithful followers learn that suffering, while anathema to self, is a part of what it means to be human, and specifically, to be Christian. The trials we face season us for days ahead and enable us to be a positive influence in the world.

This requires that we maintain our “saltiness.” But how can sodium chloride cease being what it is? Some commentators think this refers to impure salt, mixed with sand: Once the salt has dissolved, something that looks like salt remains, but it’s not salty.

Others think we should read it as something that cannot be possible. Real salt cannot lose its savor, and genuine Christians cannot act against their nature.

Those who accept the salt of suffering learn to appreciate the trials that others face, and to grow in the kind of generous acceptance that Jesus modeled, which helps us fulfill his challenge to “be at peace with one another.” When we can assign “self” its proper place, we become the kind of salty Christians who bring goodness to the world. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Oct. 3, 2021

Job 1:1–2:11

When Trouble Comes

Have you ever felt that “Trouble” could be your theme song, and that God could be behind it? If we live long enough, all of us will find bad, sad, or difficult things invading our lives, and we may wonder what we did to deserve such heartache.

Job’s trials were much worse than what any of us are liable to face, but the questions he asked were not so different. During the month of October, we’ll join Job in struggling to understand why troubles come, and how we can respond in a healthy way.

A righteous man (1:1-22)

The book of Job, along with Ecclesiastes, adds a speculative stream to the Wisdom literature found in the Bible. The book consists mainly of poetic dialogues (3:1–42:6), bracketed by a narrative prologue (1:1–2:13) and epilogue (42:7-17). The first two chapters contain similar stories, in which God allows righteous Job to be afflicted as a test of his willingness to remain faithful even when tragedy strikes.

The narrator introduces us to Job in typical storytelling fashion not unlike the “Once upon a time” of familiar folk tales, and it is likely a literary construc-

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. (Job 1:1)

tion rather than a historical account: “There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.”

From the beginning, the writer wants us to understand that Job is innocent of wrongdoing and undeserving of punishment: he was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1).

The word for “blameless” carries the connotation of being complete or whole: it speaks of Job’s integrity. We learn in Proverbs that “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” (1:7, 9:10; see also Prov. 15:33, Job 28:28, Ps. 111:10). Job qualifies as a wise man who makes right decisions.

Job’s faithfulness had not gone unrewarded. His 10 children (v. 2) and massive livestock holdings (v. 3) suggest that God has blessed him with sufficient prosperity to become “the greatest of all the people of the east.” Observing Job’s piety, even God declared that there was “no one like him on the earth” (1:8).

Yet, tragedy struck. The remainder of chapter 1 describes a setting in which a subordinate heavenly being challenged Yahweh to let him test the tenacity of Job’s trust, and God allowed it.

The name of this character is commonly misunderstood and mistranslated. In Hebrew, it is “*hassatan*,” meaning “the accuser,” but most

English translations wrongly render it as “Satan,” despite the presence of the direct article (the prefixed “*ha-*” means “the”).

The accuser is neither evil nor one who tempts others to do wrong. He is clearly identified as one of the “sons of God,” a member of the divine council who did Yahweh’s bidding. He plays the role of a heavenly district attorney, roaming the earth in search of sinners who should be brought to justice before Yahweh.

Following the accuser’s challenge and God’s permission to test his righteous servant, a quick series of tragedies robs Job of both his substantial flocks (his source of wealth) and his 10 children, who died when a tornado flattened the house where they were gathered (1:13-19).

Yet, the text says, Job remained faithful, continued to bless Yahweh’s name, and did not charge God with any wrongdoing (1:21-22).


An unspeakable trial (2:1-8)

Our primary text for the day concerns Job’s second test, which begins precisely as the first, with the heavenly council in session. As the accuser reports on what he had observed (2:1-2), Yahweh again points with pride to Job, noting that he “persists in his integrity, *although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason*” (2:3).


Are you surprised by this? The Lord admits to having been “incited” against Job “for no reason.” The Hebrew word *hinnam*, translated here as “for no reason,” is the same word used in 1:9, where the accuser had asked “Does Job fear God for nothing?”

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Despite Job's faithful response, the accuser is not yet convinced that Job's integrity will hold, and he dares Yahweh to let him wreck Job's health ("skin for skin!"). Though Yahweh recognizes that Job's suffering has been caused for no reason other than the divine wager with the accuser, God gambles that Job's integrity would hold and he would not curse God even if his health were lost (2:4-6). 

Yahweh's willingness to let Job suffer for the sake of divine pride leads some writers to wonder if it is God, rather than Job, who is being tested. What do *you* think?

With Yahweh's nod of permission, the accuser strikes Job with "loathsome sores" that cover his body (2:7) and fill him with misery. To avoid contaminating others, Job camps out by the family trash heap, where ashes from the cooking fire were discarded along with broken pottery and other garbage (2:8). 

An amazing equanimity (2:9-11)

Now, for the only time, Job's wife enters the picture. The narrator treats her poorly. He doesn't bother to tell us her name, or even to acknowledge that she has suffered the same losses of family and property that Job suffered, being spared only the skin disease – though she must observe her husband's pain.

While watching Job suffer and scratch, and perhaps feeling a keen sense of her own loss and some personal anger toward God, Job's wife urged him to get it over with, to curse God and die (2:9). Or did she? In the text, the verb translated as "curse" is the same word also translated as "bless," but Hebrew writers were so uncomfortable with the notion of cursing God that they often used "bless" as a euphemism for "curse" (see "The Hardest Question" online for more).


If that seems strange, consider our modern euphemism in which to "bless someone out" really means to curse them.

Job's poor wife gets no more sympathy from Job than from the narrator. He seems to interpret his wife's words as a challenge to his integrity, but he is determined to sit his ground among the ashes and hold to his belief that one's attitude toward God should not be dependent on material or physical blessing.

"But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (2:10, NRSV).


Note that Job does not suggest that all women are foolish, only that his wife had spoken in what he regarded as a foolish way. He is not ready to give up on God. He assumes that God is free to bring both good and evil into the world. Later he will question why God dealt him such a terrible hand, but for now he clings to his equanimity.

Even so, while Job seems resigned to accepting whatever comes from God, and he "did not sin with his lips," in this response he pointedly does not bless God, as he did in 1:21.

How would *we* respond to such a torrent of trouble? We cannot read the Book of Job without confronting questions about providence. Job's sufferings are portrayed as happening for a reason, though Job has no idea that the reason is a wager made in heaven. 

Many people, citing folk theology they wrongly believe to be biblical, find comfort in saying "Everything happens for a reason," implying that every personal trial or national calamity is part of a divine plan.

Is this the way God works? Could a lesser being incite God to smite innocent people to prove a point? Even Job's friends, who assumed that

God was behind his troubles, did not imagine that Job's sufferings could have resulted from a divine dare. They believed God was punishing Job for some sin, in keeping with Israel's traditional theology of retribution. 

Job never wavered from his declaration of innocence, however, and the narrator fully supported his claim to integrity. Nevertheless, he suffered the fate one would expect of the wicked. Why?

These questions and themes are not resolved in the prologue, but continue to play out through the remainder of the book. One lesson that becomes clear is that God is not limited to the theological boxes constructed by humans, but acts independently and freely.

Job "feared God and turned away from evil" (1:8), yet evil came upon him, perhaps the ultimate example of the reality that bad things happen to good people. The author portrays Job as perfectly upright, yet in short order he lost his children, his wealth, and his health.

Does God bring evil upon us for divine purposes that we may or may not ever come to understand? Those who hold a Calvinistic understanding of divine sovereignty or predestination might affirm that thought, believing that God sends trials as discipline for sin or as lessons designed to strengthen believers and prepare them for some future trial of greater severity.

A better approach may be to recognize that Job's experience is not a model for all. Evil can be the natural consequence of human choice, or the result of random events, or the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Our trials may not be a divinely instigated test as in the story of Job, but his response challenges us to be both faithful and honest in the midst of trouble, even when we don't understand. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 10, 2021

Job 23:1-17

When God Hides

Bad things happen, and sometimes they happen to us. Some bad things are simply unpleasant; others are life changing.

Can you recall the worst thing that ever happened to you? Some people avoid thinking about their troubles, while others dwell on them obsessively.

Your “worst thing” might involve a personal injury or trauma you experienced in an accident or in military service. It might be a medical diagnosis you never wanted to hear, or the words “I’m moving out,” or news that someone you cherish has died.

As we approach today’s lesson, get in touch with what that “worst thing” was like, even if it is hard. Try to recall some of the many thoughts that raced through your head, and the many questions – especially those that linger.

Did you ever get an answer that satisfied?

Looking for comfort

Our study of Job has jumped from the tragedies that afflicted him in the first two chapters to a painful soliloquy in the midpoint of the book. It will be helpful for us to review what has taken place between Job’s awful affliction and his present complaint.

Three of Job’s friends arrived to

Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! (Job 23:3)

comfort him, according to 2:11-13, and from that point until God speaks from the whirlwind in chapter 38, the search for understanding comes entirely through several cycles of speeches made by Job and his friends. 📖

In this lengthy section, the interpretive voice of the narrator disappears: it is up to the reader to hear Job’s complaints and the responses of his friends, and to draw his or her own conclusions about the issues at hand.

The narrative says nothing about how Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar learned of Job’s trials, though it does suggest that they also lived in the East. Eliphaz appears to be the leader of the trio, as he always speaks first.

In the prose frame of the story, the men initially related to Job as true friends. When they arrived and found Job sitting in the ashes, they hardly recognized him: they had known him as the “greatest man in the east,” but saw that his suffering had become “very great.” Job had gone from the top of the world to the very bottom.

Seeing the depth of Job’s sorrow, the men did what true friends do when consoling one who has faced tragedy: they sat down in the ashes with him. Recognizing that the time for words was not yet, they sat in silence for seven days, presumably fasting and comforting Job through the gift of their presence and their willingness to share his suffering.

While Job was saying nothing, his friends remained silent. We often

speak of “the patience of Job,” but his patience soon ran out. Beginning with chapter 3, Job railed against what God had done to him with such heat that his friends thought he was out of line.

When Job’s grief erupted, he called down curses on the day he was born and the night he was conceived. He wished that darkness would cover those days, or that Leviathan would swallow them so they would cease to exist (3:1-10). 📖

In 3:11-26, Job switched from curses to questions. He wanted to know why God would give a man life and health and then snatch it away and force him to live in utter misery. He wondered why God would not let him die and get it over with. He asked why he was ever born; why he couldn’t have gone straight to Sheol.

Job’s friends were less than understanding. They insisted that neither God nor their theology could possibly be at fault: if Job was suffering, he must deserve it. He must have been hiding some secret sin. 📖

That is *not* the way to help a friend. Job’s companions were so intent on defending God that they could not support their friend. They dared not join Job in questioning divine justice because that would threaten their embedded belief that people always get what they deserve. Would we respond differently?

In the end, God would honor Job’s complaints and honest questions, not the pious pronouncements of his friends.

Longing for God (23:1-9)

Today’s text is an excerpt from Job’s response to Eliphaz. It occurs in the

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third round of dialogues between Job and his friends.

Job's speech is the plaintive soliloquy of a lonesome man who is surrounded by friends but feels isolated from everyone, including God.

He begins by asserting that "my complaint is bitter" (v. 2), or possibly, "rebellious." Job knows he is going out on a limb. He's not sure how safe it is to complain to God, but he can't help himself. He *will* protest!

The only problem is, Job can't locate God's complaint department. He seems to be saying "I'd really like to give God a piece of my mind ... if I could just find the right place!" (v. 3). Job insists that all he wants is an audience with God, a chance to lay out his case, to present arguments for why he doesn't deserve the trouble he's seen (v. 4).

Job seems confident that if only he could get a hearing, he would get an answer (v. 5). He believes that God would listen to his grievances (v. 6) and surely acquit him of any improper charges (v. 7).

But Job can't find God. "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him" (vv. 8-9, NRSV). In the ancient world, to speak of the "front, back, left, and right" was a way of saying "east, west, north, and south," because one always oriented himself to the rising sun. Unlike the psalmist who sensed the divine presence everywhere (Ps. 139:7-10), Job could not find God.

Fearing the truth (23:10-17)

Job has looked everywhere without success, but refuses to give up. He believes that "God knows the way that I take" (v. 10). Job had no doubt that God could see *him*, but he longed for it

to be the other way around. 📌

In vv. 11-14, Job reasserts his innocence and expresses the frustration he feels that his righteous behavior and his firm commitment to God's way have not paid off in a life that is free of sorrow and trouble. His belief that righteousness always leads to blessing has been challenged.

Job knows two things for certain: (1) he has been as righteous and pure in his faith as any person could be before God, and (2) his anticipated life of blessing has turned into a nightmare.

What Job doesn't know is how to explain it, and this threatens his whole understanding of God, because that's the only theology he knows. With his entire belief system on shaky ground, Job's earlier confidence shifts to fear. He wants more than anything to see God, but at the same time, he is terrified at the prospect (vv. 15-16).

If Job's righteousness has not kept him from the suffering he is experiencing, what is to keep it from getting worse? If he could confront God, maybe his life would become even more miserable! Suddenly, Job's desire is not to find God, but to hide in the darkness (v. 17). Maybe he doesn't really want to come face to face with God after all.

Have you ever found yourself on Job's garbage heap? Have you ever asked, "Why me?" Have you ever wondered why no angel intervened to interrupt an accident or disrupt a disease?

It may be helpful to remember that even Jesus knew the feeling. On the cross, when Jesus cried "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46), he was quoting Psalm 22:1.

Job, the psalmist, and even Jesus felt forsaken by God. If we sometimes feel that way, we are in good company. Some days we may feel much in touch with our blessings, and we pray, and

God feels so close. Other days we are overcome with loss, and we cry out to God, and we get silence. We sense darkness.

Does that mean God has nothing to say? Does that mean God is no longer there?

Job held to a belief that God was never unaware of his problems: "But he knows the way that I take." Job concluded that God must be testing him, and he was determined to pass the test (v. 10).

You may remember when singer Kelly Clarkson had the hit song "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." The song title is clearly an oversimplification, but the sentiment resonated with many. Facing trials and overcoming them does have the potential to make us stronger people.

Even so, we go beyond the evidence if we claim that every trial is a test from God. Even in the unusual story of Job, the narrator carefully attributes Job's testing primarily to the accuser, albeit with God's permission.

Job found himself in a place of despair, but never without hope, even in the darkness. Whether God causes our darkness is beside the point: there is trouble aplenty to go around. The important question is how we will respond to the darkness. Will we find the hope that leads us through, or will we simply sink in the waters of despair?

We can learn from Job that it's okay to yell at God. It's okay to complain. God is big enough to take anything we can dish out without feeling the need to zap us for our impudence. God is far more pleased with an honest prayer than a pious one. God knows that as long as we're praying – even when our prayer is a complaint – we pray because we still have *hope*, and thus the door is still open to faith and life. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 17, 2021

Job 38:1-7, 31-41

When God Roars

Have you ever wished you could have a private audience with God? Are there things you'd like to ask?

Many people have a list of things they hope to do when they get to heaven. They hope to find beloved family members who've gone before. Occasionally, someone will wish "to bow before the throne in the presence of Jesus."

I resonate more with a friend who once said, "When I get to heaven, God will have a lot of explaining to do."

That's what Job hoped for, though he lived long before the Christian concept of heaven originated. He wanted God to do some explaining.

As Job carried on a running dialogue with his three friends, he spoke often of his desire to encounter God directly, with last week's lesson from Job 23 being Exhibit A.

Job longed for God to offer some sort of explanation for why his foundational theology – that obedience leads to blessings while faithlessness brings on trouble – had been shattered along with the loss of his wealth and the deaths of his children. Job was more righteous than everyone else, yet he suffered intensely.

As Job and his friends closed their third round of verbal jousting,

Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. (Job 38:3)

just before the text is interrupted by the interloper Elihu's lengthy peroration (chs. 32–37), Job's fervent defense turned into an impassioned prayer: "Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:15).

When God spoke, Job got an Almighty response, almost certainly more than he had bargained for. ↓

An overwhelming God (vv. 1-3)

The answer to Job's plea for a direct confrontation with God arrives in the form of a whirlwind, from which Yahweh speaks. This is not entirely unexpected, for the ancients often interpreted troublesome tempests as direct messages from God.

In Old Testament writings, it was common for fierce storms to accompany theophanies, or appearances of God (Ezek. 1:4, Nah. 1:3, Zech. 9:14). When God appeared to the prophet Elijah during a memorable encounter in 1 Kgs. 19:11-13, the most surprising thing is that Yahweh was *not* in the storm, earthquake, or fire that preceded the soft, calm voice by which God spoke to the prophet. The reader does not doubt, however, that the storm, earthquake, and fire were sent by God.

For Job, the appearance of a stormy whirlwind would have been especially frightful, for we recall that his sheep had been killed by lightning (1:16), and his children had died together when a "great wind ... struck the four corners of the house" where they were gathered (1:18-19), bringing

it crashing down upon them. Though the wind "came across the desert," the statement that it struck all four corners of the house at once implies that it had a circular motion of a twister.

Can you imagine how frightened Job must have been? Imagine how you would feel if you shook your fist at God and were answered by a tornado, speaking with the voice of a freight train?

We are not surprised that Yahweh's address to Job is as imperious and blustery as the whirlwind, echoing Job's own complaints but on a grander scale. The words are staggering, convincing and convicting. The text does not claim that Job had a vision of God beyond the whirlwind, but the experience made such an impression that he would later declare "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:5).

God's initial speech runs from 38:2 to 40:2, followed by a brief response from Job (40:3-5) and then an even lengthier speech (40:6–41:34) and a second response from Job (42:1-6). ↓

Note that Yahweh's challenge from the storm picks up on Job's frequent allusions to darkness in his previous laments and complaints. Imagine a crackling voice, loud enough to be heard above the storm winds: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (v. 2). ↓

Job had raised serious charges against God and asked many questions, but the voice declared that Job's ignorance had obscured the issues. Job's questions had been based on the same inadequate theology that his friends defended, with the only difference being that Job no longer trusted it.

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We have previously noted that the Old Testament's wisdom literature is grounded in a theology of creation, and that is reflected in Yahweh's torrent of questions: As God overwhelmed Job with visions of divine grandeur, the message was couched in terms of creation. Apparently, Yahweh wanted Job to gain a larger picture of the universe and the respective place of God and humankind within it. Turning the theological tables on Job, Yahweh declared "I will question you, and you shall declare to me!" (v. 3).

A creator God (vv. 4-7, 31-38)

The remainder of God's speech – far more than we can discuss in one lesson – comes as a flood of questions that pour over Job like a mighty waterfall, beating him down with no time to speak the answers even if he'd had them. The initial cascade of questions begins with creation (vv. 4-7).

Try reading those verses aloud, with an authoritative, domineering tone. Then try to imagine what was going through Job's mind as he heard God speak.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding!" (v. 4).

Clearly, Job had not been present when the earth was formed. If Job had not participated in creation, had not helped to determine earth's measures and lay it out against the grid of the universe (v. 5) – if Job had not been there for the "laying of the cornerstone" (v. 6) or heard the angelic courses singing for joy (v. 7) – how could he begin to understand God's wisdom?

Job had no time to catch his breath before Yahweh expanded the same line of questioning in ever-widening circles. Could Job master the mighty sea and set its limits (vv. 8-11)? Could

Job command the morning and bring light to the earth (vv. 12-15)? Could the complainer comprehend the mysteries of the deep and the place of the dead (vv. 16-17)? The ancients believed all these elements of creation were compassed within "the expanse of the earth" (v. 18), but they were clearly beyond Job's comprehension.

Yahweh's questions rose beyond earth and sea to consider the heavens. Could Job locate the sources of light and darkness or lead them to their respective places (vv. 19-21)?

Job would have believed that Yahweh controlled the weather, as exemplified by the on-demand appearance of the whirlwind. 📌 But he would have to admit that he knew nothing about the storehouses of snow and hail, or the home of light and the east wind (vv. 22-24). Rain and dew and frost and ice were equally beyond Job's control (vv. 25-30, 34-38), and he could certainly not imagine leading the starry constellations on their paths through the heavens (vv. 31-33). So, did he have standing to challenge God?

A sustaining God (vv. 39-41)

One might think these queries would be enough, but God continues, shifting from creation itself to the managing and sustaining of the earth. At the same time, God moves from the greater to the smaller, something more familiar to Job.

If Job could not command the heavens, could he oversee animal life on the earth? In a verbal parade, Yahweh marches representative creatures of earth and sky before Job: lions (vv. 39-40), ravens (v. 41), mountain goats and wild deer (39:1-4), wild donkeys (39:5-8), and unbroken oxen (39:9-12). Could Job tame these beasts? Could he understand the foolishness of ostriches (39:13-18), the power of

horses (39:19-25), or the bloody ways of hawks and eagles (39:26-30)?

No, of course not. Job could neither understand nor command creation. The text implies that Yahweh mercifully paused with a closing challenge for Job to give answer (40:1-2): "*Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond!*"

A thoroughly defeated Job knows, however, there is nothing he can say. Job can only declare himself to be of small account and unworthy of standing before God: "I lay my hand on my mouth" (40:4). Job's few words suggest a belief that he has already said too much, and he will say no more (40:5).

What do you think of God's response to Job? On the one hand, it seems high-handed and far from compassionate. On the other hand, it portrays a God who cares enough about humans to enter dialogue with them.

Even so, we learn that some things may simply be beyond human understanding. "When the question has to do with innocent suffering," Sam Balentine has written, "'no answer' may be the answer we need to hear from God, even if it is difficult to accept." (*Job*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Smyth & Helwys, 2006], 628). 📌

If we fast-forward to 42:1-6, we discover that Job finally found peace with God and with himself, not because he got his questions answered, and not because he gained new wealth and more children, but because he caught a new vision that enabled him to see God in a new way.

Job discovered that God was bigger than he had ever imagined, a God who could not be limited by human preconceptions about what God must do. Job learned, in short, that God could not be subject to human demands and still be God. 📌 NfJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 24, 2021

Job 42:1-17

When God Judges

Our whirlwind tour of Job's 42 chapters has been brief, but reaching the end may still bring a sigh of relief along with a flood of questions. Did Job really repent, as some writers term his response in 42:1-6? Why did God tell Job's friends that he was right to complain and they had been wrong to accuse him? Did the double restoration of Job's property imply that the traditional theology was correct after all? If we face trouble, can we also expect a happy ending?

The lectionary text for today skips vv. 7-9, but it will be helpful for us to consider the entire chapter. How does the epilogue fit with all that has come before?

Job's answer to God (vv. 1-6)

With 42:1-6, we come to the final verses of the long poetic section between the narrative prologue (1:1–2:13) and epilogue (42:7-17) that bracket the book of Job like two bookends on a shelf lined with volumes of poetry.

The previous four chapters have consisted almost entirely of two loud and lengthy speeches in which Yahweh overwhelmed Job with powerful questions designed to demonstrate such inimitable wonder that Job had no

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. (Job 42:3b)

fight left in him. Afterward, he readily submitted to the indisputable might and right of God to do as God wished.

On first reading, Job's response can be a bit hard to follow, because one must assume that, in the opening words of vv. 3 and 4, Job is not brashly challenging God as it appears, but quoting from God's earlier challenge to him in 38:2-3.

Thus, it is helpful to insert "You asked:" or "You said:" before "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" (v. 3), and "Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me" (v. 4). The HCSB and NET do this for clarity, though the words must be supplied. 📌

We note that Job still does not admit to any disobedience, only to a lack of appreciation for the immensity of God: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (v. 5). 📌 Whether Job spoke of his physical or metaphorical eye, he had perceived or "seen" God in a new way.

Having gained a deeper perspective, Job is ready to acknowledge having failed to appreciate God fully. Most translations are similar to the NRSV's "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (v. 6). This is often called "Job's capitulation." But is that really what happened?

The Hebrew word translated here as "despise" has no object: Job could be saying "I despise myself" (NRSV) or "I despise what I said" (NET). The basic

meaning of the verb *ma'as*, however, is not "despise," but "reject." Job's clear intention is to reject his earlier, inadequate understanding of God. Since the verb has no object, a better meaning could be "retract," as understood by NAS95 ("I retract") and HCSB ("I take back [my words])."

This translation offers a better parallel to Job's following declaration. The word often rendered as "repent" is not the usual word for repentance (*shub*, "to turn around"), but *nakham*, a term that means "to be sorry" or "to console oneself."

A careful reading, then, shows that Job still holds to his innocence. He does not repent of doing wrong; he simply expresses regret for having failed to see the bigger picture that Yahweh has shown him. He wishes he could take back some of the complaints and charges he has made.

"Dust and ashes" are typical symbols of grief or repentance, but they are also the literal setting for Job's sitting: In his diseased misery, Job had consigned himself to the dusty ash heap of the family's garbage dump (2:8-13). There is no indication that he had moved from the ash heap throughout chapters 3–41. Readers may imagine that Job intends to impose new dust and ashes as a sign of repentance, but he had been sitting in them all along.

Job's intercession for his friends (vv. 7-9)

The poetic section of Job ceases with v. 6, and the remainder of the chapter is written in straightforward prose, as is the bookend prologue of chapters 1–2. Here, the narrator has God turn from Job to Eliphaz to express divine wrath

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toward the three friends, “because you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has” (42:7). 📖

This is significant: despite Job’s bold challenge to divine justice, God appears far more pleased by Job’s willingness to question traditional beliefs than by his friends’ smug attempts to defend them.

God instructed Job’s friends to bring seven bulls and seven rams – an immense offering – as a burnt offering to God. What is more, they were to ask Job – whom they had been treating as an unconfessed sinner – to intercede and ask forgiveness for their wrongful critique. 📖

The image of Job acting as a priest who intercedes for others and offers sacrifices recalls 1:4-5, where Job was portrayed as doing the same on behalf of his children, seeking forgiveness on their behalf in case they had inadvertently sinned (1:4-5). 📖

Job’s surprising restoration (vv. 10-17)

How do we explain what happens next? Job’s tragic experience and manifold complaints, along with God’s imperious non-answer, have questioned the belief that right behavior and material blessings are necessarily connected. In the end, however, God not only restores Job’s property, but also doubles it.

The narrator offers no explanation for this, either in his own words or in a message from God. He simply says that it took place *after* Job had interceded for his friends (vv. 10, 12).

While Job’s lost property is doubled, he also becomes the father of 10 new children, although there is no mention of his wife, who could hardly have borne 10 more children after her first 10 had reached adulthood. 📖

This is another reminder that the story should be understood as a liter-

ary construction, an extended parable, rather than a historical event.

Other family members and friends appear in these verses, leaving us to wonder why they have remained absent prior to this, leaving Job with only three accusing friends for company. According to the story, his brothers, sisters, “and all who had known him before” came to comfort him “for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him,” bringing him gifts of money and gold (v. 11).

We also note that the author of the epilogue gives special attention to Job’s daughters: they alone of all Job’s family members are named. 📖 In addition, they are declared to be the most beautiful women in the land. In 1:3, Job had been described as the greatest man in the East; now his daughters are the most beautiful of women.

As if the distinctives of name and beauty were not enough to set the daughters apart, the narrator says that Job gave them an inheritance along with their brothers (vv. 13-15), which was counter to custom.

As Job’s story began with a folktale-style “Once there was a man ...,” it concludes with a Hebrew version of “happily ever after.” The narrator says Job lived another 140 years, seeing children to the fourth generation after him, and died “old and full of days” (42:16-17).

But again, we must ponder what the author intends to convey through Job’s surprising restoration. Did God reward him for passing the test? Did the traditional theology prove true after all? Or is something else going on?

Two aspects of the story strongly hint at a different understanding.

First, God does not just restore Job’s fortunes, but doubles them. This might reflect a nod to the regulations found in Exodus 22 that require those

who steal another’s property to repay two to four times as much as they took. Specifically, if someone entrusted his goods to a neighbor for safekeeping but they were stolen, the thief would be required to make double restitution (Exod. 22:7).

Job, as such a pious man, would have assumed that his life and goods were in God’s care. Yet, God was complicit with the accuser in taking all that Job owned for “no reason” (2:3). Perhaps we are to see the two-fold restoration as a divine admission of guilt for the loss of Job’s possessions. Thus, the doubling of Job’s property would represent a repayment of unjust theft, rather than a divine reward for Job’s obedience. 📖

A second indication that things have changed is found in the emphasis given to Job’s daughters. Not only are they the only members of Job’s family to be named, but Job also makes a point of giving them an inheritance along with their brothers.

This was not typical: patriarchal convention allowed daughters to inherit only if there were no sons (Num. 27:1-11). Job’s experience seems to have changed his understanding of justice. Perhaps the social custom of dividing one’s estate between sons but not daughters no longer seemed fair to him, and he no longer felt rule-bound by tradition.

Thus, while a quick reading might lead to the assumption that the closing chapter of Job reaffirms the *quid-pro-quo* theology challenged throughout the book, a closer inspection suggests that the “greatest man of the East” was also a pioneer in exploring the mysteries of God. 📖

Some things are simply beyond our understanding. Can we deal with that? NfJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 31, 2021

Psalm 119

When God Liberates

Did you have an “ABC book” as a child, or buy one for your own children? Such books help young readers learn the alphabet by associating them with words beginning with that letter: “A is for apple,” “B is for ball,” and so forth.

The ancient Hebrews had a related but more advanced practice of making religious poetry easier to memorize by beginning each line, couplet, or stanza with sequential letters of the alphabet.

The book of Lamentations uses this pattern, as do some of the psalms. The longest and most complex of these is Psalm 119. Its 176 verses encompass 22 stanzas of eight couplets each, one for each letter in the Hebrew alphabet – or *alefbet*. 🇮🇱

Each couplet of each stanza begins with the same letter: each of the first eight verses begin with the letter *alef*, the next eight with *bet*, the next with *gimel*, and so on to the final eight verses, which begin with *tav*.

As the poet built his prolonged prayer on the scaffold of the Hebrew *alefbet*, he utilized as building material the theme of God’s Torah, or teaching. Eight different synonyms for the concept appear repeatedly: some stanzas contain all eight terms, and all of them include at least six.

The poet believed that rules are

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. (Ps. 119:1)

important. The thought of life without restrictions may be appealing, but the lack of guidelines could lead to personal or societal chaos. The psalmist recognized the value of holding to certain standards of behavior in individual or corporate life. He encouraged readers to take comfort in knowing basic and acceptable guidelines for living, and to follow them.

In the psalm, the psalmist speaks lovingly of God’s *torah*, God’s word, and God’s way, along with God’s laws, statutes, decrees, commands, precepts, and ordinances. He firmly believes in the value of studying and following the written law.

This indicates a shift from a religion based on temple sacrifices to faith based on obedience to the written law. In this sense Psalm 119 has much in common with the book of Deuteronomy, and likely reflects a post-exilic setting, when the Pentateuch was completed.

Psalm 119 has many characteristics of wisdom psalms such as Psalm 1 and Psalm 19, which have similar themes. It also contains elements of personal lament, however, and these give the psalm an added sense of passion. The psalmist repeatedly professes a love for God’s law, which should be read more appropriately as God’s “teaching.” He earnestly desires to follow God’s way, and hopes that his obedience will motivate God to save him from distress and preserve him from his enemies.

In some ways, the psalm is like a long-play rap song, filled with wordplay

and repetition, a paean of praise for God’s teaching and a plea that God will recognize the psalmist’s devotion. 🇮🇱

A happy claim (vv. 1-3)

Tackling all 176 verses of Psalm 119 would be quite a chore, and with its repetitive themes, unnecessary. This week’s lesson considers the first eight verses, in which the poet sets forth the subject he will then explore at great length. 🇮🇱

Those who look to the psalm as a guide to specific behavior may be disappointed, for the poet consistently speaks of God’s teaching in an abstract fashion. He doesn’t cite specific laws or commandments, such as “don’t steal,” or “show kindness to strangers.” He assumes that readers are familiar with the content of God’s instructions, and focuses on his commitment to them.

Needing words that begin with *alef* for the first word in the eight verses of this section, the poet chose *ashre*, meaning “happy” or “blessed,” for the first two. Many years later, Jesus would begin each of the beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-11) with a Greek equivalent to the same word.

“Happy are those whose way is blameless,” he wrote, “who walk in the law of the LORD” (v. 1). The psalmist does not anticipate that he or anyone else can live a perfect life, but he knows that those who pattern their lives after God’s teachings – who “walk in Yahweh’s *torah*” – will have little cause for censure.

Success requires a full measure of commitment: “Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no

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wrong, but walk in his ways” (vv. 2-3).

“Decrees,” like “law,” serves as one of the eight synonyms for God’s teaching, and “ways” serves the same purpose. “Decrees” could be translated as “rules” or “guidelines.” The word for “keep” could also mean “watch” or “observe.” To be faithful is to follow the rules wholeheartedly.

The psalmist understood that life without rules is not freedom, but a path to misery. Think of a fifth-grade classroom: without some guidelines for respecting both the teacher and fellow students, chaos would reign and no learning would take place.

Or consider traffic regulations. We may occasionally resent them, but can you imagine the disastrous result if everyone drove in whatever lane they chose, at whatever speed, with no stop signs? Appropriate rules are essential for a pleasant and safe driving experience.

The psalmist understood that following God’s way by honoring God’s rules was the pathway to happiness.

A divine command (vv. 4-6)

The next few verses set forth the psalmist’s basic understanding of one’s relationship with God. It begins with a belief that God makes the rules: “You have commanded your precepts (yet a third synonym for God’s teaching) to be kept diligently” (v. 4). The word for “commanded” is the verbal form of the noun “commandments.”

God’s rules are not suggestions, but directives to those who would experience the fulness of life in harmony with God. The poet desires this above everything: “O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!” (a fourth synonym, v. 4). “Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments” (synonym

number five, v. 5).

Note the idiom of “fixed eyes.” I remember the first time my father allowed me to climb on our old John Deere tractor to turn over a field with a disk harrow. After explaining how to raise and lower the harrow, he got me positioned correctly on one edge of the field and told me to focus on a tree at the other end.

By driving straight toward the tree, I could plow a straight furrow. That furrow would serve as a guide: by keeping a front wheel just inside it, the next furrow would also be straight, and I could successfully harrow the field and not be embarrassed by a string of crooked rows. 🇺🇸

How could the psalmist live without shame? By “having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.” He had not one tree to aim toward, but the sum of God’s teaching as it was depicted in the written law.

Many of us memorized a similar thought from v. 11 of this same psalm, probably from the King James Version: “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”

A promise and a plea (vv. 7-8)

The section closes with a pledge and a prayer. “I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances,” he promised, with “ordinances” being yet a sixth synonym for God’s law, or teaching (v. 7).

The word is *mishpat*, often used to mean “judgment,” in this case God’s “righteous judgment.” The poet promises to praise God even as he continues to learn more of God’s way, and he pledges to put his lessons into practice: “I will observe your statutes” (v. 8a).

The poet is not motivated by love

for the law alone, however. As he devotes himself to God, he expects God to look out for him. He pleads, “do not utterly forsake me” (v. 8b).

Was the poet in some danger or facing difficult times? He did not want to feel alone, but wanted God to remain present and active in his life.

Most of us know what it is like to feel alone in the face of hard days, longing to know the presence and care of God. We know what it is like to pray for divine comfort or rescue from testing situations.

We may also have combined our plea for help with a promise to do better. It’s unlikely that we couched our prayers in the same terms as the psalmist, praising God’s guidance with a barrage of synonyms for “law” and promising to obey them.

But many of us have prayed along the order of “O Lord, if you will please (insert request), I promise that I will not (insert wrongdoing) again,” or “I will (insert faithful behavior) from now on.”

We may have sought help with family troubles, or financial trials, or in dealing with an illness. We may have promised to stop drinking or some other harmful habit, or we may have pledged a renewed commitment to church attendance or tithing.

In either case, we have tended to understand faith as a transactional affair in which we do something for God, and God does something for us. Texts such as today’s reading can encourage such thinking, but is that how it should be?

If God’s teaching and God’s ways are good and praiseworthy, should we not seek to follow them because it is the right thing to do, and not just because we expect rewards or special treatment from God?

True wisdom acknowledges that all are better served when we follow God’s ways rather than our own. N.F.J

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Season After Christmas

Jan. 2, 2022

Psalm 147:12-20
A Good Beginning

In Christ We Have ...

Season of Epiphany

Jan. 9, 2022

Acts 8:4-17
Amazing Grace

Jan. 16, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:1-11
Amazing Gifts

Jan. 23, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Amazing Oneness

Jan. 30, 2022

1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Amazing Love

Feb. 6, 2022

Psalm 138
Amazing Care

Feb. 13, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Amazing Hope

Feb. 20, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:35-50
Amazing Thoughts

Feb. 27, 2022

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Amazing Growth

Season of Lent and Easter

March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13
When Facing Temptation

March 13, 2022

Luke 13:31-35
When Foxes Prowl

March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1-9
When Feeling Fruitless

March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
When Far Away

April 3, 2022

Philippians 3:4b-14
Living with Purpose

April 10, 2022

Philippians 2:1-13
Living Mindfully

April 17, 2022

(Easter Sunday)
Luke 24:1-12
Living with Questions

Season After Easter to Pentecost

A Strange Kind of Hope

April 24, 2022

Revelation 1:4-8
A Hopeful Promise

May 1, 2022

Revelation 5:11-14
A Bizarre Picture

May 8, 2022

Revelation 7:9-17
A Hallelujah Chorus

May 15, 2022

Revelation 21:1-6
A New Day

May 22

Revelation 21:10-22:5
A Life-Giving River

May 29, 2022

Revelation 22:12-21
A Desperate Hope

June 5, 2022

(Day of Pentecost)
John 14:8-17
An Eternal Advocate

Season After Pentecost

Songs for the Soul

June 12, 2022

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Listen to the Lady

June 19, 2022

Psalms 42-43
Don't Give Up

June 26, 2022

Psalms 77:1-2,
11-20
Don't Forget

July 3, 2022

Psalms 30
Learn to Dance

July 10, 2022

Psalms 82
Practice Justice

July 17, 2022

Psalms 52
Choose Wisely

July 24, 2022

Psalms 85
Celebrate Salvation

July 31, 2022

Psalms 49
Vanquish Fear

Crotchety Old Preachers

Aug. 7, 2022

Isaiah 1:1-20
Ritual Wrongs

Aug. 14, 2022

Isaiah 5:1-10
Rotten Fruit

Aug. 21, 2022

Isaiah 58:9b-14
Phony Faith

Aug. 28, 2022

Jeremiah 2:1-13
Lost Love

Learning from Jesus

Sept. 4, 2022

Luke 14:25-33
Counting the Cost

Sept. 11, 2022

Luke 15:1-10
Counting Sheep

Sept. 18, 2022

Luke 16:1-13
Counting Coins

Sept. 25, 2022

Luke 16:19-31
Counting Options

Oct. 2, 2022

Luke 17:5-10
Forgiveness and Faith

Oct. 9, 2022

Luke 17:11-19
Gratitude and Grace

Oct. 16, 2022

Luke 18:1-8
Persistence and Prayer

Oct. 23, 2022

Luke 18:9-14
Pomp and Penitence

Oct. 30, 2022

Luke 19:1-10
Repentance and Refunds

Darkness into Light

Nov. 6, 2022

Job 19:23-27a
Trust for the Darkness

Nov. 13, 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25
Hope for the Despairing

Nov. 20, 2022

Psalms 46
Refuge for the Troubled

Advent

As We Wait

Nov. 27, 2022

Romans 13:8-14
Salvation is Near

Dec. 4, 2022

Romans 15:4-13
Promises to Remember

Dec. 11, 2022

James 5:7-11
Patience in Trials

Dec. 18, 2022

Romans 1:1-7
Defining Identity

Christmas

Dec. 25, 2022

Luke 2:1-20
The Old New Story

Bill Clinton (1993–2001): Part 1

By Bruce Gourley

It was a heady time for conservative white American evangelicals of the early 1990s. Ronald Reagan had rescued them from a liberal federal government focused on equal rights.

Few noticed that while a smiling President Reagan stoked their grievances in the name of God, he also picked their pockets by reducing taxes on the rich and big corporations at the expense of ordinary Americans.

Loosening regulations on corporate America, Reagan had returned the nation to the economic policies of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover that led to the 1930s Great Depression. Conservative white evangelical leaders welcomed the return to the past, remaining silent about the financial harm done to their middle- and lower-class followers during Reagan's presidency.

In the worldview of cultural conservatives, economic hardships paled in comparison to preserving shrinking white dominance in America.

CULTURE WAR

The Confederate States of America — a mid-19th-century self-proclaimed but imaginary southern Christian nation founded upon a commitment to white supremacy and the enslavement of Blacks — had formally birthed Christian nationalism. But during the Civil War that resulted, many white Northerners, too, had remained racist even while fighting to end slavery.

This is the 42nd 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 Bill Clinton, President of the United States.

Long after the South lost the war over slavery and Black Americans gained freedom, systemic white privilege and Black discrimination continued throughout the nation, a heritage Reagan had tapped into twice to win the presidency.

Following Reagan, George H.W. Bush, a non-evangelical who was neither inspirational nor doctrinaire, in his four years as president, had nonetheless furthered his predecessor's ideological trajectory.

In the 1992 presidential contest all candidates understood that Reagan, allied with conservative white evangelicals, had reset America's political landscape toward rolling back inclusive achievements of the 1960s Civil Rights era. But would the political pendulum's rightward swing last?

Among Republicans, the moderately-inclined Bush, running for a second presidential term, faced a serious challenge within his own party in the person of Patrick Buchanan.

Addressing the Republican National Convention, Buchanan, playing to a crowd

comprised heavily of white evangelicals, claimed Reagan's mantle of small government, unchecked capitalism and Christian nationalism. Condemning inclusive liberalism, Buchanan succinctly framed the foundation and future of the Republican Party in militant imagery.

"There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America," the former political consultant to Republican presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan enthused. "It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself."

It all boiled down to the endangered supremacy of white America. At the junction of politics and pulpit, a Christian nationalist God beckoned his followers to beat back the rising tide of equal rights for minorities.

"[W]e must take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country," Buchanan thundered.

Conjured up in the 1950s to anoint the Cold War against communism, the God of Christian nationalism during Reagan's years had finally found a home in the White House. With God's help, in Christian nationalists' telling, Reagan had driven a stake into Soviet communism, although the hated ideology did not crumble until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 during Bush's presidency.

Now in America, an equally despised ideology of inclusive democracy stood as the lone barrier between God and his coveted white Christian nation.

The term "culture wars," deployed by Buchanan in 1992, had in recent years edged into the popular lexicon. Weaponized by the Christian Right during Reagan's second term as a battle cry against liberalism, it positioned white evangelicals as victims in a nation striving toward an aspirational vision of equality for all.

But for all of Buchanan's political pedigree and Christian nationalist rhetoric, he proved unable to overcome President George H.W. Bush's incumbency advantage. Having achieved successes in foreign affairs but saddled with an economic recession rooted in Reaganomics, in addition to anger from many conservatives for having raised taxes, Bush nonetheless won the Republican presidential primary.

Apart from Bush, the Republican Party's platform, consisting of far-right cultural and social ideology centered on absolutist anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality positions, clearly represented the powerful white evangelical wing of the party.

Asked if the Christian Right was trying to take over the Republican Party, conservative television personality and evangelical leader Pat Robertson laughed, asking: "What is there left to take over?"

RESTLESSNESS

Democratic candidate Bill Clinton, governor of Arkansas and a Southern Baptist, disagreed. Alongside the disconnect between Reaganomics and a struggling middle class, he also sensed discontent among religiously-oriented voters.

Focusing on widespread restlessness, he emerged victorious in the Democratic presidential primary.

Turning prevailing politics on its head, in his acceptance speech Clinton openly evoked scripture, speaking biblical language with familiar ease. Aghast at the Democrat's intruding upon their religio-political turf, Christian nationalists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson angrily dismissed Clinton's faith.

Clinton was "manipulating the Holy Scripture for political purposes," Falwell fumed, glossing over his own leading role in the religionizing of politics. On his *700 Club* television program Robertson condemned Clinton as espousing "pseudo-Christianity."

The national press, introduced to evangelical Christianity by Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign and still trying to understand the movement, focused on Clinton's religious faith. The candidate obliged, sharing freely.

As a youngster growing up in Hot Springs, Ark., Bill Clinton walked to church

by himself — his parents not being church attenders — with a Bible in his hand. His Sunday school teachers thought he might one day be a great evangelist.

"It was an important part of my life," said Clinton. "It was moral instruction ... trying to get closer to being a good person and understanding what life was all about. I really looked forward to it every Sunday, getting dressed up and walking that mile or so alone."

A *Washington Post* reporter summarized candidate Clinton's personal faith: "For those who see Clinton as a political chameleon who changes colors depending on his environment, his religious experience suggests an alternative explanation. Not only is he a graduate of a Jesuit college who regularly attends a Southern Baptist church and attends Pentecostal revivals every summer, celebrating with fundamentalists who speak in tongues, but he is married to a Methodist who attends a different church in Little Rock."

While neutralizing the Republican Party's religious advantage by his active church life and biblical fluency, Clinton shrewdly focused foremost on the economy. Incessantly reminding Americans that Reagan and Bush's policies enriched the wealthy at the expense of everyone else, the Democratic candidate directly appealed to moderate Reagan Democrats and a younger generation of voters facing a gloomy economic future.

Clinton's strategy worked. Aided by the third-party candidacy of anti-Bush billionaire businessman Ross Perot, Clinton and his vice-presidential running mate, U.S. Senator from Tennessee and fellow Southern Baptist, Al Gore, easily defeated the Republican ticket.

Bill Clinton — the nation's second Southern Baptist president — and Arkansas, defying Republicans' near sweep of the Deep South, arrived on the national stage.

HOPE

Born Aug. 19, 1946 in Hope, Ark., as William Jefferson Blythe III, Clinton's story did not have a hopeful beginning.

His father had died mere months earlier in an automobile accident. Never

knowing his father, Clinton in his earliest years was raised by his grandparents, while his mother, Virginia Cassidy Blythe, studied nursing in New Orleans so that she could one day assume responsibility for her son.

From Eldridge and Edith Cassidy, his grandparents, Clinton in his formative years absorbed values of kindness and inclusion. In an era of segregation, the Cassidys, owners of a grocery store near the rural community of Hope, ignored racist norms by treating white and Black customers on equal terms.

Virginia, obtaining her nursing degree, returned to Hope when Bill was age four. The same year she married Roger Clinton, an automobile salesman. Three years later the family moved to Hot Springs where the couple obtained better jobs.

Despite his parents' disinterest in religion, Bill faithfully attended the Park Place Baptist Church, walking to the church on Sunday mornings. He was baptized into the church, where he met city leaders and local prominent families.

As a teenager, Bill legally changed his last name to Clinton. During his senior year in high school in 1962 he was selected to go to Washington D.C., to participate in a youth leadership conference. Attendees were invited to the White House to meet President John F. Kennedy.

Clinton was among the first in the group to shake the president's hand. He walked away from that experience inspired to make a difference in people's lives by becoming president himself.

Shortly thereafter, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, which Clinton watched on television, further inspired the aspiring teenager.

With financial assistance from scholarships and government loans, Clinton attended Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., earning a Bachelor of Science degree in International Affairs. During his college years Clinton worked as an office intern for Arkansas Sen. J. William Fulbright.

A Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University followed, then a law degree from Yale University, where he became involved

in Democratic politics and met Hillary Rodham, a Methodist and fellow law student.

Upon graduation in 1973, Clinton began teaching law at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Rodham also took a teaching position at the university, and in 1975 the couple married.

Although Clinton ran for U.S. Congress in 1974 and lost, two years later he was elected the Attorney General of Arkansas. Following another two years Clinton, at the age of 32, was elected as governor of Arkansas, the youngest governor in the U.S.

Losing the position two years later, Clinton, demonstrating his determination and political skills, ran again, returning to the governor's office in 1983, where he remained until his election as president.

INCLUSION

Days before his departure from Arkansas to the White House, Bill Clinton paid tribute to his home church in Little Rock, Immanuel Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist congregation.

"Were it not for this church," he said from the pulpit of the congregation he had joined in 1980 and in which he sang in the choir, "I believe it would be virtually impossible [that] I would be going to Washington next week as president. And I am absolutely certain I would be less prepared for the job."

By then, Clinton's presence at Immanuel Baptist was mired in controversy. A moderate Baptist congregation within a fundamentalist denomination, the church had been criticized by far-right Southern Baptist leaders closely aligned with the Republican Party, and picketed because of Gov. Clinton's support for abortion rights and the inclusion of homosexuals in the military.

During his tribute to the Immanuel Baptist Church, Clinton thanked Pastor Rex Horne for "standing by me and my membership in the church even when people in our own Southern Baptist Convention questioned his doing so."

He also thanked "everyone for always making me feel at home, even in the darkest days of my campaign." In a nation increasingly under the ever-tightening grip of

Christian nationalism, Clinton embodied a tolerant and inclusive religious faith.

In his inaugural address of Jan. 20, 1993, newly-elected President Clinton, a charismatic political moderate, cast his vision for America.

Reaching back to the nation's founders, he spoke of America's "ideals" of life, liberty and happiness, while acknowledging an uncertain future.

"Raised in unrivaled prosperity," Clinton said, "we inherit an economy that is still the world's strongest, but is weakened by business failures, stagnant wages, increasing inequality, and deep divisions among our people."

Taking office at the dawning of unprecedented global communications and commerce, he observed that "technology is almost magical."

Mere months earlier Congress had decided that the World Wide Web, a way of accessing the Internet through online "pages," could be used for commercial purposes. Although few Americans yet had access to the Internet, forward-looking businesses by early 1993 were busy creating corporate Web pages.

Nodding to new opportunities made possible by the digital revolution, Clinton noted that the unfolding "new world has already enriched the lives of millions of Americans who are able to compete and win in it." But many Americans, suffering from an economy strongly tilted toward the rich, had been left behind.

Lamenting that "most people are working harder for less," while "others cannot work at all" and "the cost of health care devastates families and threatens to bankrupt many," Clinton addressed middle class America.

"We must invest more in our own people, in their jobs, in their future, and at the same time cut our massive debt," the Democrat president insisted, reminding his audience that government spending had increased dramatically under his Republican predecessors.

Positioning himself as a man of the people, Clinton promised to focus on "people whose toil and sweat sends us here and pays our way."

RENEWAL

Speaking to national restlessness, he called for an "American renewal," declaring: "Let us resolve to reform our politics, so that power and privilege no longer shout down the voice of the people."

Having long publicly positioned his religiosity between the personal "born again" identity of Jimmy Carter and the political civil religion of Ronald Reagan, Clinton in his inaugural address offered no hint of his personal faith.

On the other hand, he astutely quoted a scripture reference — "And let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season, we shall reap, if we faint not" (Gal. 6:9) — and ended his speech with a familiar refrain in presidential speeches of recent decades: "God bless you all."

But what could a Democratic president reap within a national political atmosphere shaped by Ronald Reagan and Christian nationalists?

Facing a daunting list of domestic issues but backed by a Democratic-controlled Congress, Clinton pledged to right what he perceived as the nation's pressing wrongs: unemployment, a runaway deficit, a health care crisis, and ineffective welfare spending.

Significantly lowering unemployment, a bipartisan issue but a vexing economic problem for more than two decades, would take time to resolve. Deficit spending, a primary goal of Republicans yet made much worse by Reagan and Bush, seemed impossible to overcome.

Alleviating soaring health care costs, increasingly unaffordable by ordinary Americans, resonated on Main Street but lacked traction on Wall Street or K Street. Reforming welfare spending, a racially-infused issue pitting a united conservative Republican Party against ideologically-diverse Democrats, appeared fraught with political danger.

Ever perceptive to political winds, Clinton quickly defined his national political identity by finessing Reagan's legacy and governing from the middle.

Within his first year the president fashioned an economic package of tax increases on the upper class (a liberal Democratic priority) and federal spending

cuts that primarily impacted poor Americans (a conservative Republican tactic).

Not all Democrats approved, but their majority congressional status assured passage of the bill. No Republican House or Senate members, on the other hand, voted for the economic bill, despite agreeing with cuts on federal assistance to the poor.

HEALTH CARE

The same year First Lady Hillary Clinton, tasked by the president with developing a plan for reducing Americans' healthcare costs through universal healthcare, garnered the wrath of Republicans.

Universal healthcare had first been proposed by Theodore Roosevelt some eight decades earlier, and had resurfaced in national politics several times thereafter in both political parties. Hillary Clinton's presence, however, changed the historically bipartisan concept.

A professional woman of strong character, will and accomplishment, Hillary contrasted with patriarchal ideals of submissive womanhood. With mounting opposition, Republicans criticized her personality and condemned her health care proposal.

Nevertheless, Republicans, recognizing the widespread popularity of universal healthcare, created a conservative alternative. Crafted by the Heritage Foundation, the Republican proposal promised to broadly expand access to healthcare by: establishing an individual mandate, creating purchasing pools, standardizing benefits, funding vouchers for the poor to buy insurance, and implementing a ban on denial of coverage for pre-existing conditions.

In the wake of opposition from the health insurance industry, both the Clinton and the Republican healthcare proposals died. Some two decades later the conservative Republican plan would be embraced and enacted by a Democratic president allied with the health insurance industry and then universally opposed by Republicans in Congress.

OPPOSITION

Meanwhile, by 1994 and with Republican opposition to both Clintons accelerating,



Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen presents the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service to President Bill Clinton in a ceremonial farewell at Fort Myer, Va., in 2001.

centrist “Clintonomics” proved to be a notable success, reducing the federal deficit by one-third. But rather than rallying around a debt-reductionist president, Republicans ignored the fact that Clinton had accomplished what Reagan promised but failed to do.

At the same time, Republicans made large gains in the 1994 mid-term congressional House elections by moving further rightward. Conservative evangelicals — largely Republicans — provided crucial votes in the 1994 mid-term victories, opposing President Clinton's agenda of abortion and homosexual rights.

Clinton's efforts to soften the opposition by inviting his evangelical critics to the White House and speaking their language failed to yield results. Nor did his regular attendance with his family at Washington's Foundry United Methodist Church mute conservative evangelical opposition.

Richard Land, a far-right leader within the Southern Baptist Convention, voiced the limitations of religious language and regular church attendance on the part of the Democratic president: “Bill Clinton knew the language” and “could talk like a Southern Baptist evangelist when he wanted to,” Land noted years later. But white conservative evangelicals “hated what he was doing

with it, because they were in fundamental disagreement with him about so many very important social issues.”

In the words of evangelical leader Richard Cizik, “the president sort of understood who we are, but didn't have the heartbeat of evangelicals.”

But one thing Clinton did understand was that he needed only a minority of white evangelical votes to win a second term in the White House.

In the face of ideological differences between Clinton and his evangelical detractors, the president in 1993 triumphantly signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), bipartisan legislation overwhelmingly passed by Congress and designed to circumvent “neutral” laws burdening religious exercise. Congress cited the Supreme Court decision in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990) that prohibited the use of peyote as unintentionally infringing upon religious rituals involving the substance.

Clinton basked in the unifying nature of the new law that annulled the 1990 Supreme Court decision and benefited all people of religious faith.

“What this law basically says is that the government should be held to a very high level of proof before it interferes with someone's [First Amendment] free exercise

of religion,” he announced upon signing the bill. “This judgment is shared by the people of the United States as well as by the Congress. We believe strongly that we can never, we can never be too vigilant in this work.”

Christian nationalists, although pleased, remained focused on dismantling the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause — prohibitive of government-mandated religion — in order to cancel constitutional church-state separation and create a distinctly Christian government devoted to discrimination against minorities and non-Christians.

Opposition to abortion and homosexuality, practices welcomed to varying degrees by liberals, provided social, cultural and religious fuel for the uncompromising and ambitious Christian Right.

TONE SHIFT

Within this increasingly extremist and toxic political-religious environment, reality faded into the background, the first family became the embodiment of evil itself, and the Clintons’ enemies turned to an emerging, modern media landscape of fake news in an attempt to defeat the president in the 1996 election.

Steeped in lies, conspiracy theories and hatred of the Clintons, the 1994 *Clinton Chronicles* signaled a shift in tone and launched a new chapter in American political and religious history.

Hawked by Jerry Falwell on his popular *Old Time Gospel Hour* program, the deceptive documentary accused President Clinton of being, among other things, a drug addict, a drug dealer, a money launderer, a murderer, and an adulterer. A lack of evidence — apart from some sexual infidelity allegations that in time proved more substantial — did not deter white conservative evangelicals from embracing the conspiratorial film as gospel.

A far-right extremist, the film’s director, Patrick Matrisciana, formed his own production company to officially distribute the documentary. Jeremiah Films, a conservative evangelical enterprise, claimed to “promote patriotism, traditional values, and the biblical worldview of [the] founding fathers,” embodying Christian nationalists’

goals of a godly white America.

Alongside extremist anti-Clinton Christian media, a far-right secular media enterprise, Fox News, led by former Republican strategist Roger Ailes, emerged during the presidential campaign season of 1996.

Under withering ideological attacks from evangelically popular conservative media, Clinton, seeking re-election while facing the wrath of conservative Christians, made a play for white evangelical votes by airing commercials on Christian radio stations.

At the same time the president, deftly distancing himself from both far-right Republicans and far-left Democrats, ran a moderate campaign focused on broader, hot-button political issues: crime, welfare reform, affirmative action and the federal budget.

MIDDLE GROUND

On the one hand Clinton supported a crime bill that would place 100,000 additional officers on the street; on the other, he backed anti-assault weapons laws.

With a nod to conservatives, Clinton pitched a plan to limit welfare assistance to poor individuals to two years only. Pleasing liberals, he touted new tax policies that shifted more of the tax burden to the upper class.

Straddling the political middle, the president affirmed racial-based affirmative action in order to place the American Dream within reach of more minorities, and campaigned on mending, not ending — as white conservatives insisted — federal programs designed to uplift disadvantaged African Americans.

Furthering his campaign prospects, Clinton’s rhetorical skills shone in his stirring response to the horrific 1995 domestic terrorist bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building. He also received high marks in foreign affairs for helping secure a ceasefire in the ethnically-fueled Bosnian war in the former republic of Yugoslavia.

And most importantly for many Americans, Clinton’s economic policies proved far more successful for ordinary Americans than had Reagan’s or Bush’s policies. A maturing economic recovery paralleling

election season generated low unemployment, low interest rates, and a steep decline in the federal budget.

Republican candidate Bob Dole, meanwhile, proved uninspiring and never gained significant traction. Clinton and Gore coasted to a re-election victory, the two Southern Baptists defying strong opposition from voters within their own religious denomination.

Election data painted a portrait of a hardening, but not yet calcified, red-and-blue America. Dole won a total of 19 states, “most of them in the Great Plains and the Southeast, regions that form much of the heartland of Protestant America, in its mainline and evangelical varieties,” in the words of a *New York Times* analysis.

In addition, the Republican candidate claimed the Rocky Mountain West.

“President Clinton, by contrast,” the article continued, “triumphed in a more religiously diverse territory, taking states in the Northeast, upper Midwest and West Coast, as well as parts of the Sun Belt. Many of the states he won have very substantial Roman Catholic populations (Illinois, Louisiana and New Mexico, for example), large concentrations of Jewish voters (Florida, New Jersey and New York) or significant minorities of people who claim no religious affiliation at all (California, Nevada and Washington State).”

Nudging the electoral map leftward during a time of economic prosperity, Clinton and the Democratic Party outperformed their 1992 election results, reclaiming a significant swath of religious voters, including white evangelicals, previously lost to Reagan and Bush. On the other hand, the two parties settled for a stalemate in congressional races.

But would Clinton’s neutralizing of Republican power last? John Green, a political scholar at the University of Akron, voiced his doubts.

“If I was pressed,” Green said following the election, “what I would say is what Bill Clinton was able to do was halt a certain progression away from ethno-cultural politics toward ideological politics.”

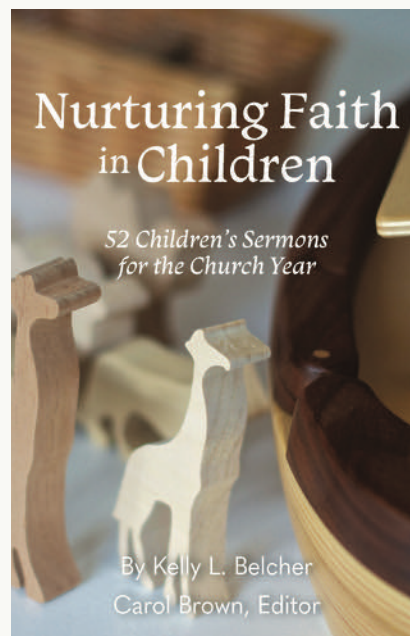
But, he continued, “Maybe this won’t survive Bill Clinton.” **NFJ**

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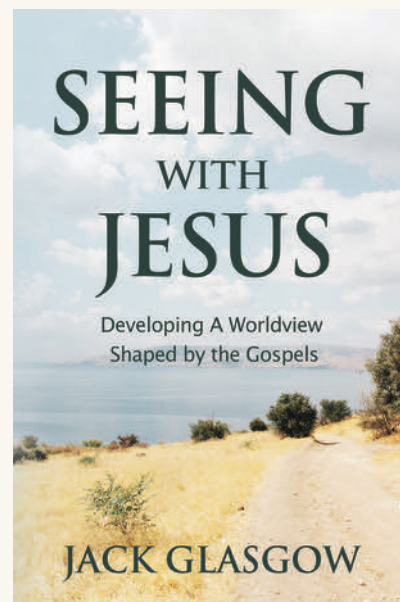
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VIRTUAL SANCTUARY

Many Christians finding substance, not just escape, on TikTok

BY CALLY CHISHOLM

According to my account cache, I have scrolled through 191 megabytes of videos on TikTok. Only God knows how many hours that equates to.

I spend a lot of downtime on the app, browsing through my “For You” page when I want to laugh or disassociate for a while.

Despite its addictive properties and reputation for viral dance videos, however, TikTok is not devoid of substance. Its impact on the public perception of Christianity and religion cannot be ignored.

Millions of young people are sharing stories of trauma, mistreatment and abuse at the hands of religious leaders to a large audience every day.

ORIGIN

TikTok originated from Musical.ly, a video-sharing service that allowed users to post lip-synching and dance content. Chinese technology firm Bytedance purchased and rebranded Musical.ly as TikTok in 2018.

TikTok offers much more than its ancestor as a social media app that holds a diverse array of content ranging from comedy, dance, DIY, politics, food, music, fanpages and education — in quick bursts lasting anywhere from 15 to 60 seconds.

The format is similar to Vine, an app that limited users to six-second videos before its demise in late 2016.

“Preachers hate this, but that [15 to 60 seconds] is all you need to communicate something meaningful,” said Brandan Robertson, an ordained minister, author, and founder of Metanoia, a global digital faith community.

“If you can say something in one



“TikTok’s impact on the public perception of Christianity and religion cannot be ignored.”

minute that reframes somebody’s theology or encourages them, that is a church that changes people’s lives.”

IMPACT

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Robertson noticed that more people were engaging with Christianity through TikTok than in most live-streamed church services. He expressed excitement that the app was providing space for a more progressive and inclusive gospel.

“This wasn’t the surface-level social media interaction I was seeing on Instagram,” said Robertson. “These people were commenting and deeply engaged,”

In April 2021, Statista reported more than 73 million users of TikTok in the U.S. alone. The site projects that number will jump to 88 million by 2024.

Among these millions of users are ministers and other Christians, evangelicals and “evangelicals,” all interacting and conversing about Christian life, politics, culture and interpretations of scripture.

Jeremy Coleman, Vision Pastor at West Metro Community Church in Yukon, Okla., said his journey on TikTok began after one of his videos went viral in the midst of the 2020 presidential election. His church has

since been supportive of his content.

“I work with an amazing staff who are constantly encouraging me and challenging me,” Coleman told *Nurturing Faith Journal*.

“That’s not to say that everyone always agrees with everything I say or loves every video I make,” he added. “But one thing that makes WMCC unique is our ability to love each other authentically and have civil discourse and good conversations. I am thankful for my church.”

CONTENT

Many TikTok users come across these videos when the platform’s algorithm suspects any interest in religious dialogue. The “For You” page customizes a playlist of sorts, highlighting videos for each individual user to cater to their unique interests.

“Liking” or commenting on any particular video may trigger a change in that person’s algorithm of recommended content.

“TikTok is unique in that the more you use the app, the more it serves you specific content based on your interests,” April Reuning, co-host of the ‘Evangelicalish’ podcast, told *Nurturing Faith Journal*. “So, I mostly see content from other creators who are also deconstructing their faith or

using their platforms to talk about harmful church beliefs.”

Since joining the app in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Reuning has developed a following from her funny sketches and skits addressing hypocrisy in the church and her experiences deconstructing harmful beliefs. She explains that communicating messages through humor can bring healing to those who may be grappling with their own pain or religious trauma.

“I receive messages every day from people dealing with church hurt and spiritual abuse, who thanked me for bringing light and validation to their experience,” she said. “It’s a powerful thing to know you’re not alone and that you’re not crazy despite what people in the church may say.”

These video-sharing apps have influenced the Millennial and Gen Z zeitgeist in various ways. Viral quotes, phrases, memes, and imagery that originate from these apps make their way into the everyday language and humor that ultimately outlasts the software itself.

VOCABULARY

Many new terms and phrases such as “exvangelical” and “exfundie” have come out of these virtual conversations about religious life. As of June 26, the tag #exvangelical has more than 194 million views and counting and #exfundie has 61 million and counting.

These terms describe a new generation of Christians who are renouncing their former ties to evangelicalism and fundamentalism.

Many Christians on the app cite political happenings and social justice as an important part of their deconstruction and spiritual journeys. The church’s historically poor response to the treatment of the LGBTQ community, immigrants, women and Black Americans drives a lot of people away from the pews.

“I think a lot of younger people are leaving the church because they crave authenticity,” said Coleman. “So many aren’t running from faith. They are running from fake.”

Coleman said church leaders often say, “Love your neighbor,” while express-

ing bigotry, misogyny, and racism. “It just doesn’t add up.”

Many users of the app tie their spiritual and religious beliefs to their political leanings. These two together provide a more nuanced perspective as to why many young Christians are straying from church life.

Reuning, the podcast host, describes herself in her TikTok bio as a “recovering conservative.” Recently she has discovered new revelations about her faith from growing up in Assemblies of God with Pentecostal influences. TikTok became a platform to document her growing frustrations.

“I’ve realized the ‘love’ I thought I was given as a conservative Christian wasn’t actually love,” she said. “It was hate wrapped in scripture and indoctrination with enough ‘Christianese’ to make me feel good about myself. There’s a grief to this realization.”

ALTERNATIVES

Similarly, Robertson grew up in a fundamentalist church that encouraged conversion and street preaching. He wanted to be the “next great evangelical preacher,” he confesses. But when he came out as gay, he was forced to re-evaluate his belief system entirely.

Living in Chicago, he discovered that what he had been taught about other religions and practices didn’t hold up. He credits his exposure to a more diverse group of people as a catalyst for his deconstruction and transition to a more progressive theology.

Robertson has also been on the receiving end of homophobic remarks and attitudes in the church.

“I found that the LGBTQ community, that had no religious affiliation, was so much better of a church than any church I was a part of in their willingness to support me and be there for me,” said Robertson.

With each video he posts, Robertson hopes to “offer an alternative” to a prevalent Christianity that excludes people based on sexuality or gender identity.

“I want to reach the young queer people. My primary calling is to let them know that I, a very gay pastor, exist — which means they can exist with their faith and sexuality and really combat the terrible

homophobic and transphobic things that are on TikTok and everywhere else,” he said.

The opportunities TikTok provides to young Christians and ministers are endless. The platform brings like-minded people together to form bonds and networks.

Reuning and Coleman, for example, have created a podcast, ‘Evangelicalish,’ with another mutual friend they met through the app to discuss their experiences in the church.

“TikTok has provided me with an incredible community of folks,” said Coleman. “People who care about me, pray for me, encourage me, and challenge me.”

“I think about people like my friends April [Reuning] (@aprilajoy) and Paul [Swearengin] (@pastorpaul_tiktok),” she added. “We live in three different time zones and have never sat in the same room; yet we have a unique and supportive relationship.”

CONGREGATING

While older generations often express concerns about the health and wellness of the church — and its declining attendance — millions of young people are engaging in conversations about theology and religion and finding fulfillment and joy from TikTok.

Virtual congregations are being formed every day. TikTok has become a sanctuary for more progressive and open-minded Christians who are tired of the antiquated ways of conservatism and fundamentalism.

“Every pastor and religious leader needs to get on TikTok,” said Robertson. “I really think we have gone through a cultural reformation during COVID.”

“We now have this digital reality where the oldest people and the youngest people in the congregation have access to digital stuff,” he added. “If you want to reach more people, you have to meet them where they are.”

Wanttoknowmore? Follow these three on TikTok: Brandan Robertson @revbrandan-robertson, April Reuning @aprilajoy, and Jeremy Coleman @jeremycradio. [NFJ](#)

—Cally Chisholm is a graduate student at East Tennessee State University and an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Intern with Good Faith Media.

Eco-justice advocate Jitsuo Morikawa deserves recognition, emulation

BY AARON WEAVER

Stories of Asian Americans have, unfortunately, been neglected or outright ignored in Baptist histories. This is regrettable, especially in the case of one extremely notable Asian-American leader.

Jitsuo Morikawa was once dubbed by Tony Campolo as “the most dynamic and brilliant leader American Baptists have had.” Campolo was right.

Morikawa was the most significant shaper of American Baptist social ethics since Walter Rauschenbusch and the father of a Baptist environmentalism called “eco-justice,” which understood issues of ecology and justice to be interrelated and inseparable.

Born to Buddhist parents in British Columbia, Canada, Morikawa (1912–1987) became a Christian at age 16 and was ordained to the gospel ministry in 1937 at a Baptist church in Pasadena, Calif.

He graduated from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary with the hope of becoming a missionary, but his Japanese ancestry proved to be a barrier. Morikawa went on to serve as pastor for three Japanese-American Baptist congregations in the Los Angeles area.

His time in the pulpit was limited as he and his wife, Hazel, were rounded up and forced into an internment camp in Arizona for two years alongside nearly 18,000 other Japanese Americans.

With World War II still raging in 1943, the historic First Baptist Church of Chicago, a predominantly white congregation, courageously called Morikawa as pastor. Thirteen years later, he left the pulpit to begin a 20-year journey as an executive with American Baptist Churches USA.



As director of the denomination’s evangelism department, Morikawa offered a new model for evangelism that signaled a more social action-oriented trajectory. This holistic evangelism viewed salvation to be both individual and social — inclusive of the entire world, political and economic structures too.

“We have obscured the gospel, distorted the gospel by assuming that evangelism was primarily and fundamentally winning souls to Christ and saving them from eternal perdition,” said Morikawa. “We have missed

out on the larger horizon of the redemption of the cosmos, the restoration of God’s universe.”

“Evangelism is primarily the activity of God, transforming this world, renewing this world, sustaining this world, persons, society, institutions, families, corporations and social structures,” he explained.

Some American Baptists politely labeled him a universalist; others called him a heretic. Southern Baptist leaders such as Herschel Hobbs wanted to keep the attention off Jim Crow and the civil rights

struggle, and instead to focus on debates around baptism and biblical inspiration.

Morikawa decried this rejection of justice issues.

“We need to be delivered out of preoccupation with the church and bring Baptists into a relevant engagement with Christian service in the world,” he told leaders of North American Baptist denominations at the final gathering of the five-year evangelism campaign, Baptist Jubilee Advance, in 1964.

Armed with this “new evangelism,” Morikawa steered American Baptists toward a fresh understanding of what being the “church in the world” looked like in the 20th century.

He led American Baptist Home Mission Societies to launch a strategic three-year focus on how the denomination could help achieve both ecological wholeness and social justice.

With “eco-justice” (coined by his colleagues) as a priority, a Morikawa-led task force urged American Baptists to reorient their priorities to create a “just and ecologi-

cally whole world, for God sent Jesus that we might have life, and have it abundantly.”

The destructive theology of God-given dominion needed to be discarded, and repentance was needed for the consumerism-driven sins that had produced so much environmental degradation, he emphasized.

In addition to educational initiatives to raise awareness about eco-justice concerns, Morikawa and his colleagues called on American Baptist institutions to develop standards, goals and guidelines for its programs to ensure ecologically responsible practices.

The formation of alliances with corporations and nonprofit organizations to effect change was also encouraged, as well as public support for policy and legislative remedies.

Morikawa’s strategic effort on behalf of eco-justice did achieve some successes within American Baptist life. Denominational entities adopted eco-justice practices, such as ethical investing and making church facilities more multipurpose and energy efficient, and also offered educational

opportunities such as retreats and prioritized public policy advocacy.

Eco-justice was also emphasized in international missions programs through initiatives to restore ecological balance in countries like Haiti and Nicaragua.

With a climate crisis upon us now, we should look to the example of this often-neglected Japanese-American Baptist hero for wisdom and inspiration.

Morikawa modeled the importance of living an active faith or “evangelistic lifestyle” that readily recognized the social nature of sin and affirmed the Christian calling to pursue social justice and ecological wholeness.

To echo Morikawa, may we be delivered from our preoccupations that distract us from Christian service in the world — and may we make our words meaningful through concrete action. **NFJ**

—Aaron Weaver is director of communications for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

This article first appeared online as part of Good Faith Media’s Earth Day 2021 series.

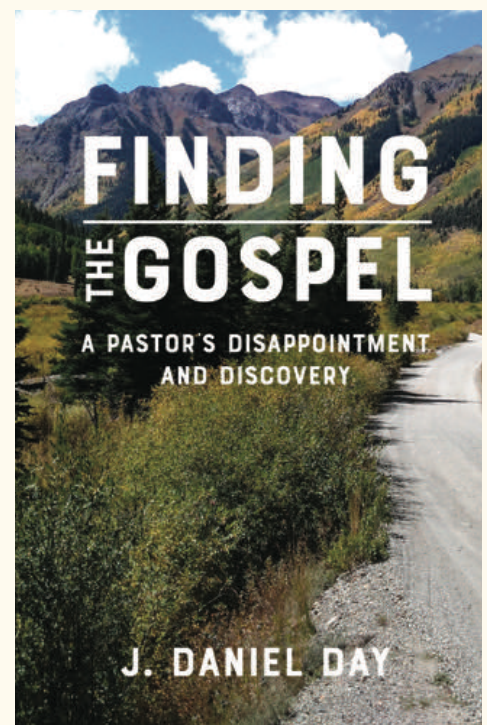
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Ignorance and religious zeal form a bad combination

By Tony W. Cartledge

There is ignorance that comes from never having an opportunity to learn something. I am ignorant of the fine points of quantum physics, for example. I've read enough for a general familiarity, but I haven't studied it in detail. Translating Sanskrit? Don't ask me.

There is also willful ignorance that refuses to accept or believe something even when evidence demonstrates it is manifestly true. Many people continue to deny that humans contribute to global warming, for example, or that Joe Biden is the legitimately elected president.

There is narrow ignorance that focuses so much on one belief that it downplays previously cherished principles. We see it when "evangelicals" readily cast aside biblical concerns such as morality and integrity to support overtly corrupt politicians and policies designed to support white supremacy.

Then, there is twisted ignorance, which not only refuses to accept clearly demonstrated realities, but invents wild notions to refute them. Think QAnon, for example, and the assorted conspiracy "theories" promoting notions of a "deep state" run by child-trafficking pedophiles and the supposed reinstatement of Donald Trump.

When twisted ignorance and religious zeal combine, the result is particularly noxious.

Where I live, a group of parents complained that the Wake County (N.C.) School Board should no longer require masks for summer school or year-round school students — even though a state-mandated "Strong Schools Toolkit" for reopening schools, following CDC guidelines, called for them.

Raleigh's *News & Observer* quoted an angry parent who described masks as "respiration trash muzzles." The decision to require masks, she said, promoted "a spirit of fear which comes from Satan."

God "created us to breathe freely and tells us not to live in fear," she added. Opposing vaccination as well, she claimed that the COVID-19 vaccine "comes from the pits of hell."

How can anyone believe such blather? It can only derive from a suspension of logic, a willful refusal to acknowledge clear scientific evidence, and a penchant for twisting the truth.

The woman, no doubt, had in mind the King James translation of 2 Tim. 1:7, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

Yet many other Bible verses do counsel fear, specifically the fear of God: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 111:10, Prov. 9:10).

But what did the author of 2 Timothy have in mind when speaking of a "spirit of fear"? Would he counsel us to walk into traffic because we don't fear speeding cars, or have the power to resist them? Would he suggest that we leave loaded guns within reach of children because we do not fear potential consequences?

No — because he also affirmed that God has given us the spirit "of a sound mind" (KJV). The NRSV and NIV translate it "self-discipline," and the HCSB as "sound judgment."

The Louw and Nida Greek lexicon describes the meaning of *sōphronismos* as "to have understanding about practical matters and thus be able to act sensibly." Its

meaning in 2 Tim. 1:7 is conveyed as "the ability to understand how to make wise decisions."

Showing no concern about exposing children to a very dangerous virus, refusing to take a vaccine that offers protection from the virus, and claiming that the life-saving vaccine comes "from the pits of the hell" does not show sound judgment.

Rather, it demonstrates irrational thought, a gullible susceptibility to anonymous "sources," and a penchant for making poor decisions. I wonder if one reason such nonsense spreads so easily or gains any credibility is that too few of us, perhaps trying to be polite or maintain harmony, have dared to call it what it is.

The author of 2 Timothy was concerned with the truth about salvation rather than with modern conspiracies, but he also warned against swerving or turning away from the truth in favor of myths (2:18, 3:7, 4:4) — while encouraging believers who know the truth to explain it to others and correct their false notions (2:15, 25).

The truth is we should thank God for the dedicated scientists and medical professionals who developed the several very effective vaccines against COVID-19, and who have encouraged safe practices for avoiding the disease.

No doubt, millions of lives have been and will be saved because of them. The vaccines' effectiveness grows in proportion to the number of people who are immunized.

What kind of thinking concludes that such a tool for good comes "from the pits of hell" and should be condemned?

It is the kind that prefers absurdity to truthfulness, and we should be willing to say so. **NFJ**

‘Biblical womanhood’ not as biblical as some suggest

A REVIEW BY JANA PETERSON

Prior to enrolling in seminary four years ago, I spent many years living into the traditional gender roles taught by my childhood faith communities. I married young, birthed six babies, and stayed home with my children.

In many ways, my life revolved around the needs of my husband and children to the neglect of my own. My days were filled with homeschooling, meal preparation and housecleaning. This was the only life I thought I was allowed to live.

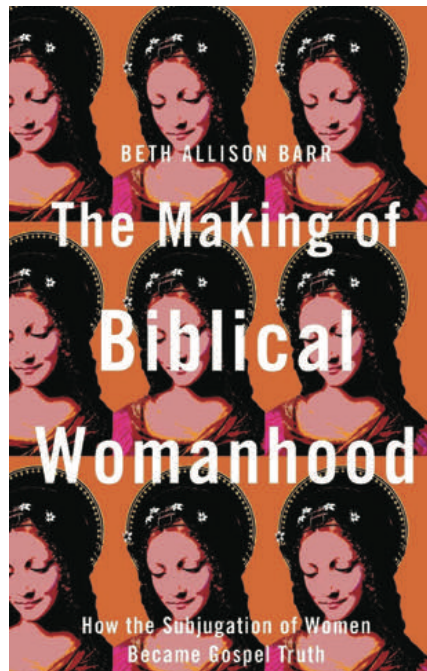
In *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Brazos Press, 2021), Beth Allison Barr unpacks how this expression of womanhood came to be.

As a medieval historian and a Southern Baptist pastor’s wife who has experienced her own subjugation, Barr brings a unique perspective to this conversation. She makes clear that gender paradigms today are not nearly as archaic as we think.

In writing this book, Barr read through many medieval sermons and considered medieval patterns, ultimately discovering that the supposed biblical gender mandates we know today were not always the norm and that the Bible does not have to be read that way.

Barr seeks to flip the narrative on patriarchy, which she defines as “both the tradition of male church leaders and the authority of male household heads function[ing] within cultures that generally promote male authority and female submission.”

She does so by reimagining Genesis 3:16, “In pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Rather than embracing “complementarian” interpretations of this verse, Barr asserts, “patriarchy wasn’t what God wanted; patriarchy was a result of human sin.”



She explores the Aristotelian household codes and the Epic of Gilgamesh to demonstrate that biblical writers were influenced by a patriarchal world.

“Patriarchy may be a part of Christian history,” she writes, “but that doesn’t make it Christian. It just shows us the historical (and very human) roots of biblical womanhood.”

Barr weaves her own experiences as a subjugated woman in the church with an exegesis of Paul’s writings in the New Testament while also sharing medieval church history with the reader. Medieval sermons carry within them an echo of a more gender-inclusive theology that we have (intentionally) lost in recent years.

Starting around the time of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, the role of men and women shifted. Barr writes, “Women’s identity, both inside and outside the church, became more firmly intertwined with the household... As the household became more firmly established as a woman’s space, professional work became more firmly identified as a man’s space.”

This shift has left an indelible imprint

on modern evangelical households. Songs are sung, sermons are written, and even Bible translations are created that support the subjugation of women in the home.

Barr spends chapter 5 explaining how Bible translations have supported this gender shift she identifies in earlier chapters. Ultimately, this results in modesty, domesticity and subordination being sanctified as the most holy duties of Christian women.

Barr concludes her book with a call to stand together and fight back in order to create a world where men and women are truly equals in every respect. This is the only way to collectively discover a more inclusive and mutual community.

“Jesus set women free a long time ago,” Barr writes. “Isn’t it finally time for evangelical Christians to do the same?”

The Making of Biblical Womanhood may have looked a little different if written by a Bible scholar who dug more deeply into Paul’s writings with an understanding that even the New Testament writers were formed by the patriarchy. But Barr brings a unique perspective from her knowledge of medieval history that is refreshing to read.

I couldn’t help but wonder what Barr would write if she took this work into an intersectional conversation around the issues of race and broadened her engagement with genders.

I applied to seminary after seeing how the church had poorly bridged the divide between psychology and theology. I wanted to be part of bringing healing to those I knew who were hurting.

Yet I applied as a counseling student because I did not believe women could be pastors or do public theology. Barr’s book would have been helpful during my first year as I did my own version of this work to unleash my calling into pastoral care. **NFJ**

—Jana Peterson of Bozeman, Mont., was a spring 2021 intern with Good Faith Media.

WHAT KIND OF GOD?

In contrast to what many sought, Jesus showed the humanity of God

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

“The Kingdom of God is within you.”
(Luke 17:21)

Who is God? The answer varies widely. Throughout American history many white Christians have used God as a pretext to enslave, terrorize and/or otherwise oppress Black Americans in order to preserve white dominance. Their God is an authoritarian, harsh and exclusive ruler.

Minority and marginalized people groups, on the other hand, often perceive God as an instrument of mercy, justice and human dignity. Their God is a caring, kind and inclusive deity.

And so it has always been in practice: human perspectives determine God’s identity.

ANCIENTS

Consider the ancient world. No strangers to religion, the ancients collectively envisioned and worshipped a dizzying array of deities.

From Anubis (the god of death) to Yah (the moon god), Egyptian gods numbered in the hundreds.

From Achelous (patron god of the “silver-swirling” Achelous River) to Zeus (the god of the sky, lightning, thunder, law, order, justice, etc.) of a later era, Greek gods were everywhere.

From Abundantia (the god of wealth) to Vulcan (the god of fire), legions of gods roamed the Roman world.

Reflective of the power and authority of religion, some ancient rulers also



allowed themselves to be worshiped as gods, an honorary designation extending from their exalted status as pharaoh, king or emperor.

ONE GOD

Ancient Hebrews, to the contrary, conceived of a singular, powerful God — Yahweh — and of humanity created in the image of this singular God.

At times authoritative and xenophobic, and at times compassionate and inclusive, concepts of this singular God, as found in Hebrew scriptures, broadly mirrored the varied and often contrasting attributes of gods in the ancient world at large.

Here, matters of gods of diverse powers and attributes stood at the time of the birth of Jesus as revealed in the Gospels.

In the account of the wilderness temptations, the Gospels record that Jesus was pressured to conform to ancient constructs of God as authoritarian. Mere mortals could not turn stones into bread nor summon angels at will, but Jesus could, if he so chose.

But he did not.

History was replete with mortals who never commanded stones or angels but nonetheless achieved great power, ruled nations and assumed deified status. Surely Jesus wanted to be the next ruler of nations, the tempter purred, the authoritarian messiah for whom many longed—a god among gods.

But Jesus demurred.

JESUS

To conform to common practice and forcefully rule nations would be to extend evil in the name of religion, Jesus understood. There was a better way.

Turning his back on evil, Jesus, according to the Gospels, devoted his life to living and embodying a God who identified with and healed the wounds of poor, outcast, sick, oppressed, despised and minority peoples.

This, Jesus taught, was the kingdom of God.

There was no glory in his choice, no pretensions of power, no victories of armies, no conquering of nations and no god of wrath.

Looking back on Jesus’ life, early Christians — from among whom the Gospels were recorded — did something remarkable: they wrote of the humanity of God embodied in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus’ life as depicted in the Gospels focused on uplifting the hurting, sick and marginalized. Seeing what others did not, his teachings simultaneously reached back into Hebrew scriptural traditions and forward toward a world-not-yet.

Setting aside an authoritarian and vengeful scriptural portrait of God, Jesus in the Gospels lived the humanity of God expressed in mercy, justice, love and acceptance.

Looking past the privilege, pomp and circumstance surrounding religious leaders of his day, Jesus warned against ignoring the least of persons.

POWER

Jesus did not give in to the temptation — voiced by followers and opponents alike — to demonstrate the power of a wrathful God.

When his disciples wanted Jesus to call down fire to destroy an unfriendly crowd, Jesus refused. When some religious leaders asked him for a miraculous sign, Jesus dismissed their request as evil.

Instead, Jesus in the Gospels went about the extraordinary business of meeting the needs of hurting people — feeding, healing and comforting those who before had lived without hope.

Minute by minute, person by person, Jesus' life and actions portrayed a vision of a place even his closest followers, so often with earthly power on their minds, seemed unable to grasp: a world in which everyone would have enough to eat, in which the sick would be healed, and in which no one would live in fear.

Even near the end of his own life, when his followers still dreamed of a militant, kingly ruler reigning in power

and glory, Jesus remained focused on the redemptive work of healing persons victimized by social, cultural and religious constructs.

His disciples, he hoped, would listen to his teachings, observe his actions, and follow in his footsteps.

But having planted the seeds of a revolution, Jesus died a lonely death — the humanity of God nailed to a cross, while the mystified dreamers of power and glory were nowhere to be seen.

ANOTHER WAY

Overcoming death and doubt, the humanity of God found embodiment in a small, new religious faith — known as simply “the way,” and later called Christianity — that for several centuries quietly modeled the redemptive heart of Jesus' revolutionary life and teachings: the sharing of wealth, courage in the face of injustice, compassion for the sick and poor, and ethnic and racial inclusivity.

The movement Jesus inspired would not last.

In 1896 former Massachusetts Senator Henry Dawes — determined to force Native peoples in Indian and Oklahoma territories to abandon communal land ownership in favor of white norms — voiced in a few words the basis of much of human history.

“Selfishness,” he said approvingly, “is at the bottom [foundation] of civilization.”

By “civilization” Dawes meant

the Western world, a world shaped by Christianity, a world of inequity.

For Christianity, the turn to selfishness came in the person of a Roman Emperor, Constantine. In the fourth century Constantine placed a bet that the maturing sect, by then having in some quarters of the Empire attracted prominent and powerful followers, could be fashioned into a useful political tool.

Mandating that Christian leaders sort through their theological differences and produce a formulaic system of belief, Constantine set in motion the fashioning of a state church in the service of the Empire.

Emerging in the Council of Nicea, a revised Jesus took shape in creeds absent his gospel life and teachings, a Jesus who remains common within Christendom today.

Minus the humanity foundational to the gospel — Jesus' life and teachings — the revised Jesus gets portrayed as vengeful, powerful, judgmental and formulaic. This vision and version of the divine is widely adopted by majoritarian power structures to subjugate those minority people groups considered inferior and undesirable.

Yet there is another way.

Imagine the humanity of God present in the here and now, evidenced in the lives of the marginalized and hurting and suppressed and oppressed, and demonstrated in acts of acceptance, compassion, mercy, justice and inclusion.

Jesus did. **NFJ**



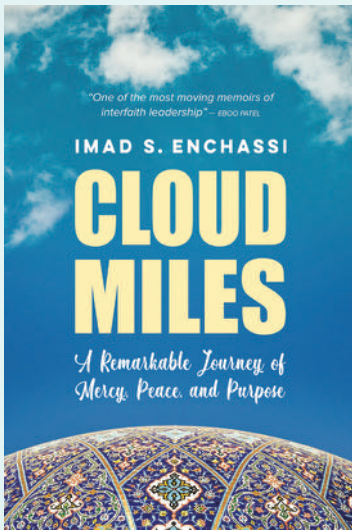
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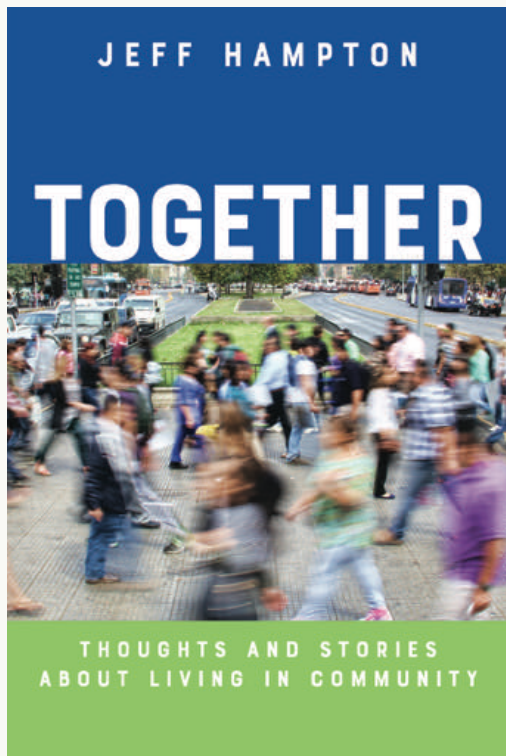
—Dr. Charles Kimball, author of *Truth Over Fear: Combating the Lies about Islam*



Imam Imad Enchassi, Ph.D., is a senior imam at the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City, the Chair of Islamic Studies at Oklahoma City University, and a visiting professor at Phillips Theological Seminary and Saint Paul School of Theology.



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—George A. Mason, Senior Pastor,
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Not knowing all the Baptist women pastors is a good thing

By John D. Pierce

There was a time, a few decades ago, when a woman being called to the pastorate of a church with historical connections to Southern Baptists was so rare (sadly) and such a big deal (for good reasons) that it created major headlines.

In each case, it seems, I knew the person personally or at least knew a good bit about her journey. For some of these women, I'd heard them share this deep sense of calling that was truly a long-shot possibility.

They served as staff ministers for many years — pastors-in-waiting who too often waited and waited. Others found the fulfillment of their pastoral calling in more accepting and affirming places.

My first participation in an ordination service for a woman by a Southern Baptist congregation was in 1978, placing her among the first 50 or so. The ordination was not controversial, just a rural congregation affirming what they had witnessed in the life of one of their own.

That newly ordained Baptist minister at the time, however, is now retired from the pastorate after serving congregations of the United Methodist Church. Some of the brightest and best from the nurturing of Baptist congregations and Baptist campus ministries, and the training of Baptist theological seminaries, have fulfilled their ministry callings in other fellowships.

This journal — going back to its earlier years as *SBC Today* and then *Baptists Today* — has long advocated

for gender equality and reported on the growing impact of women in ministry.

The first issue, dated April 1983, reported on a gathering in Louisville, Ky., that led to the formation of what is now Baptist Women in Ministry (BWIM).

The late Sarah Frances Anders, a sociologist and professor in Louisiana, faithfully tracked the growth of women ministers in Southern Baptist/Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregations.

Long before social media, her primary method for garnering such information came through her frequent requests for updates via letters to the editor that we gladly printed in the journal.

Sarah Frances, like many others, found BWIM to be a needed organization that encourages and resources both women ministers and the congregations they serve.

It is encouraging to see more women responding to ministerial callings and receiving theological training — and to read about congregations that eagerly call them to ministry positions including the pastorate.

But barriers still remain, even within congregations that claim to support gender equality.

As BWIM Executive Director Meredith Stone told me, “There is reason to celebrate the tremendous progress that has been made for women in ministry among Baptists. But this is not the time to claim victory.”

“Women still struggle to find places to live out their callings, and still experience the effects of 2,000 years of patriarchy embedded within the church — even among moderate and progressive Baptists,” she continued. “It will take

continuous and intentional efforts from all of us to transform congregational cultures into ones that empower all women to live fully into their potentials for service in the church and world.”

The next big step will come when a congregation calling a woman as pastor will be less newsworthy. It will be no more of an exception than calling a man to that position.

My hope is to get to know more of the excellent pastors of congregations — both women and men — as their work is important and often very challenging. But it is a good thing that there are more women in pastoral roles now than when one could recite the few names from memory.

Ministry calling is to be taken seriously without the erecting or protecting of human barriers poorly constructed by patriarchy and propped up with isolated biblical texts in the same ways slavery, racism and other acts of inequality have been supported.

Several pastor friends have announced their retirements for later this year. Congregational leaders charged with finding their replacements would be wise and faithful to consider the full spectrum of pastoral possibilities.

It's OK if the line of framed photos of past pastors takes on a different look. **NFJ**

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‘ONE BLESSING AFTER ANOTHER’

Baptist chaplain to lead Air National Guard Chaplain Corps

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Colonel Leah Botona Boling has been selected to serve as the director of the Air National Guard Chaplain Corps.

“It’s still hard for me to believe I got the job,” said Boling, in a phone interview, “but I’m truly honored.”

Boling, a chaplain for Hawaii Air National Guard’s 154th Wing, will relocate to Joint Base Andrews near Washington, D.C. There, she will work out of the Air National Guard Readiness Center to oversee all the chaplaincy work of the Air National Guard.

“It’s been one blessing after another,” said the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship endorsed chaplain, who was promoted to colonel in March of this year.

That promotion made her the first Asian-American/Pacific-Islander woman in the Hawaii Air National Guard to achieve that rank. Now, her selection to lead the Air National Guard Chaplain Corps breaks more ground, as she is the first person of color to hold that position.

Her new responsibilities will include supervising the division chiefs for the chaplaincy work of 90 Air National Guard wings and also chaplains serving in U.S. territories. In addition to overseeing all the field managers, she will be an adviser to the National Guard Bureau.

Colonel Boling expressed appreciation for the colleagues, mentors and others who’ve encouraged her, including fellow Baptist chaplain, Col. Ira Stan Campbell who recently retired from the Air National Guard. He described the scale of his friend and former colleague’s new assignment:



U.S. Air National Guard photo of Col. Leah Botona Boling, chosen to lead the Air National Guard Chaplain Corps.

“She will give direction to 279 Air National Guard chaplains and 292 Religious Affairs Airmen (formerly known as Chaplain Assistants), and thus oversee the spiritual support and care for over 107,000 Air National Guard Airmen and their families across 90 air wings and 54 states and territories.”

Noting her role as the first female and first Asian to direct the Air National Guard Chaplain Corps, Campbell affirmed: “Chaplain Boling will be a great inspirational leader.”

While the job appears “overwhelming” at the outset, Boling said “this is where being creative is very helpful.”

Her prayer in facing this groundbreaking assignment, she said, is: “God, I don’t mind being the first: just get my back. I’m not going to carry that burden.”

Boling said she trusts that “what has worked for me for 19 years will work for me as [Air National Guard Chaplain Corps] director.”

While based in Hawaii for all 19 years of her service, Boling and her husband, Jeff, who retired from the Air Force in 2003, soon after she began military service, are used to moving for various assignments.

“I’ve had my share of the mainland,” she said, “but I’m not looking forward to the winter and snow.”

A native of the Philippines, Boling has found breaking new ground in ministry and the military to be a natural progression.

In addition to her undergraduate and seminary training in the Philippines, Boling completed clinical pastoral education (CPE) with Pacific Health Ministries in Hawaii and earned the educational specialist in professional counseling from the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

Boling holds licenses in marriage and family therapy and professional counseling, and she has received numerous awards for military service including the Meritorious Service Medal, the National Defense Service Medal and the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal.

In a 2015 interview with *Nurturing Faith Journal*, then Lt. Col. Boling told of playing as a child on the grounds of Mati Baptist Hospital in the Philippines. She saw an elderly woman from her church going into the hospital’s emergency room.

“I followed her and noticed that she was visiting patients and their families,” she recalled.

Young Leah was intrigued by her mother’s explanation of the woman’s service as a volunteer chaplain and all that entailed.

While earning a Bachelor of Science in customs administration from Holy Cross of Davao College in 1985 and doing an internship with the Bureau of Customs, Boling was involved in discipleship training through her church.

It was during those formative years that her “calling into the ministry solidified,” she said. This led her to pursue theological education at the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary with a focus on pastoral care and counseling.

Following seminary graduation, and a year of CPE residency in Manila, she joined Interfaith Ministries of Hawaii (now Pacific Health Ministries) in 1991. It was in Hawaii that Boling met her husband, Jeff, who introduced her to military life and the chaplaincy.

Boling traces her understanding of and appreciation for ministry to her mother.

“She was very active in church from [Woman’s Missionary Union] to choir to teaching Sunday school,” Boling recalled in the earlier interview. “Even at a young age, she modeled for me what a woman can do in and for the church.”

While military chaplaincy was not on her radar early on, she discovered it fits her distinctive gifts.

“One of the unique things about

While military chaplaincy was not on her radar early on, Boling discovered it fits her distinctive gifts.

military chaplaincy is our ability to work in a pluralistic environment,” she noted. “Even though I’m expected and mandated to perform according to my denominational endorser, I am still able to work with other chaplains and service members of different faiths to ensure everyone’s freedom of religion.”

Another component of military chaplaincy, she added, is the chaplain’s role in advising commanders regarding morale in addition to moral, spiritual and ethical issues. Then there are roles specific to combat settings.

“One of the most fulfilling times I’ve had was when deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Philippines, through the Joint Special Operations Task Force,” she said, where ministry is provided

“in the trenches.”

Now a newly minted colonel with an even bigger assignment, she hopes her story will inspire other women and girls to see their full potential in following God’s call.

“Don’t let any other voices tell you any different,” she said.

Renée Lloyd Owen, director of chaplaincy and pastoral counseling ministries for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said she was not surprised by Boling’s accomplishments due to her obvious dedication, leadership, and passion for providing sacred spiritual and pastoral care to service men and women and their families.

“Leah is an exemplary chaplain,” said Owen. “She embodies and demonstrates the essence of chaplaincy — offering a compassionate and loving presence to all people, meeting people where they are in their journey and providing the care that is needed in that moment.”

“We are blessed to have her among our ranks as a CBF-endorsed chaplain,” Owen added, “and we are so very proud of her.” **NFJ**

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Fred Shuttlesworth stuck to his message and stuck his neck out for justice

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

When Fred Shuttlesworth died at age 89 on Oct. 5, 2011, he had served as pastor of Greater New Light Baptist Church in Cincinnati for more than 40 years. But Birmingham, Ala., was where the civil rights hero played his major role in the struggle for racial justice and equality.

Shuttlesworth, pastor of Birmingham's Bethel Baptist Church in the mid-'50s to early-'60s, was a front-line organizer and fearless leader during very heated and hostile years there.

His contributions were not ignored in either city. In the Avondale community of Cincinnati there is Fred Shuttlesworth Circle. A larger-than-life statue of him stands outside the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham — and the city's international airport now bears his name also.

Yet historians such as Andrew Manis, a Birmingham native now retired from teaching at Middle Georgia State University, believe the fiery and courageous preacher "hasn't gotten his dues."

Manis, who wrote the biography, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth* (University of Alabama Press, 1999) and was invited by Shuttlesworth's family to speak at his memorial service, had this response to the activist preacher's death in 2011:

"Shuttlesworth repeatedly prodded [Birmingham's law official] 'Bull' Conner to obey the Supreme Court's *Brown* ruling and reject Jim Crow. Shuttlesworth repeatedly pestered Martin Luther King Jr. to join forces with him and his organization, and launch a double-barreled nonviolent assault on segregation."



Photo by John D. Pierce from a 2001 interview in Cincinnati with civil rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth, arranged by mutual friend Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler.

Manis added: "Shuttlesworth convinced [King] that if they could defeat segregation in Birmingham, they could defeat it in all America."

While King and other civil rights leaders are better known, Manis noted: "It was Shuttlesworth who braved the famous dogs and fire hoses in the 1963 demonstrations.

"And it was Shuttlesworth's demonstrations that finally convinced John F. Kennedy that civil rights was, in the president's own words, a moral issue 'as old as the scriptures and as clear as the Constitution.'"

That conviction, said Manis, led Kennedy to introduce into Congress what a year later became the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Shuttlesworth was known for his unflappable courage in the face of violence. His home and church were repeatedly rocked by dynamite.

A Christmas 1956 bombing blew away a corner of his house — an experience Shuttlesworth said "took the fear out of me."

He was beaten with bats and bike

chains, and jailed dozens of times, leading Manis to say that while the minister never became a martyr it wasn't because of a lack of trying.

Shuttlesworth willingly and repeatedly put himself in harm's way to keep the fight for justice and equality on track.

In a 2001 interview with *Baptists Today* (now *Nurturing Faith Journal*), he described his leadership style as "challenging, persuasive, determinative and brutally frank."

Shuttlesworth almost took offense when first reading Manis' description of his confrontation style, he said, but confessed: "What he wrote was true."

Shuttlesworth said he didn't treat his ministry and activism as separate callings.

"I don't divide myself into civil rights and religion," he said in the 2001 interview. "I believe with all my heart that [the civil rights movement] was of God."

"I'm a churchman," he added. "Even when the church is not acting like the church, it's the best thing on earth... Even Jesus said, 'You're the light of the world.'"

Shuttlesworth, who suffered a concussion from mob resistance to enrolling his daughters in Birmingham's Phillips High School in 1957 and was hospitalized by injuries from a fire hose during a 1963 demonstration, among other sufferings, said the high price of freedom was worth it.

"Those were times I was doing God's will; I was glad to suffer," he said. "I didn't know if I'd be around to see the benefits, but someone would."

Despite the odds, Shuttlesworth made it past his 89th birthday. In the decades following the hottest days of the civil rights struggle, he stuck to his message: "You can't preach about God without justice."

With a sincere smile, he added: "It takes a divine insanity to follow Jesus." **NFJ**

Questions Christians ask scientists

Should Christians trust scientists?

Here in what are hopefully the waning days of the COVID-19 pandemic in America, it has become obvious that many people still refuse to be vaccinated. A surprisingly large fraction of these people are Christians.

The Pew Research Center conducted a survey a few months ago and found that white evangelicals are the religious group least likely to say they'd receive the COVID-19 vaccination. Nearly half (45 percent) said they would not get the shot, compared with 30 percent of the general population.

"We are creations of God and we will follow him and we will do as he has called us to do," said Orlando resident Holly Meade, adding that she is exercising her religious freedom and trusting in God for her health, according to WESH 2 News.

"We're anti-mask, anti-social distancing, and anti-vaccine," said Tony Spell, a minister at the Life Tabernacle Church in Baton Rouge, La., according to Pew Research. He believes the vaccine is politically motivated, and has used his pulpit to discourage church members from taking the vaccine.

Perhaps Meade and Spell and others like them have a point. It seems that Christians should not trust scientists.

Few scientists are Christians, after all, and why should we trust those outside our fold? Why should we — who claim to have access to the truth about the world — rely on those who do not?

Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding," and what is science if not our own human understanding?

Perhaps science is a product of human pride and a show of independence from God. After all, science does not require any reference to God or scripture or theology; it operates completely outside anything we might call "trust in the Lord."

Human beings, left in this way to our own skills and devices, always fall short of the goal. If we could ground science in scripture, then perhaps we could think of scientists as trustworthy. But as it is, we should regard them and their statements with skepticism.

Moreover, this world is passing away. As Christians we are citizens of another, more real, spiritual world.

Even if science were grounded in scripture we should place no true hope in it, for even our best understanding of the Bible and even our best theology is written and apprehended through a glass darkly.

Nothing but Jesus on this side of heaven can be relied on. Therefore science, established as it is in this present darkness, is tainted at the source.

Finally, science has again and again challenged traditional religious views of creation and human identity. Evolution by natural selection, for example, throws a skeptical light on the creation story found in Genesis, brings into question the notion of human specialness, and paints a picture not of a blessed and very good creation but of millions of years of brutal and bloody struggle for survival and dominance.

Certain cosmological and neuroscientific theories cast doubt on the veracity of the Bible and the special status of human beings. More could be said about this but, in general, science has proven itself to be not merely neutral but actually antagonistic toward belief.

On the contrary, however, when, in Matthew 22, the lawyer asks Jesus to name the greatest commandment, he says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your

heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

This story, including the piece about loving God with all your mind, occurs also in Mark and Luke. Jesus' words cannot be ignored or brushed away.

When Jesus is asked directly what is most important in life, he not only does what he almost never does — give an immediate and clear answer — but he also includes in his answer an imperative to engage our minds, granting them the same status as our hearts and souls.

I conclude that there is such a thing as the intellectual love of God, and that to reject the full and honest use of our minds is to disobey the central commandment of our faith.

Genesis 1:26-28 tells us that humans are made in the image of God. Jewish and Christian scholars have debated the meaning of this phrase — the image of God — for thousands of years, and many suggestions have been made as to what it might signify.

Some have said our use of symbolic language makes us like God; others have pointed to our capacity for love, or to our drive to create. Still others have suggested we are most similar to God in the use of our minds, in our ability to think and to think about our thinking.

So without insisting that this be the whole of the divine image, I believe we can say that in using our minds we reflect something of God's nature, just as we do in the full exercise of our hearts and souls.

And what is science if not the use of our minds?

If we reject science then we reject the direct and first commandment of Jesus, who tells us to love God with *all* of our minds, including the scientific parts of them.

Further, I say that loving creation is necessarily a part of loving the creator.



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.

Who, given the gift of a painting from their beloved, would not love the painting as part of the greater love?

Moreover, if we reject science we also reject the fruits of those who, wittingly or not, have obeyed the same commandment.

If science had been a historical disaster, we would have warrant to reject it. But the overall fruitfulness of science only adds weight to my response.

I hardly need to enumerate here the many ways science has benefited us (notably by vaccines), nor do I need to convince you that science tends, over time, to work.

It does not do all things. It cannot tell us how to live; it is not intended to replace theology or ethics or philosophy. But its success within its own domain signifies that science tells us something real about the world God so loves.

Therefore I answer that, in light of the greatest and first commandment and of the historical success of the scientific enterprise, Christians should trust science and scientists.

Now to object to my first three arguments: As to the statement that Christians should not trust those who are not

Christians, every human being carries the divine image.

Therefore it is not necessary to be Christian, to be moral, or loving, or correct, or to have deep insight about the human situation or about creation. To refuse to be influenced by non-Christians is not only shortsighted; it is also impossible.

So far as we have control over it — which may not be very far, the question is not whether to allow ourselves to be affected by nonbelievers; it is about what and to what ends shall we be so affected.

As to the statement about this world passing away, on one level it seems to be true: the earth will not last forever. Yet ours is precisely the world God so loved that he sent his only begotten son.

We are not here by accident, nor is the world a waiting room or some kind of triage. It is the very good creation of God, and we are a part of it and are to live out our days in hope and fidelity, loving God with all our heart, soul and mind and loving one another as ourselves.

As to the statement that science challenges certain traditional Christian

beliefs, this is true. The cosmos scientists have revealed often forces us back to the theological drawing board.

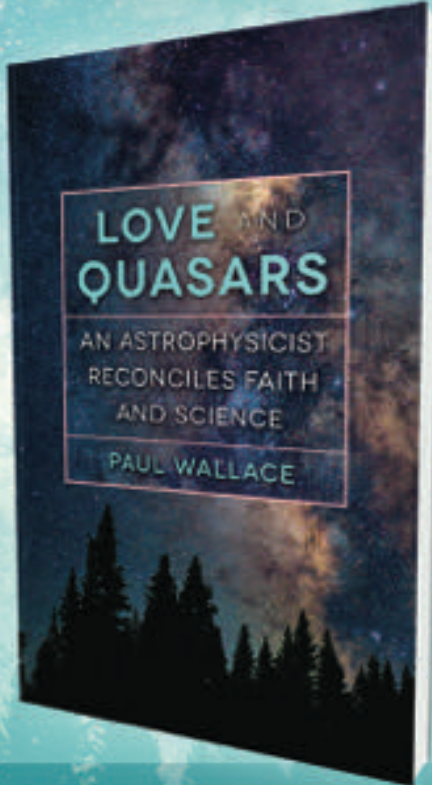
We must rethink not only the nature of creation, humanity and God, but also the way the three relate.

Where does the Adam and Eve story fit on a geologic timeline? Are human beings mere products of blind, impersonal forces such as natural selection? How does Jesus fit into a 13.8-billion-year-old evolving cosmos?

Where, in such a universe, is there a place for a creator? If our brains are essentially extraordinarily complex electric computers, where does that leave the soul? If we can be protected by a vaccine, what use is there for prayer?

But it is precisely these questions that the greatest and first commandment draws us toward. To love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind means to not run from the unknown, to not fear answers we don't prefer, and to work courageously toward understanding the world.

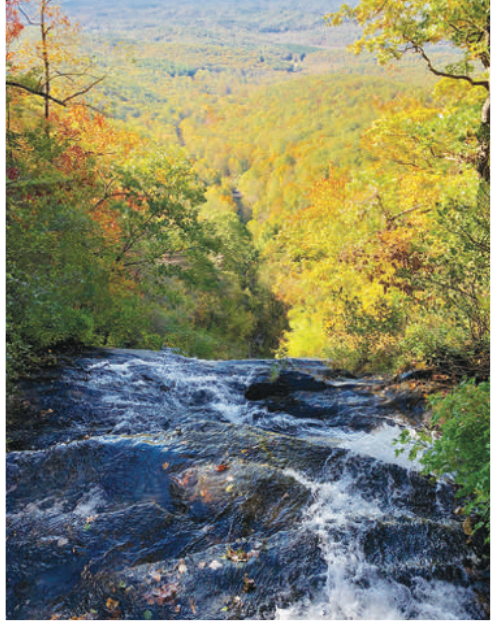
Because for this scientist at least, that's what the loving God looks like. **NFJ**



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WORDS & WONDERS

GFM Writers' Retreat will offer insights, inspiration

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

What a combination: mountain vistas aflame with varied hues, fresh fall air for every breath, the soothing and continuous sound of water flowing over rocks, writers and readers engaging with one another about the creative shaping of words for good purposes.

Good Faith Media will host its first Writers' Retreat, Oct. 20-22, at Amicalola Falls Lodge in the colorful mountains of North Georgia. And the invitation is open "to anyone who loves words."

The retreat is truly designed for anyone — whether a seasoned writer, an aspiring author, an appreciative reader, or someone simply seeking to craft words more creatively or learn from those who do.

Program guests include author/playwright Anne Nelson, singer/songwriter Pat Terry and novelist Pamela Terry, along with the Good Faith Media publishing and marketing team.

An award-winning author, Anne Nelson's books include *Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the*

Radical Right (Bloomsbury, 2019) and *Suzanne's Children: A Daring Rescue in Nazi Paris* (Simon & Schuster, 2017).

A former war correspondent and human rights advocate, Anne directs the International Program of the Columbia School of Journalism in New York City.

Her play, *The Guys*, dealing with the aftermath of 9/11, has been widely produced on stage and as a feature film starring Sigourney Weaver.

Pat Terry has penned top hits for country artists such as Tanya Tucker and Travis Tritt. Others who have recorded his songs include B.J. Thomas, the Oak Ridge Boys, Roy Rogers, Alan Jackson, Kenny Chesney and many others.

With his well-traveled Pat Terry Group in the 1970s, he was a pioneer of Contemporary Christian Music. His latest songs express honest struggles, sensitivity to suffering, and reigning hopefulness.

Pamela Terry and her new novel, *The Sweet Taste of Muscadines* (Penguin Random House, 2021), were featured earlier this year on *Good Morning America*.

She tells an intimate story of a woman's return to her small southern hometown in

the wake of her mother's sudden death — only to find stunning family secrets.

A gifted storyteller, Pamela's internationally popular blog, "From the House of Edward," was named a top-10 home blog of the year by *The Telegraph* in London. Her second novel is in the works. She and her husband Pat live in the Atlanta area.

The retreat begins on Wednesday afternoon, Oct. 20, and concludes with a Friday morning session on Oct. 22. A complete schedule is available online along with registration details.

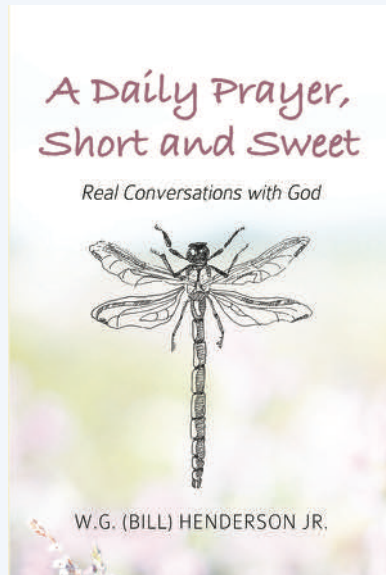
The retreat fee of \$390 per person includes catered meals, all programming, writing consultation, optional free time activities and the daily park pass, internet access and other perks.

Rooms at the beautiful Amicalola Falls Lodge are offered at a deeply discounted rate of just \$149 plus taxes per night, with a variety of room types.

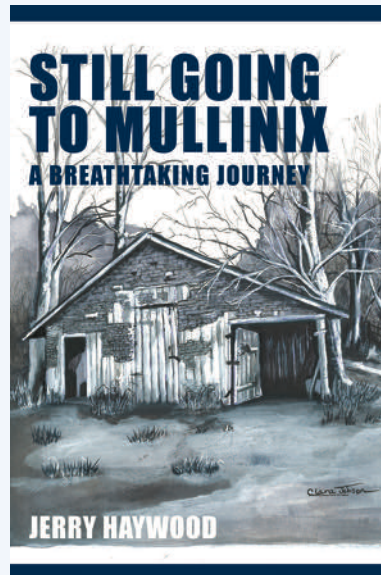
To register for the conference (and then receive lodging information for making one's own room reservations), visit goodfaithmedia.org/writers-retreat-2021 or call Good Faith Media at (615) 627-7763. **NFJ**

New titles available from **Nurturing Faith**

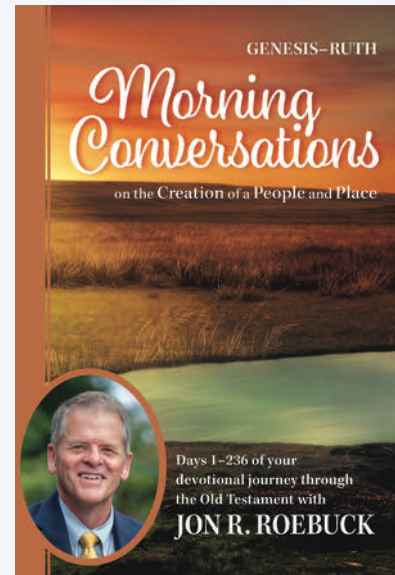
(the publishing arm of Good Faith Media)



“I have known all my life about prayer,” author Bill Henderson writes. “Like breathing in and breathing out, it is just a natural part of moment-by-moment living—every hour, every day.” In *A Daily Prayer, Short and Sweet*, Henderson puts on paper many of the conversations he has had with God, and the result is a daily devotional whose prayers explore avenues that are frequently on the minds and hearts of all of us.



Author Jerry Haywood tells the stories of a new collection of people, critters, and events that have “put heart back into [him].” Sometimes these “signs” were gentle nudges easy to miss unless he exercised the “discipline of noticing.” At other times they were unmistakable road markers along the journey toward the “full stature of Christ.” All of them together reveal God’s presence in such a way that it took his breath away.



Morning Conversations on the Creation of a People and Place, the first of a five-volume set, contains a devotion drawn from each chapter of Genesis through Ruth in the biblical narrative. Each devotion is Jon Roebuck’s personal reflection on the text, inspired through the work of the Spirit, and his musings on how to apply the wisdom of God’s word to daily life. The author’s hope is that you will discover a lot about God’s story.



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Astrophysicist and faith/science columnist Paul Wallace will join the experience.

ISRAEL/WEST BANK

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Bible studies writer Tony Cartledge will guide this remarkable exploration of the Holy Land — including participation in an archaeological dig for a day.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

JULY 23-30

This well-hosted experience will take in the varied wonders of Olympic National Park and other sites in Washington State, along with the beautiful coastline extending into Oregon.



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Further details and upcoming registration at
goodfaithmedia.org/group-experiences.