

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2021

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

**Trust your
doctor, not your
Facebook feed**

goodfaithmedia.org

Christ or Chaos

**A courageous pastor
and the Clinton 12**

FROM SAINT TO SANTA

The religious, historical
roots of a popular,
seasonal gift giver

YELLOWSTONE STORIES

The history, inspiration of
America's first national park

A publication of Good Faith Media



NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE: ISRAEL/WEST BANK MAY 27-JUNE 6, 2022

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Offering a unique opportunity to visit the land of patriarchs and prophets, to walk where Jesus walked, and to breathe the fresh air of Galilee, this customized experience will be expertly hosted by Nurturing Faith Bible Studies writer Tony Cartledge, veteran guide Doron Heiliger, and Good Faith Media CEO Mitch Randall.

Highlights will include an archaeological dig at Tel Mareshah, exploration of the Valley of Elah where David fought Goliath, and conversations with Palestinian Christians at Bethlehem Bible College.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

My colleague Autumn Lockett said her favorite magazines include a note from the editor. She asked if we might do the same.

Her idea appealed to me because it allows for a more personal touch. Editorial writing sometimes takes that form, but tends to be more issue-oriented.

This spot — here on page 1 of the journal — gives me the opportunity to highlight what readers can expect to find within these pages. And it offers an opportunity to share some insider information that readers might appreciate.

Engagement between editors/writers and readers/supporters often takes on a personal dimension, which I enjoy. Relationships are built through shared in-person experiences and also the varied resources provided by Good Faith Media.

This new and expanded media venture — formed just last year — has enhanced the offerings that both *Nurturing Faith* and *Ethics-Daily* could bring to the table. Our expanded team provides more and broader voices — to this journal and elsewhere.

Oh, and we like each other! So, for all of this, I'm very grateful.

This particular issue of *Nurturing Faith Journal* hits mailboxes in October and is dated November/December 2021.

The timing is such that the journals — with the wonderful weekly Bible studies within — can be distributed to participants, and teachers will have adequate time for preparation (using both the lesson within and online teaching resources).

This fourth quarter of the calendar year includes times of signif-

icance for us. We hope these writings help focus us all on preparing to gain the most spiritual benefit from each observance.


You are invited to bring your hearts and minds into this issue with the hope that your reading will be informative and inspirational — even when some of the matters addressed are challenging, even frustrating.

As I often say: following Jesus is hard, but not complicated — as his life and teachings are made known in the Gospels.

So may an increasing faithfulness, and the fuller celebration of the life that God gives us, mark our shared journeys — especially through Advent and Christmas.

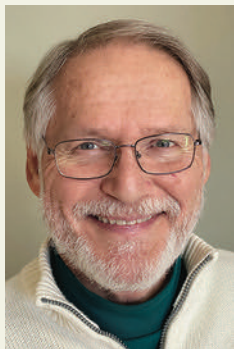
And when counting our blessings this Thanksgiving, please know that those who read, support, and engage with us in a variety of ways are deeply appreciated.

Keep turning the pages!



Executive Editor
john@goodfaithmedia.org

Great Bible Study IS IN YOUR HANDS!



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

See page 21 for more information.

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OUR MISSION

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

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

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

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RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

Bill Clinton: (1993–2001)

Part Two

By Bruce Gourley

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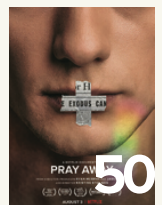
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'PRAY AWAY'

Film documents trauma inflicted by 'conversion therapy'
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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Abyss Pool is one of the colorful features in Yellowstone's West Thumb Geyser Basin.

Worth Repeating

“Who grew up in a house so saved you had to call them ‘stuffed eggs,’ not ‘deviled eggs,’ because the devil is busy?”

Pastor Tyler Burns, host of “Pass the Mic” podcast (Twitter)

“[Deconstruction] always entails the danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. And as a church body, during these messy processes, it is our job to help hold those babies — but it is also our job to help dump that dirty water down the drain.”

Karen Swallow Prior, research professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (RNS)

“We’ve learned from each other. And we have learned to accommodate each other’s idiosyncrasies.”

President Jimmy Carter on 75 years of marriage to wife, Rosalynn (Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

“If you stopped being a Christian because of the evils done to Black people during slavery, then you need to spend more time in Black Christian spaces and figure out how we dealt with that issue. The Black church always had to figure out, ‘How do I be a Christian without power?’”

Wheaton College professor Esau McCaulley, author of *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (The Atlantic)

“I find it interesting that folks will eat a tomato that was picked while green and ripened in a box, but won’t get a vaccine that could save their life.”

Harris Blackwood, layman in First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., and columnist for *The Gainesville Times*

“When we make our methods sacrosanct rather than the message, we are in danger of traditionalism. When we innovate on tradition, we honor the past with a new liveliness of faith in our time.”

Pastor George Mason of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, on the need for post-COVID innovation (GFM)

“The dominant strain of hyper-individualism that runs through American Christianity has left us ill-prepared to consider the needs of the whole more important than the needs of the individual — regardless of how many Bible stories we tell.”

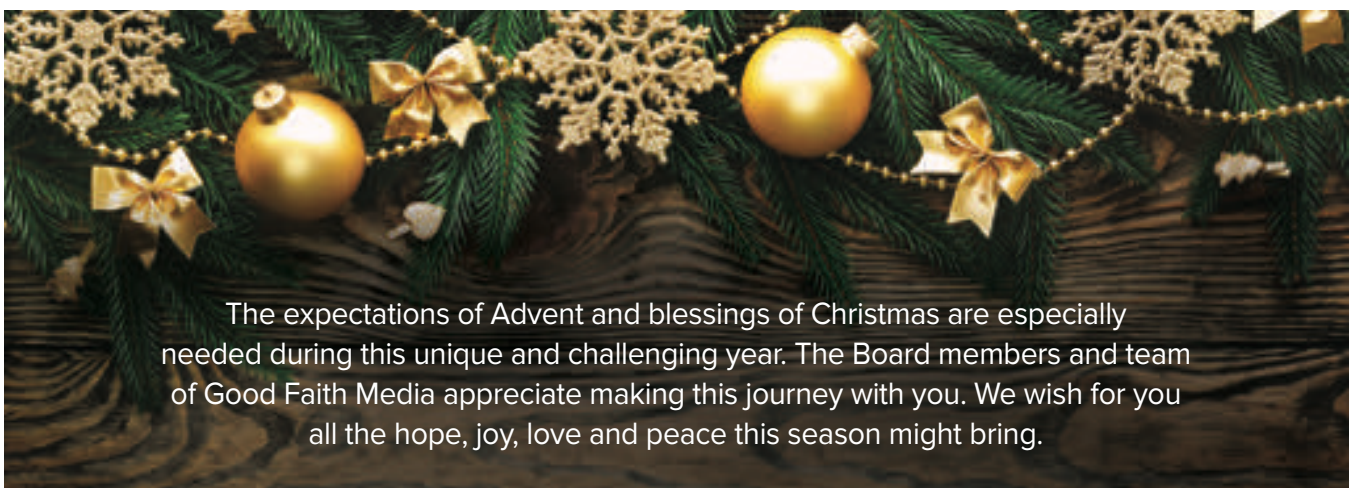
Mark Wingfield, executive director/publisher of Baptist News Global

“A call for unity with abusive people is a call for more abuse.”

Author David Dark, who teaches theology at Belmont University (Twitter)

“...[F]or many evangelicals, ‘religious liberty’ is code for license to use their faith as a pretext to do whatever they please, without regard for what others are due. Christian nationalism engenders bad citizens and even worse Christians.”

Scott Coley, who teaches philosophy at Mount St. Mary’s University in Maryland (Twitter)



The expectations of Advent and blessings of Christmas are especially needed during this unique and challenging year. The Board members and team of Good Faith Media appreciate making this journey with you. We wish for you all the hope, joy, love and peace this season might bring.

Mystery isn't ignorance; ignorance is the denial of mystery

By John D. Pierce

Claims of certainty about every aspect of the divine tend to lessen needed humility and lead to beliefs and practices that are shortsighted and uncharitable. God, when fully figured-out, is projected as overtly petty and overly vengeful — with all the divine anger directed away from the firm believer.

Therefore, learning to embrace mystery — rather than failingly trying to explain everything that surrounds us — is a healthier, more mature and more faithful approach to abundant and communal living.

Too often, however, “discipleship” practices are focused on explaining every aspect of human existence and divine revelation in definitive ways. There is a sense of security in having complete answers to life’s big questions — even if they can’t stand up to scrutiny.

Often, we fail to see the spiritual value in simply acknowledging, “There are many things I don’t — and will never — fully understand. So, I’m staying open to new possibilities.”

The worst Christian doctrine and practices tend to come from those who feel the need to narrowly define and rigidly defend God, Jesus and the Bible. All kinds of answers, excuses and assured solutions are offered to every question or quandary one might face in this life and the one beyond.

In doing so, the divine gets forced into a narrow, controllable, human-formed box without enough room for the boundless surprise, grace and love of God that comes in ways and volume we could never imagine, schedule or control.

Media consultant and producer David Dault made this needed observation on Twitter when he wrote: “Just a reminder

that you cannot claim ‘divine mystery’ and ‘absolute truth’ simultaneously.” Indeed. Indeed.

No matter how much we might believe something about God, or how thoroughly we search through holy texts to find answers to life’s most challenging questions, we must acknowledge that many mysteries remain.

We can know something — because self-revelation is in God’s nature. Yet we will never know everything, no matter how authoritatively someone pronounces some highly claimed truths.

In fact, a fragile faith is actually revealed when one seeks to answer questions and solve concerns about matters that have no definitive answers and solutions. One of the great confessions of faith is simply saying, “I don’t know.”

Such a confession acknowledges that we put our trust in a God who is bigger than our best-believed concepts — not one who must perform according to our personal expectations and often-poor renderings of holy texts.

Paul might have been overstating things when he told the Colossians (2:2-3) of the “full riches of *complete understanding*, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures and knowledge.”

But Paul points to the best source for both truth and life — amid the mysteries beyond our human comprehension — Jesus.

And, remember, this is the same guy who beautifully and poetically affirmed that we all see through foggy glass (1 Cor. 13:12), but can rest in the greatness of faith, hope and particularly love.

Comfort within mystery comes from affirming, as Paul does, that we know enough of God in Jesus to be faithful and hopeful without claiming to know what we can never know. Embracing mystery as an important expression of the divine is a freeing rather than restrictive experience of faith.

Who wants to bear the burden of pretending to know it all, or worse, being surrounded by those who think they have all the answers to timeless questions beyond any human capacity for understanding?

God answered a lot of questions through Jesus. But plenty of mystery remains — in which we can marvel rather than seek to resolve.

Some of life’s most meaningful moments are those observing something that cannot be fully comprehended or expressed — from the birth of a child, to an overwhelming display of natural beauty, to an act of unwavering kindness or sacrifice. Misty eyes and a mouth agape from such experiences far exceed any recited creed, confession or inadequate explanation.

Christian believers have long confessed, “Jesus is Lord.” Any shared confession beyond that would be more appealing if it began and ended with, “I don’t know.”

With Jesus as God’s clearest and fullest revelation, we are most faithful when following in his way rises above and beyond any other allegiance — and then to rest, even while we wrestle at times, with the mysteries of God that call for marvel, uncertainty and humility. **NFJ**



CHRIST OR CHAOS

Pastor Paul Turner lived the moral imperative he preached

BY CALLY CHISHOLM

On May 17, 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision made racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The effects of this landmark decision reached all corners of the country, including the small Appalachian town of Clinton, Tenn., where residents found themselves at the center of the civil rights movement.

The story began on Jan. 4 of that year, when the U.S. District Court Judge Robert L. Taylor, of Knoxville, decreed that Clinton High School would desegregate for the 1956–1957 school year in compliance with the Supreme Court decision.

As a result, 12 Black students (who came to be known as the Clinton 12) became the first to desegregate an all-white public school in the South, effectively altering the course of history for America and the small town of Clinton.

Their names are Jo Ann Allen, Bobby Cain, Theresser Caswell, Minnie Ann Dickey, Gail Ann Epps, Ronald Hayden, William Latham, Alvah J. McSwain, Maurice Soles, Robert Thacker, Regina Turner, and Alfred Williams.

These students met hostile opposition from outspoken residents and interested parties from outside Anderson County who were vehemently against desegregation efforts. Most of that hostility came from the White Citizens Council and their executive secretary John Kasper, the man responsible for the rallies and protests outside of Clinton High.

In addition, many threats were made to prominent community leaders. These violent reactions to desegregation prompted the National Guard to come settle things down.

Mounting resistance to the new law of the land caused the 12 students to be incessantly bullied and harassed. Their lockers were egged and filled with ink, their ankles bloodied and their hair pulled. They were



Photo of Rev. Paul Turner courtesy of the Green McAdoo Cultural Center

called names, and their textbooks thrown and destroyed.

One of the 12, Epps, was almost pushed out of a window. These are only a few of the ways in which the students were targeted.

Because of the intense racial violence and emotional toll that attending school entailed, the parents of the Clinton 12 started keeping their children home for fear of their safety.

This is where Pastor Paul Turner of Clinton's First Baptist Church enters the story. The church sits at the heart of downtown Clinton and within walking distance of then Clinton High.

At the time of the crisis, Turner acted as the moral compass.

Many local leaders called for "law and order" during this time. Turner also advocated for peace in the community and urged citizens to cooperate, but what separated him from other leaders was his genuine care and concern for the students.

"Rev. Turner really becomes an integral part to the narrative when he makes the argument that it's of the moral imperative," said Adam Velk, director of the Green McAdoo Cultural Center. "A lot of the

leaders can talk the talk, but Rev. Turner literally walked the walk with these kids."

Turner "walked the walk" when he personally called each of the students and offered to escort them into the school building. He believed that it was important for them to continue going to school. Not all of them felt safe enough to go back, but six of the students accepted his offer.

On Dec. 4, 1956, Turner walked these students into Clinton High after months of tumultuous protesting and harassment. Hecklers from the White Citizens Council followed the students and Turner down Foley Hill to the school.

Once the students were inside, Turner left the school building at around 9 a.m. to return to the church, when he was suddenly stopped on Broad Street. He was brutally assaulted at the hands of four men, one of whom Turner identified as a member of the White Citizens Council.

As documented in the CBS documentary, *Clinton and the Law*, Turner describes the situation in detail. He was surrounded by the men, chased, forcibly held down, and punched in the nose.

After realizing the dangerous position he was in, he remarks that "It was at that time I knew I had to defend myself in some way."

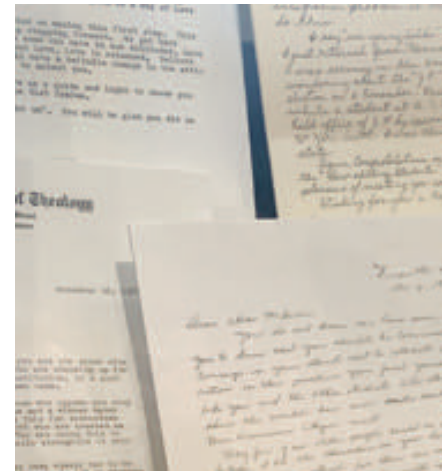
He pinned his attacker against a nearby car, which attracted more men to the fight. The situation was going from bad to worse.

Among the nervous onlookers was a young woman who did what no one else had the courage to do. She recalled thinking they were going to kill the pastor right there, so she ran toward the fight and attempted to pull the attacker's arms away from Turner's graphically bloody face.

CBS asked the Good Samaritan about the incident for the documentary.

"I certainly don't consider that it was an act of bravery," she said. "It was a matter of the right or wrong thing to do; I did what I thought was right."

When the police finally arrived, Turner



Left: A display of the Clinton 12 inside the Green McAdoo Cultural Center in Clinton, Tenn., details the events of desegregation. Photo by Cally Chisholm. **Above:** The letters that Rev. Turner received in response to his support of the Clinton 12 are on display at the Green McAdoo Cultural Center in Clinton, Tenn. Photo by Cally Chisholm

was able to grab hold of two of his attackers and shove them into the arms of an officer to be taken to the station. Horace Wells, then editor of the *Clinton Courier News*, noted that the beating of Turner was a tipping point for the community.

The attack occurred on the day of the town's mayoral election, and the candidate backed by the White Citizens Council was defeated. Around that same time, Clinton High was temporarily closed down.

The culmination of these events compelled 650 people to the pews of First Baptist Church the following Sunday, Dec. 9, 1956. Turner stood before his all-white congregation and CBS news cameras with a black eye and swollen nose.

He proclaimed: "There is no color line at the cross."

In his sermon titled "The Way Up Is The Way Out," Turner said: "Many have tried to misuse the Bible, trying to justify some low standard of conduct by the very Bible they profess to love and by the book that never compromises with sin, with pride, with prejudice or with hate."

He continued, "We have been too far away from God, too disobedient to the Holy Spirit, too indifferent to the supreme example of Jesus Christ our Lord. Now we see clearly that it is Christ or chaos."

Among the congregants sat 6-year-old Larry Gann, who was next to his mother in the sixth row of the sanctuary — the same pew the Gann family occupied each Sunday. Gann was friends with Turner's children, who were of similar age.

Gann says his childhood memories of First Baptist Church and his first pastor remain some of his most vivid.

"The day they [CBS News] filmed his [Turner's] sermon in service was a life-changing experience for me," said Gann. "There were lights everywhere and cables and cords. CBS came to film his entire Sunday morning service, and I can name about 90 percent of the people in that video."

Because their families were close, Gann heard stories about the "Clinton Crisis" and the church's role during that time period.

"One of the things that my father told me — my dad was a deacon — was that he

and several other men at the church took turns after the incident where [Turner] was beaten, spending nights at the parsonage so he and his family could rest," said Gann. "They were basically standing guard to make sure there was no harm that came to the family."

Reactions to the small town pastor also came from outside the community. As a result of his walking alongside the students, Turner received letters from all over the world.

Many of these letters are on display at the Green McAdoo Cultural Center in Clinton, where visitors can read through a collection of responses from people both for and against integration.

Some letters use graphic language and slurs, and include racist remarks. Many of the more disturbing pieces of mail came from anonymous senders.

"Of all the letters [Turner] received — we did a quantitative analysis — the letters of support outnumbered the letters of hate 6-to-1," said Velk. "Every continent with the exception of Antarctica and South America were represented. The letters of hate were mostly centrally located in the American South."

The contents of such letters targeted Turner's character and questioned his credibility as a Christian and pastor because he stood up for the 12 students and made an

effort to help them. Despite the opinion of a hateful few, Turner garnered the attention and respect of well-known evangelists and Christians such as Billy Graham.

Turner was also well received by the Clinton 12 and their families. Among the constant abuse and torment these students and their families experienced, they held the pastor in high regard for his acts of kindness.

Soon after this long series of events, the students were able to return to school once it reopened.

On May 17, 1957, the third anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* decision, Cain became the first Black student to graduate from a Southern public school. The next year, Epps became the first Black woman to receive her diploma at Clinton High.

Tensions continued despite these important milestones. On Oct. 5, 1958, a bomb exploded at the high school, destroying much of the building. It was rebuilt soon — with Billy Graham helping raise funds along with local citizens. The community settled down after the school was rebuilt.

Turner remained in Clinton for two more years before moving to a church in Nashville. Gann fondly recalls Turner's last Sunday as pastor of First Baptist Church. Gann's parents wanted their son to be baptized by their friend, so the pastor made it happen.

"When we knew he was getting ready to go, there was a lot of discussion about me making my profession of faith," said Gann. "The last Sunday before he left, he gave an invitation after the first hymn and I was baptized that night."

After his time in Nashville, Turner began teaching in California at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, but he continued to struggle with the events that occurred 20 years prior. A week before Christmas in 1980, Turner took his own life.

Although he has been a relatively unknown character in the larger story of civil rights in America, Turner left a lasting impact on the small community of Clinton. He remains an example to look toward in the ongoing fight for civil rights.

"Empathy and tolerance are the biggest pieces of him," said Velk. "This man had a humongous heart and saw people for who they were."

"When you see something that's wrong or when you see something that doesn't sit right with you — when you see an injustice — it's not enough just to say it's bad," he added. "We have to take action."

Velk continued: "We might not be able to change the world, but we can change someone else's world. That is what you can get from a guy like Paul Turner."

Turner's life and legacy are preserved at the Green McAdoo Cultural Center along with the brave group of 12 students who endured and broke barriers for the following generations of students.

The McAdoo Center is an important monument and staple of the community, but the town's history hasn't always been embraced.

"For a really long time, this history was swept under the rug here in Clinton. Some saw it as more of an embarrassment to the town than anything else," said Velk. "But, thankfully in the early 2000s, there was a group of some great citizens here who really wanted to memorialize the story because they understood the importance that this had."

The CBS documentary, *Clinton and the Law*, which featured Turner's sermon, was banned from classrooms for quite some time. Gann recalls there being a concern about embarrassing families who acted in favor of segregation.

But, once he returned to Clinton High

as a government and history teacher, Gann was finally able to show it to his students, some of whom had never heard the story.

"Quite frankly it is a really difficult history to come to terms with. It's not that perfect storybook ending where all 12 graduate and every student and all the teachers and all the town welcomed them with open arms," said Velk. "At the same time, Bobby and Gail walking across the stage is one of the great moments."

"These are our kids. These are our students," he added. "This is our town, and these kids managed to do something so great."

Despite all of the progress we have made since the 1950s, there is still a lot of work left to advance social justice, equality and equity in America. So much can be learned from the past and from stories such as that of Clinton, Tenn.

This story shows that the church — its leaders and members — can play an important role in this ongoing effort.

"I look back and think, 'Have we not learned anything in 50 years?'" said Gann. "It's not always going to be easy to do the right thing. You're going to be faced with difficult obstacles, but you still have to try to do the right thing even if it is painful."

At great personal cost, Turner embodied the spirit of Jesus and changed the course of the civil rights battle in Clinton. His Dec. 9, 1956 sermon ends with these important words:

"Let life be anchored to faith, hope and love. Let God make us better people, and immediately our community and nation will see better days." **NFJ**

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

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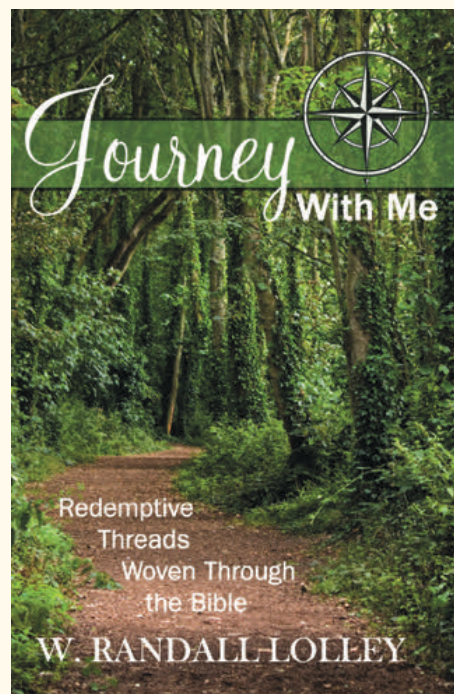
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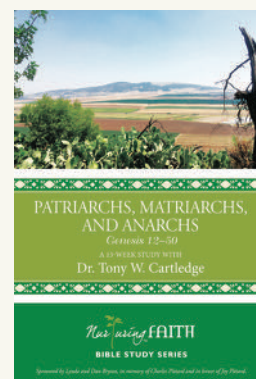
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Fraley and Nash serving internships with GFM this fall

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Emma Fraley and Jamie Nash are serving as fall term interns with Good Faith Media, bringing unique gifts and perspectives to the multifaceted media organization.

Fraley, who grew up in a suburb of Portland, Oregon, graduated this year from Baylor University where she studied Science Research Fellows as a pre-med student with a philosophy minor. She also served as president of Gamma Alpha Upsilon, an unofficial LGBTQ student organization at the university.

“This is how I got involved with Good Faith Media and I’m so excited to continue this partnership,” said Fraley of the organizations’ shared equality and inclusion efforts.

“I’m hoping to continue to read and write about current events and the role of Christians in a global community,” she



added. “I am passionate about discussing topics such as science ethics, epistemic responsibility, and socioeconomic inequalities.”

Nash brings a unique background in military service and ministry. He is a Master of Divinity student at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology and a high school Air Force JROTC instructor.

He retired from the U.S. Air Force in 2015 and has served in many ministries around the world. He and his family live in Metro Atlanta.

His passion for churches being more inclusive of persons with disabilities and their families led to the creation of the nonprofit Autism Faith Network in 2016.

“The Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Internship program was the intern opportunity of a lifetime for me to cultivate my voice,” said Nash. “Good Faith Media distinguishes itself by providing wonderful news, stories, podcasts, books, and documentaries to the Christian community around the world. I want to be a part of that great work.”

Good Faith Media CEO Mitch Randall called the Hynds Internship program an essential and vital part of the organization’s ministry.

“Having the opportunity to work alongside such talented and gifted young journalists has been an inspiration,” said Randall, adding that “Jamie and Emma continue the excellent trajectory past interns have set as we work together to further a Jesus worldview.” **NFJ**

Good Faith Media sees transition in Creative Director position

Longtime graphic designer for *Nurturing Faith Journal*, Vickie Frayne, has completed that role with this issue. She has accepted a full-time teaching position in Macon, Ga.

Frayne has also designed the covers and interiors of many *Nurturing Faith* books — and served as a book copyeditor. Her work expanded with the formation of Good Faith Media in 2020, designing the new organization’s logo along with many promotional materials.

“I can’t say enough good things about working with Vickie for so many years,” said journal editor John Pierce, who oversees publications for Good Faith Media. “She has brought creativity, dependability and a delightful personality to every task.”

Pierce added that the loss of Frayne from the publishing team is softened a bit by her willingness to do some freelance



work on books and to train her successor, Cally Chisholm.

Mitch Randall, CEO of Good Faith Media, announced Chisholm’s hiring in August. Chisholm, whose byline appears on the feature story on page 6 of this journal issue, served GFM this past summer as an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Intern.

She will be completing graduate work at East Tennessee State University during this academic year while filling the creative design role with Good Faith Media.

“We have benefited from the varied gifts of very talented interns since the launch of the internship program made possible by a gift from the foundation of the First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., in memory of a beloved, longtime member,” said Pierce.

He added: “Some 25 years ago, I worked with University of Georgia journalism interns when Ernie Hynds was a department head there. I believe he would be very pleased to see the success of this new internship program in his honor — which has already become a gateway for career opportunities.” **NFJ**



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Punk's 'subversive joy' parallels the biblical story

By Alyssa Aldape

No genre of music defines biblical lament quite like Punk. It is subversive joy as an art to call in those who have been deemed unwanted — or folks who wish not to be seen as victims of systems designed to keep them on the outside, but as partners shining lights into dark corners.

Feminist biblical scholarship came out of a similar need to include voices that were historically excluded. It serves as a reminder that there is always room for more of the story to be told.

In *Biblical Views: Wrestling with Faith*, Phyllis Trible writes of the importance of engaging with the stories in the Bible that often do not end with “happily ever after.” There is no pretty bow to tie it up with God’s grace or provision.

There is just terror — often toward women who have gone unnamed. These stories are rarely chosen for Sunday morning readings, and are not found in children’s Bible story books.

They hide in the shadows of our collective understanding of the narrative of our faith. Women such as the Levite’s concubine, Hagar, Bathsheba, and Saul’s harem do not have the privilege of remembrance in ways that honor their memory.

After the “Me Too” movement and the subsequent “Church Too” call for Christians to face our own sins of sexual misconduct, why is it so hard for us to admit that these stories exist in our biblical narrative?

Might talking about these stories, and lamenting on behalf of these victims, help us reform how the church has treated women and gay and transgender men? What would it look like if we reimagined a part of our corporate worship to include lament?

I am talking beyond the pastoral prayer that includes one or two lines naming that

we have not honored God in our actions. What if we wrote hymns with lyrics that read like a psalm about laying our instruments down and weeping?

What if Sunday morning liturgies included a corporate deep cry for those who have bore witness to the injustices of the world? What if the church of Jesus Christ was unafraid of lament?

Lament and anger are just as important to my Christian devotion as are my joy and delight in the creator of it all. Denying those emotions keeps important parts of us from God.

Lament calls us to hear the pains that our siblings experience. Lament gives us space to air our grievances when we feel as if we have lost control

Lament allows us to shout at the top of our lungs. Lament breaks us open and shatters the boxes in which we put God and ourselves.

Trible adds that we must not ignore the texts of terror, but wrestle with them until we have found the blessing in them. Likewise, the women of Punk invite us to wrestle with power and then rebuild a world where any person who has felt excluded is called worthy.

Punk is the deep grief and reality of defeat and exile of Psalm 137 by the rivers of Babylon. It is the subversive poem sung in the midst of oppressors of revenge and restoration as they look on from their high horses. It is a shout from the outside inviting us to look in and join.

Much like theology, Punk has its caveats created by groups within the genre

who have historically felt excluded from the narrative.

As with feminist theologians, women of Punk wrestle with the terrors of sexism, racism, classism, ableism and homophobia. They invite us to reimagine a radically inclusive world where power is turned upside down and those who are called dogs and unworthy are, in reality, those with the power to disrupt systems meant to keep a few in power and the rest in their place.

When the world tells women to make themselves invisible and small, in their song “Rebel Girl,” the band Bikini Kill sings: “When she talks, I hear the revolution; in her hips there’s revolution.”

When women and queer folks are harassed on the streets, Hijas de Violencia performs on the spot on the streets of Mexico — proclaiming the spot of harassment as a landmark of injustice.

At the pandemic’s beginning, when a classmate of a Chinese-American girl told her she was dangerous (because of the novel Coronavirus), she and her bandmates of The Linda Lindas sang out about the sexism experienced by girls as young as 9 years old. Rather than sulk and hide, they sang, “We will rebuild what you destroy!”

From the mouth of babes, we hear a prophecy common throughout the biblical narrative: Power and empire destroy the God-sized dream, and what is hidden in the dark will come to light. The women of Punk ask us to shout out by the rivers of oppression that we will rebuild what is destroyed; the church of Jesus Christ is Punk. **NFJ**

—Alyssa Aldape is a contributing correspondent for Good Faith Media.



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

My church divorced me

BY ANONYMOUS

I never thought my church would ask me for a divorce. But this past January a group of self-selected leaders of the church I served as pastor decided — absent the consent of the church — that a divorce was necessary.

I was called to a meeting that was advertised as my yearly evaluation. It was my ninth one, so I knew what to expect, or so I thought. Instead, I walked into a room filled with anxious and scared people, masquerading as angry, ready to confront me.

“You can resign today or be fired next Sunday. You choose.”

The words came at me like a shot. “Why?” I asked.

I was not completely blindsided, as there had been some rumblings of unhappiness during the pandemic, but how about a slow release maybe, or a shift to a part-time role? There was no response.

“You’re arrogant,” one of them said. I asked for examples, and all I heard was crickets.

“You don’t take care of senior adults” was another accusation. Examples?

A couple was cited that moved four hours away three years ago. The husband had recently died. “You did not call her.”

“You’re not growing the church.” The church had been in free fall for 10 years before I arrived, and I could not do the impossible. We were, like nearly all churches of our kind, facing forces larger than us that made such growth nearly impossible.

To genuinely begin to grow would mean a radical change in nearly every aspect of the church. I could not keep the church

Editor’s note: Bill Wilson, founding director of the Center for Healthy Churches, enlisted the writer of this column, noting: “Nearly every week, I hear from ministers who are going through traumatic events at the hands of their church. The script is frighteningly familiar and usually features a mish-mash of: ‘We’re not doing well; people are not returning after COVID; you’ve been a disappointment; the church on the edge of town is flourishing; you’re too political; and we think it’s time for you to go.’ I asked one of these ministers to share his story anonymously. Please pray for this pastor, your pastor and all pastors in these challenging days. Then find a Nathan who is willing to tell you if you are, indeed, the one who needs to repent.”

as it was and yet make it the church they wanted.

They offloaded on me all of the responsibility for the church, but not the authority to actually do what needed to be done.

What I saw in my erstwhile friends was fear. Their church was all but dead, and in their fear they needed someone to blame. I made a good target.

Scapegoating has long and deep roots in nearly every religious tradition. We need someone to blame for things that happen to us that we don’t understand or want to understand.

For most churches, it is much easier to scapegoat the pastor or a staff member than to own up to the realities of the congregation’s shortcomings or the bullying behavior of a few, or the narcissistic tendencies of us all. Regardless, it was obvious I was to blame for everything.

I could have resorted to the technicalities of our church constitution and demanded a vote, but no one wins in that type of church vote. If it ever gets to that point, everyone has lost already.

Two years ago, I had lunch with my cousin who was still smarting over the

leaving of his wife. She walked out on him, leaving two small kids, after four years of marriage, to pursue her high school beau.

My cousin was livid. He gloried in the way he fleeced her in the settlement, and he sought every way possible for me to affirm his moral superiority. Knowing that in marriage it takes two to tango, I refused to join this unholy triangle.

Finally, he blurted out to me, “Won’t you at least say that what she did was wrong?”

“Sure,” I said, “and will you admit any wrongness you’ve done? It’s healthier that way.”

Owning our piece of the mess is painful and takes some degree of maturity. Let us just say the lunch ended quickly.

When I broached the issue of settlement with my judge and jury, the answer was blunt: “No settlement, and be out of your office tomorrow.” The same spirit of superiority and a lack of self-awareness emerged.

I do not wear rose-colored glasses. I know that my leadership of the church for 10 years was not perfect. For the past two years I could feel my energy waning, knowing that the end was near for the church, and I am sure I was not the hopeful,

energetic pastor of a decade ago.

Just as any marriage is never between two perfect people, neither is a church-pastor relationship. Our foundation must be built more on grace and forgiveness than expectations of perfection. I was not perfect for this church, but neither were they perfect for me.

It would be very easy to ask why I did not take them on and fight for my job. The answers are very complicated.

My family, along with my mental, physical and spiritual health, is more important than this collection of church members. Jesus gave a wonderful sacrament of failure: shake the dust off and move on when people overtly resist the Spirit.

There are some valid reasons why one in three churches in the U.S. will probably be closing by the end of this decade. Some days, we just need to shake the dust off and move on to a healthier place.

Stunned, I negotiated hard to get one week to clear my office. Not understanding why I was being treated as if a criminal, I asked about it.

The deacon chair responded, “We don’t want you to put something ugly on the church sign.” My heart sank. Ten years of untold sacrifice and love, and this is what they expect?

The following week was a rapid back and forth of pseudo-closure. I insisted on some kind of financial settlement to help my family.

I learned that one month of severance for each year of service is considered reasonable. Yet I asked for just six months. I was told to take three months or nothing.

Ironically, this church of 25 active members has a bank account holding \$1.25 million due to a recent land sale. I guess the additional \$15,000 was a bridge too far.

I wasn’t able to say a proper goodbye to the church — or to answer anyone’s questions. Those will now become part of the toxic cultural infection lurking beneath the surface of this church. Others will become victims as the dysfunction and disease are left untreated.

Now my wife and I are focused on

preserving the faith of our teenage children. For years I have taught them person-first language.

In this case, “They are not bad people; they are people behaving badly. We all do sometimes.”

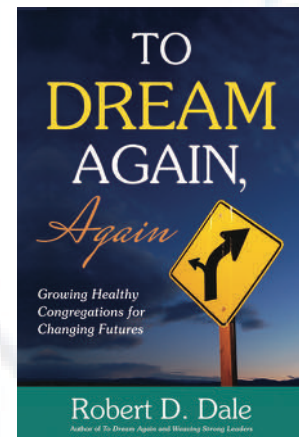
Glorying in their fleecing of me is pretty bad behavior, but fear of the future reveals itself in strange ways. One wonders the degree to which God is disgusted with such behavior.

What I cannot shake are the images of the Kingdom of God — or Jesus’ parables that promise abundant life, shared community, new life and unbounded joy.

The ideal God holds out for us still woos me. I can only pray that I might some day get to experience God’s kingdom coming to earth as it is in heaven.

Somehow my life in this church did not fit into those positive images. I hope to one day be able to see such things actually happen. Perhaps the Kingdom of God — which is given over to those who will produce its fruit (Matt. 21:43) — still works. **NFJ**

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Gideon's jug? Hold your horses

By Tony W. Cartledge

This year archaeologists in Israel discovered an ancient inscription that may carry the name Jeruba'al, a nickname the biblical account attributes to Gideon, one of Israel's "judges" (Judg. 6:32).

Israel's *Haaretz* suggested the inscription, which dates to about 1100 BCE, could have belonged to Gideon himself.

"[B]ased on timing and location, the archaeologists surmise that he may have been none other than the biblical figure Gideon (also known as Jerubbaal), son of Joash the Abiezrite, whose activities are described at length in the book of Judges," wrote Ruth Schuster.

Amanda Borschel-Dan, writing for the *Times of Israel*, was more circumspect. The story's attention-grabbing headline declared: "Five-letter inscription inked 3,100 years ago may be name of biblical judge."

Headlines are often written by editors. Unfortunately, many people don't read past them.

Borschel-Dan correctly emphasized the key role of the inscription as helping to fill a gap in the history of the Proto-Canaanite script. She acknowledged that the archaeologists discussed the find in relation to the biblical Jeruba'al, but "We cannot tell whether he owned the vessel on which the inscription is written."

An e-mail blast from *Biblical Archaeology Review* provocatively asked: "Archaeological Evidence of Gideon the Judge?" Fortunately, writer Nathan Steinmeyer observed that "since the biblical Gideon lived in the Jezreel Valley, nearly a hundred miles away, this inscription likely belonged to another Jerubbaal."

Khirbet Al-Ra'i, which excavator Yosef Garfinkel believes to be biblical Ziklag, is located a few miles west of Lachish, in the southern part of Israel. The inscribed pottery fragments were found in a stone-lined



Photo of inscription credit: Photo by Dafna Gazit, Israel Antiquities Authority

storage silo from the Iron I period (about 1200–1000 BCE). Ceramic, radiographic and petrographic analyses all date the inscription to between 1150 and 1050 BCE.

Let's get realistic. The find was recently featured in a more scholarly publication, the open-access *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology*, published by the Institute of Archaeology at Hebrew University.

Eminent epigrapher Christopher Rollston joined the four lead archaeologists in writing "The Jerubba'al Inscription from Khirbet al-Ra'i: A Proto-Canaanite (Early Alphabetic) Inscription."

The letters were found painted on three pottery fragments from the same vessel. It was probably a small liter-sized jug that may have held something valuable, hence the rare decision to put a name on it.

Two fragments fit together to reveal four complete letters and two partial ones. Another fragment that does not connect has parts of two letters, but not enough to speculate on their identity.

Ancient writers hadn't settled into a reliably consistent direction for writing the proto-Canaanite script, but the stance of the letters indicates the most likely direction for this inscription is right-to-left.

The broken letter at right is the trickiest, as the remaining two downward strokes could represent more than one possibility. Rollston judges the most likely candidate to be a *yod*, comparing it to an inscribed ewer

from a slightly earlier period at Lachish, which draws the *yod* roughly in the shape of a squared uppercase English "A."

The next letters follow more typical forms for *resh*, *bet*, *'ayin*, and *lamedh* during that period.

The combined letters – assuming they were meant to be read together – could spell Jeruba'al, the first extrabiblical evidence of the name. A folk etymology in Judg. 6:32 ascribes the meaning "Let Ba'al contend," but the authors suggest that "May Ba'al be great" is a more natural reading.

Khirbet al-Ra'i was probably a Canaanite town during the Iron I period, but the Israelites also used Ba'al with its generic meaning "lord" as an element in personal names on into the Iron IIA period.

Sometime between the ninth and sixth centuries, though, the word *ba'al* became so associated with the Canaanite deity that the Israelites considered it too offensive for such use, and some biblical writers edited the older names.

Saul had a son named Eshba'al (1 Chron. 8:33, 9:39), and Jonathon had a son named Merib-ba'al (1 Chron. 8:34, 9:40), but the author of 2 Samuel called them Ishboshet (2 Sam. 2:8 ff.) and Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 4:4 ff.), substituting *boshet* ("shame") for Ba'al.

Gideon himself (as Jeruba'al) got the same treatment in 2 Samuel 11:21, where he is called "Jeruboshet," though some modern translations ignore the scribal editing.

We have reason to celebrate this find, not just because it may reflect a name that also appears in the Bible, but mainly because it aids in understanding the development of the script that was adopted by the Israelites.

Speculating that it might have come from Gideon's personal jug may attract readers, sell ads, and fire up those who want to "prove the Bible," but it's a classic case of barking up the wrong tree. **NFJ**

The abuses and idolatry of American exceptionalism

By John D. Pierce

My public school and religious education was taught through the lens of “American exceptionalism.” We were not only blessed, we learned; we were also special, which translated to privileged.

I don't recall learning about the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny specifically. But I recall a Sunday school teacher — likely parroting what she had been taught as a child — saying that if our forebears hadn't stolen and occupied these lands from Indians, the poor souls would have never known about Jesus.

The Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny are at the root of much of how America and Americanized Christianity have taken shape and continue to do so. It is out of this framework that the concept of American exceptionalism emerged and evolved.

The Doctrine of Discovery refers to the late-15th-century papal blessing of Christopher Columbus' exploitations of native peoples. Any lands not occupied by “Christians” could be taken in an effort to advance the Catholic faith and the Christian religion.

This proposed noble undertaking, which was actually theft and genocide, was excused as being beneficial to those whose lives and land would be destroyed. Pope Alexander VI considered such carnage a fair price for overthrowing any “barbarous nation” in need of being “brought to faith itself.”

Jump ahead to the 19th century of western expansion of what is now the fuller United States of America. Settlers were

“destined” to take lands and destroy livelihoods as needed to fulfill this divine calling.

These abuses also were deemed benevolent, since “our system” was superior to all others — and therefore, a gift to them. Claims of being “the greatest nation in the world” became justification for claims of doing no wrong.

This concept of exceptionalism, however, was not applied to all Americans, just those of European descent — in particular the self-appointed arbiters of the Christian faith who were blessed to be born as male.

Exceptionalism birthed a lot more racism and privilege than responsibility. It permitted continuing efforts to demean others based on ethnicity, religion and economics.

Still today — and in some ways more so than in recent decades — there is a robust effort to keep this indoctrination, masquerading as education, going. And it is best accomplished by continuing to ignore the larger and truer history of this imperfect nation with good, stated ideals.

That's why the straw man of critical race theory has been erected and continues to be thrashed.

One needs to look no further than Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, who recently said: “Teaching children that this is the most exceptional nation in the world is incredibly important.”

Author and religion professor David Dark of Belmont University gave this clear and needed response on social media: “He's wrong. Teaching children that America is the most exceptional nation in the world is religious indoctrination. It's also idolatry.”

Patriotism doesn't require exceptionalism — which isn't a Christian concept. Deeming any persons or nations exceptional goes against everything Jesus said about individual value, faithfulness and conduct.

There was and is nothing noble — and certainly nothing exceptional — about a long history of human rights abuses in this nation directed toward Indigenous people, African slaves, immigrants from a variety of places, and women based solely on gender. And similar justifications have been used for acts of war.

To teach American exceptionalism requires ignoring a whole lot about this nation while romanticizing a faulty version of its history. And to do so is, indeed, idolatrous.

It calls for a commitment beyond mere patriotism. It seeks to justify horrific abuses of the past — and positions a particular, powerful people to claim divine directives for continuing to treat others as less than God created them to be.

The exceptional thing to do is to work diligently toward the goal of liberty and justice for all rather than a privileged few. [NFJ](#)



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Theology is interpretation

By John R. Franke

In my previous column, I started answering the question, “What is theology?” by suggesting it is an ongoing and open-ended activity involving God, ourselves and other people in which we seek to understand and participate in the purposes of God for the world.

In engaging in this work, 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.

The ongoing and open-ended character of theology points to a companion idea: theology is interpretation. From this perspective, the doctrinal, theological and confessional formulations of churches and theologians are the result of particular human reflection on the revelation of God and the witness of scripture.

As such, theological constructions and doctrines are always subservient. They constitute a “second-order” language that is attempting to make sense of and understand the primary commitments of Christian faith and life made known by God in Jesus Christ according to the inspired witness of scripture.

While this interpretive or second-order language is helpful and even necessary, it also presents challenges. For instance, it has entailed the development of conceptual vocabularies and sophisticated forms of argument that often seem to be distant from idioms of the Bible.

A classic example of this is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The term “trinity” — and many of the concepts related to the idea — are not in the Bible.

Indeed, an entire conceptual language is now in place to express the perceived implications of the biblical witness. This interpretative language has become a part of the heritage of the church and has produced a rich tradition of theological reflection

and conviction that continues to shape the Christian faith.

However, for all of its importance and value, we must always remember that it is still interpretation. This idea that theology is interpretation presents two challenges.

The first is the conclusion that since theology is merely interpretation, we can marginalize and dismiss the history of Christian theological reflection and function as though it did not exist. Such disregard for the history of theological reflection effectively cuts contemporary communities off from the past action of the Spirit speaking to the churches throughout the ages and detracts from its corporate witness to the gospel.

The second challenge occurs through the claim that a particular tradition or set of theological conclusions be viewed as virtually, if not absolutely, infallible.

While many contemporary Christian communities place little value on the confessional heritage of the church, some continue to maintain a very strong, confessional approach to tradition as a vital component of theology. Finding their theological bearings in the authority of the confessions and catechisms of their various traditions, these communities often give evidence of a static, rather than living, view of theology.

Each of these approaches is problematic for the missional church. In the first instance, the witness of the church in the present is cut off from its connection to the work of the Spirit in the witness of the church through the ages and across linguistic and ethnic boundaries.

In the second instance, an awareness of the ongoing need for reformation is lost as particular theological formulations are

understood as universally appropriate for all times and places, and, as such, immune from criticism and correction.

The affirmation that all theology is interpretation also reminds us that all theology is local. Theology bears the distinctive marks of the particular thought forms and practices that shape the social context from which it emerges.

The practice of theology throughout history is an extended series of second-order interpretive reflections on the revelation of God made known in Jesus Christ. It takes root among people of every tribe and nation in the ever-expanding exploration of the good news of God’s love for the world.

This interpretive exercise is always subordinate to God. Theology is a response to the revelation of God and its witness in scripture.

However, this should not lead to the conclusion that theology is merely a poor and fallible human attempt to bear witness to the truth of the gospel. To speak of the interpretive provisionally of theology should not lead to the conclusion that the work of theology is unimportant or unnecessary.

It is a basic act of Christian witness. It is simply a sober consequence of the fact that finite human beings cannot fully comprehend the revelation of God and the need for continual reformation.

In the words of the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth, “As [Christians] we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both *our obligation and our inability* and by that very recognition give God the glory.” **NFJ**

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



Deconstructing faith community is the future of the church

By Starlette Thomas

Questions will come. Go with them. For some of us, they come early and often. For the rest of us, they arrive later in life. All, if answered fully, can create deep meaning within us and in community.

Often foundational and taking us back to our beginnings, they do not come to drive a wedge between us and them, our past and present — but they can bring people, places and things together in ways we wouldn't have seen if not for the question.

Questions can lead to new beginnings.

I have questions about power and visibility. I have had these kinds of questions since I was a child, raised in the South.



There I wondered behind my closed bedroom door but never aloud, “Why are children expected to be ‘seen and not heard?’” Addressing that question publicly to an adult would have been viewed as questioning proper authority.

I would have been accused, convicted and swiftly punished for “talking back” — based solely on the fact that I had not “stayed in a child’s place.” My raising a question would have called the hierarchical familial system and their childlike image of naïveté and immaturity into question.

“Too big for my britches,” they’d say. But that’s not what Jesus said.

In Matthew 18, Jesus said that the child — that little person with lots of energy, curiosity and imaginary friends — is the model for behavior. Jesus said if his disciples are to enter the kingdom, then we will have to act like children.

Jesus’ words led me to question the reductionist view and the family system that supported it. “Jesus is the answer,” but the

behavior of some of his disciples raises more questions than answers.

I came to the Christian faith in the Pentecostal-Holiness tradition, and its leaders made it seem as if they had all of the answers. So, we should have no fear, save pregnancy out of wedlock and eternal damnation.

We could have no doubts because “Jesus saves.” We were taught to believe and behave with the end in mind, to be “rapture ready” because Jesus was coming soon.

Wait. “Who am I *really*?” asked preacher, theologian and social activist Howard Thurman. I, too, wanted desperately to know the answer.

Writing about “the inwardness of religion” in his book, *The Creative Encounter*, Thurman noted: “There need not be one single rebirth, but again and again a [person] may be reborn until at last, there is nothing that remains between [them] and God.”

Sometimes you don’t want to work with the words you’ve been given. I was given the color black as an identity, and I questioned it until I had the courage to hand it back.

“Do I have to be black?” No, I am an African American. My ancestors came from a continent, a country — not a color.

My interrogation of race led to an affirmation of faith, which became the raceless gospel.

This, of course, led to more questions about the racialization of the church and the divine community. The continued practice of segregation on Sunday mornings was and remains blatant hypocrisy.

“It was not just plain and simple racial antipathy or prejudice,” writes Henry H. Mitchell of the desire to separate churches into black and white congregations in his book, *Black Church Beginnings*. “It was

also the differences in the three C’s of class, culture and control.”

This is why I had to go back to the beginning, strip the North American church down to the rock that Jesus built it on and consider more fully what I was believing in (Matt. 16:18). Unbeknownst to me, I was deconstructing.

Derived from the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida and used for literary analysis, I am separating race from my faith in God.

Other Christian believers are deconstructing in response to purity culture, clergy sexual abuse and adultery, church hurt, Christian nationalism and any number of divisions.

Realizing the discrepancy between Jesus and American Christianity, we just have a few questions. We are not trying to tear the church apart or tear up the plans that God has for it. It is deconstructing, not demolishing.

Instead, we are tearing down what will never work for us all. We are calling into question beliefs and behaviors along with the family systems and the superficialologies that undergird them — but do not support a healthy relationship with God, self and neighbor.

Deconstructing saved Christianity for me. A part of the deconstructing faith community, I practice my faith with curiosity. I also remain in conversation with the Spirit, who is wholly imaginative.

People used to say, “Children are our future.” Likewise, deconstructing, a kind of childlike faith, will ensure the future of the Church and is an answer to the Lord’s prayer for the “kin-dom” coming. [NFJ](#)

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

The True, Mammoth Believers

By Brett Younger

The father and son in line in front of me at the Waco Mammoth National Monument spend \$156.45 on stuffed mammoths, mammoth key chains, mammoth T-shirts, mammoth hats, and assorted books on mammoths.

The cashier/ticket seller/park ranger can see they are true believers, so she talks about how good it is that the ears of a mammoth are shorter than an elephant's or they would get frostbite, how much she would love to see a woolly rhinoceros (who became extinct about the same time as mammoths), and how great it is that they are discovering new mammoth tusks in the Arctic Siberia (one of the few good things about global warming).

As she rings up another book on the joy of mammoths, she smiles at the father in that flirty way park rangers have. "I wrote this book."

She knows this was too forward, so she turns to the 8-year-old. "I see you love mammoths. Do you love dinosaurs, too?"

"Of course."

"What's your favorite dinosaur?"

"A raptor."

"Did you know that when you eat turkey, you're eating a raptor?"

This third grader has been around the block a few times. "I don't think so."

Even though it is 97 degrees, the park ranger is dressed in full regalia. Kudos to this skeptical young man for not being blinded by her fancy uniform.

When it is time to buy my ticket, I know I will not pass for a true believer. I can't say, "I know you can learn a mammoth's age from the rings of its tusk. How many of the 24 Columbian mammoths here were you



I did not have a real commitment to mammoths, but the fans' enthusiasm was infectious. At first I felt like an imposter, but then I became curious, and by the end I was a convert.

able to date using this method?"

I go with, "I get the senior citizen discount."

In light of my advancing age and the weather in Waco, she keeps assuring me, "The building is air-conditioned."

I would not have guessed how many mammoth enthusiasts there are. I hear: "That's what we read about!" "They're even bigger than I thought!" "This is amazing!"

I see women with national monument insignias sewed on their hats like scout badges. They don't need the Waco emblems because they already have them.

A girl's tee-shirt announces, "Forget princess. I want to be a paleontologist."

There are mammoth jokes:

What is huge, shaggy, has 16 feet and sounds terrible? *A mammoth barbershop quartet.*

What do you get if you cross a mammoth and a kangaroo? *Big holes all over the ice.*

What is the best way to get a wild mammoth? *Get a tame one and then annoy it by telling it mammoth jokes.*

I learn that Columbian mammoths were 14 feet tall, weighed 20,000 pounds, and had six sets of teeth in a lifetime. They ate 300–700 pounds of food, drank 50

gallons of water, and produced 400 pounds of dung per day — which sounds like a lot.

The museum is here because layers of mud trapped a herd of mammoths at this site. The arrangement of bones suggests one mammoth mother tried to hold her baby above the flood.

I did not have a real commitment to mammoths, but the fans' enthusiasm was infectious. At first I felt like an imposter, but then I became curious, and by the end I was a convert.

Sometimes on Sunday morning, tourists wander into our worship service. They hear us talking about events from centuries ago, praying for people we have never met, and singing songs they are unlikely to hear anywhere else. Some of us wear strange uniforms. The tourists must think we are odd.

As our culture becomes more secular, worship is going to look increasingly like a trip to a museum. The church has usually tried to convince non-churchgoers that attending church is reasonable. Maybe we need to try a different approach and embrace our peculiarity. We are interested in events from long ago, curious about things others ignore, and passionate about what we have discovered. Being true believers might keep us from becoming extinct. **NFJ**

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



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

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

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



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

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

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 7, 2021

Mark 12:38-44

True Generosity

Do you consider yourself to be a good steward – not just of your finances, but of your time, your talents, your passions? Many of us tend to think of stewardship as a church matter only, because that’s where we’ve heard of a “Stewardship Committee” to look after the congregation’s finances, or a yearly emphasis promoting the church budget. 📌

Today’s scripture is a favorite text for annual stewardship campaigns, but it concerns far more than how much we give – it’s a sharp challenge to consider how we *live*.

Sham sacrifice ... (vv. 38-41)

Try visualizing the scripture lesson. The setting is first-century Jerusalem at Passover time. The narrow streets are packed with Jews and Gentiles, pilgrims and residents, people who sell and people who buy. It smells of sweat and sewage.

But, as you stand on the Mount of Olives and look across at the city before climbing down through the Kidron Valley, it looks clean and bright. Your eyes are drawn to the temple mount, where you see a tall rectangular building constructed of clean white limestone with highlights of lustrous gold veneer.

Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.” (Mark 12:43)

Around the inner sanctuary a portico supported by parallel rows of smaller columns extends in a large rectangle divided into two parts. Jewish men are allowed into a narrow strip before the temple proper. Women can go no further than the balconies of a “Court of Women” leading up to the “Court of Israel” before the sanctuary. 📌

Outside the inner courts you see porticos lining a large courtyard. The entire surface of the ground is paved with flat, well-laid stones. People come and go at all hours.

The women’s court is also the location of the temple treasury. Thirteen collection boxes shaped like ram’s horns – small on the end where coins are inserted, large on the end where money was removed – are located around the court, marked for different purposes: tithes or money for sacrifices or gifts for the poor. 📌

Off to one side you notice a young rabbi who is teaching near a prominent collection box. He is not so well dressed as the other rabbis, and he doesn’t talk as much. He has directed his disciples to be silent and to watch what is happening around them.

They watch as a scattering of finely dressed men studded with religious symbols swagger about as if floating in a sea of self-importance. They are known as “scribes” because of their education that has prepared them to read and write and study. They interpret

the Torah and teach it to others. They smile and nod when other people call them “Rabbi.”

The young teacher takes note of this group. Quietly, he warns his disciples to “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets” (vv. 38-39).

The men are also trained in accounting and finance. Despite their pious appearance, some of the same men might have gained their wealth through the practice of loaning money to the poor and then foreclosing on their property when they couldn’t pay. Feeling no remorse or concern for those they exploit, they consider themselves righteous and offer long prayers designed more for a public audience than for God. “They will receive the greater condemnation,” Jesus said (v. 40). 📌

A second group approaches, more boisterous and less holy. They wear fine robes of white and scarlet, purple and blue. Their sandals are of new leather, their skin is well oiled, and their toenails are manicured.

A man with a wide belt of folded cloth steps up to the collection box. He carefully unfolds one side of his belt to reveal a leather purse. Deliberately, he takes several gold coins and drops them into the box, one at the time.

Another soon takes his place. His cash is stashed in a decorative money-bag of finely woven cloth, hidden on a string around his neck and behind his glistening beard. The bag clinks softly as he carefully counts coins to be sure that he gives a full tithe, but no more.

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A silent sermon (vv. 42-44)

Jesus alerts his followers to the stooped figure of a poorly dressed woman waiting quietly on the fringe. Her outer robe is worn and patched. It looks as if she's been sleeping in it. Her feet are covered with dust, and her sandals already well-worn when the first owner threw them away.

The dark color of her faded clothing makes it obvious that she is a widow. Whether she feels shamed by her clothing, her social status, or hurtful glances from wealthier worshipers, she has been standing apart from the group in front of her, looking down, trying to be invisible, avoiding rejection, awaiting her turn.

The righteous rich eventually move on and leave their wives behind to talk among themselves and perhaps, to recite a prayer.

The poor woman moves quickly. She steps quietly to the box, and bows her head for a moment. Her calloused fingers drop two tiny copper coins into the slot and they land with a small, tinny sound.

Perhaps you wonder how she had obtained those little coins. Did she earn them by sweeping someone else's house? By cooking someone else's food? Had the mites been thrown to her as a charitable pittance?

The Greek text calls these coins *leptons*, the smallest coin then used in Jerusalem. Like the rabbi's disciples, you may be unimpressed. A poor little woman put her two cents' worth into the collection box. So?

But hear what Jesus says: The young rabbi speaks. "Look! I tell you the truth – this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. Every one of them gave out of their surplus, but this woman, despite her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had

to live on!" (Mark 12:44, slightly paraphrased).

If anyone ever had a reason not to give, it was this destitute woman. She didn't have any other money hidden away in a cookie jar, and she probably didn't have a cookie jar to begin with. She may not have had a home. And yet, she gave.

Jesus wants us to understand that the amount we give is far less important than the measure of our sacrifice. The rich who had filled the coffers with gold and silver could give substantial sums and never miss it. This woman's gift could not begin to compare in a quantitative sense, but the gifts of the rich could not compare in a qualitative sense.

The heart of the matter

Our well-worn habit is to approach this text by condemning the hypocritical scribes and valorizing the poor widow, but surely few of us identify with either one. We don't parade our righteousness while exploiting the poor, do we? And we certainly don't give all, as did the widow.

But it's likely that we have more in common with the wealthy scribes than we think, for we all – consciously or not – participate in an economic system that inevitably exploits the poor to benefit the rich. Many low and middle-income earners pay proportionally higher taxes than the wealthy, whose tax rates may be higher, but who often benefit from loopholes and accounting practices that enable them to amass great fortunes while paying little or no income tax.

Studies suggest that in America, the top one percent control 40 percent of the nation's wealth. The top 10 percent control 70 percent of the wealth, while the bottom 50 percent are left to scramble for just two percent.

Do you see anything wrong with

this picture? Economic and governmental policies controlled by wealthy interests have maintained a system in which low-income people – especially minorities – do much of the country's real work but have little chance of ever getting ahead. The minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour hasn't changed since 2009, while inflation has risen more than 24 percent. Could you support a family on \$290 per week – *before* taxes and other deductions?

Yet, many of us blissfully enjoy our privileged status, and are unwilling to engage the hard work of producing a more just society. We thank God for blessing us without stopping to think about the inequities that surround us. We don't see ourselves oppressing the poor, but we benefit from a system that does.

Do you think Jesus would congratulate us for attending church in our finery, even if we support the church generously, if we do not also work for change and contend for those who Jesus cares about so much?

Jesus had little patience with those who grew wealthy at the expense of others, even if they tithed faithfully from their gain. He saw a deeper faith and truer heart in the poor woman who felt compelled to give the last pennies that she owned.

Now, the text does speak to the issue of giving, and there are good reasons for it, but that's not the main point of the story.

Of course, there is more to stewardship than money. Our time is also a trust from God, as are our talents. Imagine what could be accomplished if we devoted a tenth of an average workweek to serving others.

When we think about serious stewardship, we may automatically think "I can't afford to do that."

Perhaps it is better to ask if we can afford not to. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 14, 2021

Mark 13:1-8

Wise Waiting

Don't you love a scriptural conundrum? A puzzling passage that's open to wild and crazy interpretations? Mark 13, which has parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, fits into that category.

Over the years, alarmists promoting premillennial dispensationalist theology have claimed a perceived increase in wars, famines, earthquakes, and other disasters as “signs of the times,” predicting that the world was coming to an end and Christ would soon return. ⤵

Apocalyptic fans are abundant. The imaginative and rapture-focused *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins has sold nearly 80 million copies, spawning movies, spinoffs, and video games.

A careful reading of the text shows that Jesus' words were indeed designed as a warning, but they had little to do with forecasting a date for the last days.

So, what is this puzzling chapter about? What did Jesus intend for his disciples to take from this surprising eruption of apocalyptic language, and how might it speak to contemporary disciples? ⤵ Different interpreters have reached widely divergent conclusions. ⤵

It is important that we note the

Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” (Mark 13:2)

context: much of Jesus' teaching in the previous two chapters took place inside the Jerusalem temple. It was often critical of the temple and the privileged religious establishment that had grown up around it. In chapter 13, Jesus led his disciples away from the temple grounds – and predicted that the beautiful edifice would be destroyed.

Jesus' remarks about the destruction of the temple ultimately led to a discussion of the last days. The lectionary text for the day extends only through v. 8, but to understand what is happening, we will give brief attention to the remainder of the chapter, too. ⤵

Trouble for the temple ... (vv. 1-2)

According to Mark's chronology, Jesus concluded his triumphal entry (11:1-11) into Jerusalem by going to the temple for a quick look around before returning to Bethany for the night. The next day, while returning to the temple, Jesus reportedly cursed a fig tree that had no fruit. It subsequently withered. Mark apparently saw the fig tree as a symbol of the temple establishment (11:12-14, 20-21).

Jesus' attitude toward current temple practices became clear that morning when he caused a stir by upsetting the tables of merchants and moneychangers who had been allowed to do business in the temple courts (11:15-17). His reference to the temple

as a “den of robbers” did not sit well with the chief priests and scribes, who feared Jesus' rising popularity and sought for a way to kill him, Mark says (11:18).

On the following day, Jesus and the temple officials exchanged verbal barbs over the issue of authority, with Jesus gaining the upper hand (11:27-33) before telling a parable about wicked tenants of a vineyard who kept profits owed to the landowner, mistreating servants and killing the owner's son (12:1-9). The priests who ran the temple were the clear targets of Jesus' story, and they knew it (12:10-12).

Various Jewish groups sought to entrap Jesus with tricky questions about taxes (12:13-17) and the resurrection (12:18-27). Further questions related to identifying the greatest commandment (12:28-34) and the identity of the Messiah (12:35-37). Jesus then lambasted the greedy and surface piety of religious leaders, contrasting their public sanctimoniousness with the humble devotion of a poor widow (12:38-44).

With this clearly negative judgment in the background, Jesus led his disciples away from the temple, but one of the twelve looked around and could not help exclaiming his delight at the magnificent sight of the temple compound (13:1).

Was Jesus exasperated by his student's apparent failure to grasp how the whole temple enterprise had departed from its divine mission? Frustrated or not, Jesus pointed to the massive stonework of the temple complex and insisted that it would all be leveled, with not one stone upon another. Can you imagine the disci-

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ples' astonishment? The temple's giant platform was constructed of stones weighing many tons. 📌 The thought of it coming to ruin might have seemed ludicrous, but Jesus used two strong double negatives (allowed in Greek) to emphasize its certainty. 📌

Don't be troubled (vv. 3-8) ...

At some point later, Jesus and the disciples were sitting on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city, which was (and is still) dominated by the temple mount. Peter, James, John, and Andrew approached, 📌 and one of them had a question: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (v. 4).

Jesus had claimed the magnificent temple would fall. Finding it hard to believe, they wanted to know more.

Jesus responded by telling them not to be worried about it (v. 7). Wars would be fought. Disasters would happen. People would rise up and call themselves messiahs, pointing to upheavals as signs of the end and recruiting people to follow them.

Mark's gospel, on which Matthew and Luke were patterned, was probably written in the late 60s CE, during a period of increasing tension between the Jews and their Roman overlords. A Jewish rebellion had erupted in year 66, leading Emperor Nero to dispatch Vespasian to put down the revolt. The Jews were not easily quelled and the war dragged on for years, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem – and of the temple – in 70 CE.

Mark writes as if Jesus knew such troubles would come, but wanted his disciples to know that self-styled messiahs, wars, earthquakes, and famines should not be seen as signs of the end. 📌 The temple had been destroyed before,

and it would be destroyed again. The fall of the temple would not necessarily mean the end of the world. Thus, he said, "Beware that no one leads you astray" (v. 5).

When modern believers are presented with statistics about escalating wars or natural disasters as evidence for the coming return of Christ, they should likewise recall Jesus' advice and not be troubled by putative prophets. 📌

Jesus didn't want his disciples to focus on the grandeur of buildings or the pain of potential persecution, but on eternal matters. Trouble would come. Evil would rise. People would think things were so bad that surely God would end it all.

Jesus' words are couched in apocalyptic language, such as that found in the latter half of Daniel, because that was a common way of dealing with national trauma. By nature, apocalyptic writings sought to encourage beleaguered people to stand strong in great travail by predicting that the trials were signs of a new age dawning.

Jesus was not offering a timeline to the end of days, but a reminder that his followers would have to endure hardships even when there was no end in sight. In vv. 9-23, Jesus goes on to speak of more trials to come: his followers would be rejected in the synagogues and beaten by both religious and governmental authorities. Family members would turn against one another, sacrilegious forces would invade the city and overrun the temple, and presumptive messiahs would offer empty promises of deliverance.

There would be an end, Jesus taught, a time of his future appearing, but he wasn't predicting when. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the

Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (13:32-33).

... but learn from this

What can contemporary Christians learn from this intriguing interaction between Jesus and the disciples? After all, the temple has already been destroyed, and it has not been rebuilt. Today, Jerusalem's Temple Mount is occupied by the 1200-year-old Mosque of Omar ("the Dome of the Rock") and the Al Aqsa Mosque. Both have existed far longer than either of the Jewish temples, present reminders that the Holy Land was ruled by Muslims of various stripes for well over a thousand years.

Nothing remains of the Jerusalem temple but a portion of the retaining wall built when Herod expanded the temple platform. We no longer acclaim the beauty of the Jerusalem temple, but we do admire other accomplishments – perhaps our own church buildings, our impressive cities, the wonders of technology. Should we contemplate the possibility that these things that give us such pride are also subject to destruction? Many large churches host tiny, shrunken congregations. Cities inevitably have pockets of blight. A computer virus or failure of the power grid could leave us virtually unable to communicate or work.

The things we accomplish may be impressive, but they are also transient. What lasts is not what we build on this earth, but what we contribute to God's eternal kingdom. Such contributions take place in the present, however. We work to make this world a better place – for now and for as long as it lasts – by loving others as Jesus loved us.

As many have noted, we don't want to be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good.

For what are we striving? To what are we contributing? And will it last? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 21, 2021

John 18:28b-37

True Kingship

We're nearing the season of Advent, but our text seems more fitting for Holy Week.

Why? The lectionary's gospel texts for November begin in Mark, emphasizing the lordship of Christ and of what Jesus expects of subjects in the kingdom of God. Today's text maintains the theme but shifts to John's gospel for a different angle on Jesus' lordship: through questions posed a Roman official. Did Jesus claim to be a king, or not?

If so, how would John have us to understand what that means?

One mark of a good story is its unpredictability: well-told tales often include unexpected twists and work on several levels. The story of Jesus' passion is written as non-fiction, but it has the characteristics of a captivating account. Who really had charge of Jesus' fate?

Jesus' measured responses to his captors revealed that, despite appearances, neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities controlled his destiny. As the story is told, both parties were playing unwitting parts in a divine drama that would have eternal and universal implications.

Jesus was living out his own role in that great drama of human redemption, but intentionally. If anyone was

Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (John 18:37)

in control of the situation, it was not the anxious Roman or Jewish authorities, but God. And, despite his outward appearance as a victim, Jesus is the only character in the story who knew what was really going on.

A bit of background (vv. 28b-32)

The lectionary text begins at v. 33, but we'll understand the text better if we think back to what has taken place. 📖

After Jesus' arrest, he was brought to trial before multiple authorities, beginning with the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Gospel of John differs from the synoptic traditions in that it gives primary attention to Jesus' trial before the Roman authorities, while the synoptics emphasize the earlier trial before Caiaphas. The Fourth Gospel also gives more attention to the issue of Jesus' kingship, which plays only a minor role in the synoptics. 📖

Only John describes Jesus' initial, informal appearance before Annas, the high priest's father-in-law. 📖 After a brief interview with that formidable priestly leader (18:19-23), Jesus was sent to stand before Caiaphas, the official high priest. John records nothing about this confrontation (18:24), choosing instead to focus on the courtyard scene of Peter's denial

(18:25-27) before returning to Jesus as he was brought before Pilate for the first time.

Rome allowed the first-century Jews great leeway in "home rule," granting the religious leaders considerable authority to police their own people. To maintain their upper hand, however, the Romans built a large fortress called the Antonia (or "Praetorium") adjacent to the temple complex. This may also have been where Pilate lodged when he came to Jerusalem. 📖

Pontius Pilate served as the Roman official in charge of Judea from 26–36 CE. His appointive position as "prefect" or "procurator" granted him complete judicial, financial, and military control over the area, so long as he kept things under control and was not guilty of behavior that would harm Rome's interests in the area. A few years later, Pilate conducted an ill-advised massacre of many Samaritans, and was replaced.

Jesus was brought before Pilate "early in the morning," a phrase that could refer to the last watch of the night, between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. This is not surprising, since Jesus had been arrested late at night, with his hearing before the Jewish authorities being a clandestine affair hidden by darkness. If Pilate had been roused from bed to meet the high priest's impatient demands, he would have had sufficient reason for irritation.

Pilate first sought to brush the matter off, leaving Jesus in the hands of the religious authorities. When he questioned the accusations against Jesus, his captors dodged the question, saying: "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him

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over to you” (v. 30). Only when Pilate began to withdraw did they say that Jesus was charged with a capital crime. Since Rome alone could invoke the death penalty for treason, the Jewish leaders insisted that Pilate hear the case (v. 31). 📌

Apparently, Jewish leaders could have ordered death by stoning for religious offenses, but only Rome could execute someone by crucifixion. Jesus had spoken earlier of being “lifted up” (12:32-33). John observed parenthetically that a Roman-style execution was necessary to fulfill Jesus’ prediction (v. 32).

A troubling encounter (vv. 33-37)

Pilate initially spoke to the Jewish leaders outside of his quarters, because the Jewish leaders refused to come inside. Entering the home or business of a Gentile would cause ritual defilement and prevent them from participating in the Passover meal (v. 28). According to John’s calendar (which has things occurring one day earlier than the synoptics), Jesus’ last evening with the disciples was the *eve* of Passover. 📌

Once convinced that he must deal with the matter, Pilate summoned Jesus to his quarters, taking the two of them out of the hearing of Jesus’ accusers. We assume that the Jewish authorities had accused Jesus of positioning himself as a self-appointed king and political rival to Pilate, for his first question was “Are you the King of the Jews?” (v. 33). 📌

Given the dramatic setting, it’s a shame we cannot hear the emphasis in Pilate’s voice as he questioned Jesus. Did he ask: “*Are* you the King of the Jews?” “*Are you* the King of the Jews?” “*Are you* the ‘*King*’ of the Jews?”

Jesus’ response begins a pattern of responding to Pilate’s queries with

questions of his own. Jesus asked: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Jesus’ response not only changed the dynamics of the conversation, but also clearly shifted the burden of responsibility to Pilate, who would have to convict him based on his own judgment, and not what he had heard from others.

Pilate claimed ignorance of Jewish affairs, implying that Jesus must have posed as a political rival, for apparently nothing else should have earned his attention (v. 35). Pilate then abandoned the question of kingship and resorted to a simpler question, “What have you done?” It is possible that Jesus could have denied all charges and been dismissed, but as he had done in the garden (v. 8), Jesus took control of the conversation and pressed the issue. This seems to have been lost on Pilate, but the reader recognizes that, though Pilate is the official ruler, Jesus is guiding the interrogation.

Jesus returned to the issue of kingship, implying that he was in fact a king, but of a different kingdom, and no threat to Rome: “My kingdom is not from here” (v. 36, NRSV). “Kingship” could be a better translation than “kingdom” in this verse. Jesus was emphasizing the nature and origin of his reign, not the location of a political entity.

Recognizing the importance of Jesus’ claim, Pilate returned to the initial charge: “So you *are* a king?” (v. 37, emphasis mine). The Roman leader was accustomed to thinking of kingship only in political, material, or military terms. Jesus’ talk of a kingship that was “not from here” seemed like smoke and mirrors to him.

Jesus continued to speak in ambiguous terms, however. He pointed out that Pilate had first used the word “king,” not he. Then, turning a different light on the subject, Jesus said “For

this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (v. 37). There is a connection between Jesus as king and Jesus as the truth. Not everyone could understand this. Those who “belong to the truth,” Jesus said, are those who listen to his voice. Here, as is often the case in scripture, to listen is to obey.

A question of truth

Pilate reacted to Jesus’ claim of truth with the question that has become proverbial: “What *is* truth?” (v. 38a). In Pilate’s world, kings ruled by might and truth was secondary. He who held power could make anything he wanted to be “the truth.” Powerful people today may feel entitled to the same practice, but no amount of bluster or repetition can turn lies into the truth. To Pilate, the concept of a rival to his own political “truth” seemed irrelevant. We can imagine a smirk in his voice as he asked “What is *truth*?”

Although the procurator officially held a position of greater authority, the influence of the Jewish leaders – who could do an end run around him with higher Roman authorities – forced Pilate to do something. By the drama’s end, Pilate would order that Jesus be crucified, not because he loved or favored the Jews, but to serve his own interests. Issues of guilt or innocence were less important than remaining in control. 📌

Pilate’s question should lead modern readers – especially in this postmodern world – to ask questions about truth. Can something be true for one person, but not for another? Can we make the truth what we want it to be?

More importantly, do we understand the truths Jesus taught? Can we count ourselves among those who “belong to the truth,” and would our actions lead others to agree? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 28, 2021

Jeremiah 33:14-16

A New Hope

The church year does not begin January 1, but rather with Advent. During the four Sundays of Advent, Christians celebrate the coming of something far more important than the impending new year: we combine memory and anticipation of the earthly arrival of Christ as life-changer, world-changer, even eternity-changer. 📖

Today we begin the Advent season with a curious text from Jeremiah in which the prophet speaks of a “righteous Branch” that will arise and start something new.

Jeremiah’s “branch” calls to mind two of my favorite Christmas specials. The first is *Emmet Otter’s Jugband Christmas*, Jim Henson’s muppet version of Russell Hoban’s book by the same name.

Emmet’s story is set in a little river village called “Frogtown Hollow,” where he and his widowed mother barely scrape by because Emmet’s father had invested everything in worthless snake oil.

As the story begins, Emmet brings home a “Christmas Branch” in keeping with a tradition started by his Pa, who would say “Because I didn’t cut it down, that tree will still be alive in a hundred years!” It’s a very simple pine branch,

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jer. 33:15)

but serves as an important symbol of hope for the remainder of the program.

A homely twig of a Christmas tree also appears in the perennial favorite *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. While shopping for a Christmas tree, Charlie Brown picks out a scraggly little specimen because he feels sorry for it. The other children give Charlie Brown much grief for choosing such a pitiful tree, but when they gather to decorate it, the little tree becomes something beautiful.

A righteous branch (v. 14)

It happens that three different prophets, when they wanted to proclaim the hope of a coming Messiah, used the image of a branch or shoot from a tree. Sometime near the middle of the eighth century BCE, Isaiah of Jerusalem predicted that the great tree of Israel would be chopped down. But Isaiah also saw a promise of hope in that “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isa. 11:1, NRSV). 📖

Some 150 years later, after Israel had fallen to the Assyrians and Judah was imperiled by the Babylonians, Jeremiah also saw past Israel’s fall to a day of hope when God would raise up “a righteous branch” from the house of David.

Following the exile, Zechariah used the same metaphor to express hope that Zerubbabel, a descendant of

David, was the chosen “Branch” who would rebuild the temple and the nation (3:8, 6:12).

All three prophets used the image of Israel as a great tree, especially when under David’s leadership, that had been cut down. Yet, from a stump that appeared lifeless and forlorn, the prophets saw a new shoot springing up, a branch that would grow strong with new life and bring renewed hope to God’s people. 📖

Jeremiah’s prophecy is portrayed as a direct word from God: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD. I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (v. 14). 📖


What promise was that? Jeremiah may have in mind other prophecies of his own (including 23:5-6, 7-8; 30:3; 31:27, 31) that also begin with “In days to come.” Behind these prophecies is God’s promise to David that his descendants would rule over Israel forever (2 Sam. 7:1-14). The imagery in that surprising promise described a “family tree” of kings, beginning with David, who would lead Israel. The promise was to last “forever,” but included a provision that those who led Israel wrongly would be subject to discipline.

This is precisely what happened: Over the years, David’s descendants were inconsistent in their leadership. Many turned away from God, and David’s family tree was cut down when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and carried a wave of Israelites into exile about 586 BCE. The Deuteronomistic authors of Joshua through 2 Kings interpreted the exile as God’s discipline for their errant ways.

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A hopeful promise (vv. 15-16)

Jeremiah – a contemporary who appeared to have influenced the Deuteronomists – escaped to Egypt but wrote letters to the exiles, encouraging them to remain hopeful. He did not believe God would forget the “forever promise” made to David. Thus, speaking on God’s behalf, Jeremiah declared that at the appropriate time, “I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (v. 15). 

Though Israel’s “family tree” had been cut down, the stump did not die. Those who heard Jeremiah’s prophecy did not see much evidence of new life, for the exile went on for 50 years. The end of the exile began a hopeful period, but Israel remained a sub-province of Persia and later of other kingdoms. For 500 years, there was little to suggest that God’s promise to David would come to pass, despite Jeremiah’s prediction.

But in God’s good time, a vigorous sprig sprang from the side of the aged stump and began to grow. The gospel writers recognized Jesus as the hoped-for messiah and took pains to identify him as a direct descendant of David, a scion of the family tree.

Jeremiah describes the coming “Branch” or “Sprout” as being “righteous,” and one who would “execute justice and righteousness in the land.” To first-century Jews, the notion of executing justice in the land meant leading Israel back to its former glory as a strong and independent kingdom.

Verse 16 further strengthened this notion: “In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” The Hebrew people would naturally have interpreted this to describe the restoration of a strong kingdom and a sense of national security.

A surprising twist


This is not, however, what happened. Jesus may have been born as a “sprout” from the stump of David, but the justice, righteousness, and salvation that Jesus would bring to the family tree would be more spiritual than physical, more relational than national.

As “the righteous Branch” began to teach those who would listen, he revealed a new kind of justice and righteousness: a relationship with God based on divine forgiveness rather than human striving, a righteousness that works for justice and goodness because it is motivated by love rather than obligation.

The promised salvation of Judah and the safety of Jerusalem would not be fulfilled by a victorious army, but through divine grace that offers God’s people present hope and future salvation, whatever the political state of Judah and Jerusalem.

In response to God’s work, Jeremiah says Jerusalem will be called “The LORD is our righteousness.” Jerusalem was the symbolic heart of Israel and its people. Jeremiah seems to be saying that those who live in this new relationship with God will be called by the name of the very one who brings them life and hope.

We don’t use that title now, calling ourselves by the name “The Lord is our righteousness.” But we who are saved by the Messiah, by the Christ, *do* call ourselves “Christians,” after the Lord who grants us a righteous standing with God.

The important thing to remember is that Christ not only imparts to us his name, but also his nature. To call ourselves “The Lord is our righteousness” is to commit ourselves to righteous living. To call ourselves “Christians” is to commit ourselves to being Christlike. 


As we go about our professional and personal lives, do we make decisions based on what Jesus would have done? If others were asked to describe our character, would they be likely to use the word “righteous”?

Most of us would have to confess that our lives are lacking. We don’t always live up to Christ’s calling. We don’t always achieve our dreams. We don’t always finish our plans.

It may be comforting to know that we are not the first. That is what this text is about: broken dreams and unfinished business. Israel’s theologians believed that Israel had gotten off to a strong start under David, but the nation lost its way, and it failed.

In our lives, we may have experienced failed courses in college, a failed business venture, or a failed marriage. We may also feel that our spiritual journey, begun with great promise, has foundered.

The indisputable fact is that we, like Israel, are sinful people. But even though we may sabotage every new spurt of growth, God still loves us. And, just as we may redeem a scraggly tree by covering it with tinsel and lights, God in Christ wants to cover our ragged and failed lives with forgiveness and love, making of us something beautiful and alive and radiant.

Some days our spiritual lives may feel no more beautiful than Charlie Brown’s scrawny Christmas tree, but Jeremiah wants us to know that God’s grace can fill in motivational gaps and straighten our behavioral limbs. God’s love can cover us with shining ornaments of spiritual gifts that declare good news to the world. 

The real miracle of Christmas will happen when our neighbors are less impressed with how we decorate our houses, and are more impressed with the transformation in our lives. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Dec. 5, 2021

Luke 3:1-6

A New Voice

Do you like interruptions? We can imagine a pleasant interruption, as when a spouse or co-worker breaks into our reverie or workload with a plate of warm brownies or some other snack.

Then again, there are telemarketers. Does anyone like to be interrupted by someone who insists we need an auto warranty or new cable service? Despite “no-call” lists and federal regulations, they find ways to keep barging into our daily lives.

If you resent unwanted sales calls, it’s likely that you also would have resented a rustic preacher named John, the one we call John the Baptist, though “John the baptizer” would be more accurate.

John came into the world as a divinely appointed interrupter. Like an emergency bulletin or an alarm clock, his purpose was to call people to be alert to the new day that was dawning in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

John might seem to be an odd choice, because he was an oddball of the first order, living as a hermit, dressing in skins, and dining on grasshoppers.

When he entered public life and started preaching, John proved to be abrasive and irritating. He did not

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ... (Luke 3:3)

hesitate to criticize the powerful with such strident comments that Herod had him arrested in hopes of shutting him up, and eventually deprived him of his head (Luke 3:19-20, Matt. 14:1-12).

Yet, John’s contrarian message appealed to many, and people from all around traveled into the wilderness to hear him preach, and to be baptized by him (Luke 3:7).

John’s background (vv. 1-2a)

This week begins the season of Advent, when a look at the baptizer’s preaching is appropriate because the holy disturber calls us to wake up and get ready to meet Jesus – not in a Bethlehem manger, but in our own world; not annually on Christmas morning, but on every day of the year. ⬇

Luke’s introduction to John’s ministry stands out from the other gospels because it provides more information about the political setting and the prophetic background of John’s ministry.

Alan Culpepper suggests that the more detailed chronological data reflects Luke’s view that John’s advent signaled the true beginning of Jesus’ ministry, so it provides a setting for both (“The Gospel of Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Luke-John* [Abingdon, 1995], 80).

Before the system of fixing dates by the Christian era began, events were

denoted by correlation to the administrations of high government officials, or by the number of years since the founding of Rome. Luke chose the former method, dating the beginning of John the baptizer’s ministry to the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius, in addition to dates for five other rulers of lesser degree.

Even with Luke’s elaborate chronology, we can’t pin down a specific date, though it points to a time between 26 and 29 CE. ⬇ Luke later noted that Jesus began his own ministry at “about thirty years old” (Luke 3:23). Jesus was probably born around 4 BCE, which would have made him just over 30 at the time of his baptism. This fits well with the chronological framework Luke provides. ⬇

Note that Luke is careful to situate John’s ministry within both the secular climate dominated by the Romans and the religious culture of Judaism. This underscores Luke’s special interest in demonstrating that Jesus came to redeem all peoples, not just the Jews. Among the lesser officials Luke names in his chronology, several of them (Pilate, Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas) would later play important roles in Jesus’ crucifixion.

John’s call (v. 2b)

Having given the context, Luke tells us that “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (v. 2b). This is the language of prophetic calling (see Jer. 1:1-5, Isa. 6:1, Ezek. 1:1-3, Hos. 1:1). In the Old Testament, the call of a prophet usually included several common elements: (1) a notice that “the word of the Lord came” to

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him, (2) his name, (3) his father's name, (4) the place of his call, and (5) the date, fixed by the current king of Israel or Judah. In John's case, the final element came first (vv. 1-2a), but the others fall into the familiar pattern.

John's father Zechariah was a priest, already known to the reader from the account of John's birth in Luke 1:5-25, 57-80. As one who was born into a priestly family, we may assume that John received religious training as he was growing up. At some point, however, he forsook sedate company along with civilized food and clothing, retiring to the wilderness for an unknown period before beginning his active ministry.

We learn a bit more about John's sojourn in the wilderness from Luke 1:80, which describes John's growth and his choice of the desert as his home: "The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." This suggests that John may have pursued the hermit's life while still a young man. 📖

The wilderness was a desolate and demanding area where one lived by the skin of the teeth and was ever aware of the need for God's help. John's choice of camel hair clothing, along with a diet of locusts and wild honey, may suggest personal idiosyncrasies, but it also emphasizes John's total dependence on divine provision for his sustenance. John truly lived off the land. Even so, he appears to have been an eccentric character who may have been close to God, but not to many others (Mark 1:6).

What setting do you think contributed most to John's spiritual formation? The influence of society, his religious upbringing, or the time he spent alone with God in the wilderness?

Does that suggest anything to us about our own spiritual growth?

John's preaching (v. 3)

All three synoptic gospels suggest that John preached throughout the region around the Jordan River. Foremost in his preaching was the need for repentance and the efficacy of baptism as a public confession that led to forgiveness of sins.

Jews of the day practiced frequent immersions in special pools called *mikva'ot* as a requirement for ritual cleanliness, but they were performed alone, like a ceremonial bath without the soap. 📖

John called people to be baptized in the Jordan, not for ceremonial cleanliness, but to mark a deep repentance: a cleanliness of spirit, not of body.

As Luke describes it, John punctuated his sermonizing with quotations from Isaiah, seeing himself as one who had come to prepare the way for the Lord (vv. 4-6). He lambasted religious hypocrisy and challenged his hearers to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" rather than trusting in their religious heritage for salvation (vv. 7-9).

John called for social justice in words reminiscent of Jesus' teachings (vv. 10-14), and he predicted the coming of another who would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Why did John practice baptism as a sign of repentance? Many scholars presume that John became an adherent of baptism from his supposed association with the Essenes, a strict sect within Judaism. The Essenes often lived in wilderness areas such as the desert village of Qumran, or made periodic retreats to the desert from their homes in Jerusalem. They taught the importance of regular confession and frequent ablutions to ensure ritual purity.

These ceremonies may have been based on the purification rituals of Leviticus 15, or on Old Testament references to washing as a symbol of confession and forgiveness (see Ps. 51:7,

Isa. 1:16, Jer. 4:14). Both John and the Essenes emphasized, however, that washing in water was ineffective apart from true repentance.

In our day, adult church members sometimes express a desire to be baptized a second time, especially when they return after a time apart from church and from God. Sometimes they explain that they did not understand what they were doing when they were baptized as children. They would have fit right in with John's movement: he was calling people away from cultural religion to heartfelt faith.

John's mission (vv. 4-6)

Although John was often portrayed as a new Elijah (see "The Hardest Question in the online resources), Luke describes his mission as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah of the exile, who spoke of one who would arise in the desert and "prepare the way of the LORD." 📖

In vv. 4-6, Luke quotes directly from Isaiah 40:3-6. While Isaiah's language describes the sort of physical road building that would require a civil engineer and a fleet of bulldozers and dump trucks, his intent is clearly metaphorical. We know how much time and effort it takes to build a new highway – persuading people to hear a new message can take even longer.

Isaiah spoke of one who would call on the nation to prepare a straight way and a level road through difficult terrain in hopes of seeing "the salvation of God" appear. John's preaching was not to cut a highway through the desert, but to cut to the quick of Hebrew hearts, calling them to repentance and readiness for the message of Jesus. 📖

Is John's message still needed today? How much effort is required to dig into the rugged hills of our hearts so we might prepare for and welcome Jesus' presence? Advent calls us to it. [NFJ](#)

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 12, 2021

Luke 3:7-18

A New Perspective

What image comes to mind when you think of John the baptizer? My favorite portrait of John is found in the quaint, white-framed building of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, near West Jefferson, N.C. Visitors who venture inside discover three fresco paintings by renowned artist Ben Long. They include a portrait of a very pregnant Virgin Mary, a majestic depiction of Jesus' spirit ascending from the cross, and a rugged portrayal of John the Baptist.

Most visitors find the baptizer's image least appealing of the three: he is shirtless, wiry, and deeply tanned, a camel hair loincloth about his waist, a huge staff in one of his hands. His eyes burn through heavy brows beneath matted hair, and his lips seem poised to pronounce some bitter invective through his bristly beard.

But I like the man in that picture. It's true that he looks like a wild man, but he also looks like John. Jesus' cousin lived a hard life, and he said hard things.

Somebody had to do it.

But, beneath John's rough exterior there was a heart that beat for God. And, within his fiery words, there was a message that Luke calls "good news."

Luke's gospel provides our fullest

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" (Luke 3:10)

account of John's preaching, though still brief. In this week's gospel lesson, Luke presents three groups of sayings attributed to John: warnings about future judgment and empty repentance (vv. 7-9), a call for a new ethic (vv. 10-14), and the announcement of the coming Messiah (vv. 15-17).

Can snakes be sorry? (vv. 7-9)

Matthew's gospel says that John's most scalding words targeted the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mat. 3:7-10), but Luke portrays John as preaching the same message to everyone in the crowd who came forward for baptism. Although the people had professed repentance, John called them a "brood of vipers" – an obviously negative appellation that accused the penitents of inner evil.

Is this any way to win new converts?

John asked the crowds, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" The question may have been rhetorical: John himself had surely warned them, and others may have been predicting judgment, for apocalyptic thought was popular in the first century.

The gospels relate very little of John's preaching. We have no record of the earlier sermons that prompted such throngs to come for baptism. His call for repentance in v. 3 would certainly have been accompanied by warnings of judgment if they did not turn from sin.

Raising the specter of "the wrath to come" echoes prophetic warnings

that a coming "day of the Lord" would mean trouble for the wicked (compare Isa. 2:11-22, 13:9; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:14-18, 2:2). John warned his hearers that empty repentance based on fear alone could be worse than no repentance at all.

John seemed to be concerned, however, with the sincerity of those who had come for baptism. As crowds of people came to fear that a day of judgment was drawing near, they flocked to the river. Perhaps John visualized them as a nest of snakes slithering away from danger – but without changing their serpentine nature. John wanted to see evidence of lasting, heartfelt change.

Thus, he called on the baptism-seeking crowds to demonstrate a change of life through "fruits worthy of repentance," rather than relying on their Hebrew heritage (v. 8, compare 16:19-31). We presume that John was addressing a primarily Jewish audience, but the preacher wanted the crowds to know that "being Abraham's kin won't get you in."

God could make children out of stones, John said, perhaps reflecting imagery of "the rock from which you were hewn" (Isa. 51:1-2). God did not need the Israelites to produce children, but the "children of Israel" needed to depend on God. Returning to the metaphor of the "fruits worthy of repentance," John warned his hearers that the ax was already poised to strike down any trees whose barren branches revealed the emptiness of their faith (v. 9).

John's warning could easily be addressed to Christian believers who may have responded to an altar call

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out of the fear of hell, only to go back to life as usual. Church members may be tempted to assume that their “once saved, always saved” doctrine of the “preservation of the saints” assures them of a fire insurance policy that will pay off no matter how they behave. John’s call for behavior commensurate with commitment suggests a more nuanced “once saved, always saved – if *really* saved.”

The proof of repentance (vv. 10-14)

The baptizer’s abrasive words may not have comforted his wilderness congregation, but it engaged them, and some talked back to him, asking: “What should we do then?” How do we demonstrate repentance?

John responded with a call for just living and care for others. His teaching was not new: Hebrew prophets as early as the eighth century had consistently called for social justice and better treatment of the poor (Amos 5:21-24, Mic. 3:3-5, Jer. 5:26-29, Isa. 58:6-9, among others).

Luke shows a special interest in the plight of the poor and the dangers of wealth. By his record, all three of John’s ethical teachings concerned themselves with the problematic issue of material greed. Those who were wealthy enough to have two tunics should share with someone less fortunate, he said, and those who had more than enough food should do the same (v. 11). 📌

While Luke ascribes the question in v. 10 to “the crowd,” John said that Jesus was speaking directly to Pharisees and Sadducees. That may suggest that they were foremost among those who asked the question. They were followed by two specific groups of people who asked similar questions: tax collectors (vv. 12-13) and soldiers (v. 14).

Though we may assume that all who came forward were seeking baptism, tax collectors are the only ones specifically said to be aiming for the water. They also asked “What should we do?” John’s instruction was simple: they should take no more than the amount prescribed by law (vv. 12-13).

The “tax collectors” in this context did not assess income or property taxes, but were independent contractors who collected tolls and customs fees common to daily life and business. In the Roman system, such persons would bid in advance for the right to collect certain tolls, pay their overseers the amount of their bid, and keep whatever else they could demand. The system, obviously, was open to abuse, making “honest tax collector” a near-oxymoron (witness Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1-10).

Those who collected taxes for the Romans faced natural enmity from their fellow Jews, who considered them to be traitors and turncoats. John does not demean their position or the necessity of collecting taxes, but calls for just taxation rather than the greedy exploitation commonly practiced. 📌

Soldiers made up the third group. If we are correct in assuming that John’s audience was largely Jewish, these would have been Hebrew mercenaries who worked for the Romans. This made them, like the tax collectors, subject to public derision. Soldiers did not receive a high wage, and were tempted to use the power of their office to extort money from the populace by threat of violence. 📌

Imagine that someone in your profession or your social setting had asked John “What shall we do?” What do you suppose John would have said? How can you demonstrate the reality of repentance through caring and ethical behavior in *your* daily life and work?

The one yet to come (vv. 15-18)

John’s authoritative preaching and arresting charisma (despite his appearance) led many hearers to wonder if he might be the Messiah (v. 15, compare to the more detailed discussion in John 1:19-28). Luke says the people were “filled with expectation,” suggesting that they hoped John would prove to be the long-anticipated Messiah.

John explained that he was not the one, but a forerunner who had come to prepare the way for the Messiah’s arrival. Today we might think of a head of state who has security agents and others who travel to a city prior to a state visit, making sure that everything is ready. John’s concern was not with arranging security for the coming leader, but with preparing the people’s hearts and minds to receive the Messiah’s message.

The one coming, John said, would be greater than him: so much greater that John – equivalent to a religious rock star in his day – was unworthy to carry out the slave’s task of stooping down to loosen his master’s sandals.

In further contrast, while John baptized with water, the one to come would baptize “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (v. 16). Fire can have a cleansing or purifying purpose. In this context, it is also symbolic of judgment: the following verse declares that the Messiah would winnow out the good wheat while consigning worthless chaff to the fire (v. 17). 📌

Despite John’s sharp words and his warning of an imminent and painful judgment, Luke summarizes his preaching (or “exhortations”) as “good news.” Those who heeded John’s call could avoid judgment, find forgiveness, and reform their living in a way more pleasing to God.

Does that sound like good news to you? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-55

A New Dawn

Think back: what is the most joyful reunion you have experienced? When we haven't seen a loved one for a long time, for example, our greeting can be ecstatic.

Picture what it was like when the world's most unlikely pregnant women got together for a family visit. What a hug that must have been! The most obviously expectant one is Elizabeth, who had been unable to conceive throughout her long life (Luke 1:7), but she had surprisingly become pregnant after the angel Gabriel had paid a visit to her dumbstruck husband Zechariah (1:8-20).

Hurrying to meet Elizabeth is her relative Mary, probably still in her teens, who has become pregnant in even more miraculous fashion. Gabriel had visited her, too, declaring that God had chosen her to bear a son to be called the Son of God – while she remained a virgin (1:26-35). She was to name the boy Jesus (*yeshua*), which means something akin to “Yahweh saves.”

The angel had told Elizabeth's husband to name their son John, from the Hebrew *Yohanon*, “graced by God.” He was to become a great man for God, in the spirit and power of Elijah (1:14-17). Mary had expressed skepticism about Gabriel's promise to her, perhaps prompting the angel to tell her about

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. (Luke 1:41a)

Elizabeth's pregnancy as a way of encouraging Mary to believe, because “nothing will be impossible for God” (1:36-37).

Imagine the glad reunion of two women at such different stages of life, but both carrying miracle babies. 🇺

A joyful journey (vv. 39-40)

With this text, which would have taken place about 30 years prior to the events in Luke 3, we continue our three-week pattern of looking at Advent through the eyes of John the Baptist and his family. To understand the absolute joy experienced by the two women – and the impact their children could have – we must remember that for several hundred years, messianic expectations had been growing among the Hebrews. As a subservient people ruled by outsiders, many Jews longed for the birth of a Messiah who would deliver Israel from the Romans and set up a new order with Israel in a favored position.

Neither Mary nor Elizabeth yet understood that Jesus was to be a radically different kind of Messiah than expected in popular thought, but their spiritual insight was clear enough to perceive that God was about to do great things through their sons.

Luke implies that Mary went to visit Elizabeth very soon after her encounter with the angel Gabriel, possibly before she experienced any signs of her own pregnancy. No doubt

filled with questions and perhaps anxious for confirmation of the sign, Mary set out “in haste” to go and visit Elizabeth (v. 39). 🇺

On foot or by donkey, a journey from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea would require at least three or four days. 🇺 It is possible that Mary journeyed in company with a trade caravan or a group of pilgrims to Jerusalem for part of the journey, but when she arrived at Elizabeth's home, Luke depicts her as being alone. Works of art often portray Elizabeth running out to meet Mary, but Luke insists that Mary first entered Elizabeth's house, which becomes the setting of their encounter (v. 40).

Alan Culpepper notes that Luke tells the story through a quick series of active verbs: Mary “set out,” “went with haste,” “entered the house,” and “greeted Elizabeth.” This also moves the narrative from the more general to the more specific in a spatial sense: Mary went to the hill country, to an unnamed village of Judea, into a house, then to Elizabeth (“The Gospel of Luke,” *The New Interpreter's Bible IX: Luke, John* [Abingdon Press, 1995], 54).

A prophetic greeting (vv. 41-45)

According to the tradition preserved by Luke, Elizabeth appears to have been startled by Mary's happy greeting. When we are surprised in a good way, we may sense that our heart jumps within us, or we may think our stomach is doing flips. When Elizabeth heard Mary's joyful voice, Luke says, her unborn child “leaped in her womb.”

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Simultaneously (and more significantly), Elizabeth was “filled with the Holy Spirit,” who apparently inspired her breathless response to Mary. The inrushing of the Holy Spirit upon Elizabeth (and apparently her unborn but active child) fulfilled the angel’s prophecy that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit “even before his birth” (Luke 1:15).

The text describes Elizabeth and Mary as relatives but does not specify their relationship: we know only that Elizabeth was considerably older. Bound by both blood and the common experience of miraculous pregnancies, Mary and Elizabeth also shared the bond of the Holy Spirit’s presence within them.

Since Mary had come “in haste” after Gabriel’s annunciation of Jesus, the story implies that her pregnancy was in its early stages. Yet Elizabeth (and apparently the fetal John) perceived that Mary was with child. The reader assumes that the Holy Spirit inspired this perception, in addition to Elizabeth’s address to Mary as “the mother of my Lord.” There is no indication that the women had communicated previously or that an angelic messenger had prepared Elizabeth for Mary’s arrival.

The pronouncements of Elizabeth in vv. 41-45 could be understood as a prophetic oracle, either a longer oracle in four parts, or a series of briefer oracles. Some writers speak of this as the “Song of Elizabeth,” and it has some poetic qualities, but these are better explained by its oracular nature.

“Blessed are you among women!” Elizabeth reportedly said, “and blessed is the fruit of your womb! (v. 42). The Greek word is *'eulogēmēnē*, the root of our word “eulogy,” meaning “good words.” We normally pronounce a eulogy at funerals, but Elizabeth’s “eulogy” was pronounced before

Jesus’ birth. The older woman’s words, reminiscent of blessings on other female Jewish heroes, recognized that God had already blessed Mary. 📖

Elizabeth’s blessing was followed by a question: “Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” (v. 43). Note Luke’s emphasis on Elizabeth’s humility: her question implies unworthiness to have been granted such a visit.

God had granted to Elizabeth the perception that Mary carried the Messiah – whom she describes as “my Lord” – but she was not jealous. Rather, she was overwhelmed with gratitude that Mary would take the trouble to visit her.

Elizabeth’s third assertion affirms the connection between Mary’s voice and the intrauterine activity of her unborn son John. She seemed certain that the infant was wiggling for joy to be in close proximity to the newly conceived Jesus (v. 44). Joy is a common theme in the text.

Finally, Elizabeth pronounced a beatitude on Mary with the word *makarios*, the same term translated as “blessed” or “happy” in the more famous “Beatitudes” of Matt. 5:1-12. Elizabeth praised Mary’s faith in believing the angel’s promise.

A special song (vv. 46-55)

Our text officially ends with v. 45, but we should take a brief look at Mary’s response, which is in the form of a hymn. 📖 The poem falls naturally into two sections, with the first focusing on what God has done for Mary (vv. 46-50) and the second celebrating what God has done for all people (vv. 51-55; see Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Smyth & Helwys, 2008], 42-43).

As Luke tells the story, Mary gave

voice to her joy through a spontaneous hymn of praise, and it is an impressive piece of work. Are we to imagine that she rehearsed it in her mind on the long trip down, or that it was inspired by the same Holy Spirit who had moved Elizabeth to perceive Mary’s own pregnancy? Parts of the song are very similar to the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10: both songs praise God as one who makes the barren fruitful, topples the proud, and reverses the fortunes of the poor.

Scholars have often noted that Hannah’s song might have been more appropriate for Elizabeth to echo, since those two women conceived long after everyone had assumed that they were infertile. Some ancient versions attribute the song to Elizabeth, but the strongest traditions assign it to Mary.

It is likely that the song was a later composition based on traditions about Mary rather than a careful recording of Mary’s response at the time, but that does not make it less meaningful.

The key theme of Mary’s song is praise. She praises God’s power, holiness, and mercy toward the faithful (vv. 47-50). She praises God’s justice and concern for the poor, expressed in the “reversal of fortunes” theme that echoes Hannah’s song (vv. 51-53). God could be trusted as reliable and faithful in dealing with Israel, even as God’s promises had proven true for Mary and Elizabeth.

Following a pattern that grammarians sometimes call the “prophetic perfect,” the song speaks of things yet to come but uses the past tense, as if they had already happened. In doing so, the song expresses confidence that God’s promises would be fulfilled. 📖

Can you name promises that are associated with God’s work in Christ? Do you feel confident enough to praise God even before the expected blessings are fulfilled? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 26, 2021

Luke 2:41-52

A New Teacher

Did you “grow up in church”? I was one of those kids whose parents took them to church from infancy on, and we worshiped together from the time I graduated from the nursery. I would sit under the balcony with my father and brothers, while my mother kept watch from the choir. 🇺

The memories of those times are special to me. I knew we were going to church because it was important, but also because it was meaningful. My family didn’t go because we *had* to go. We went because it kept us grounded.

Today’s text tells us that Jesus’ parents took him to church, too. In Jesus’ world, however, there was only one “church” for all the Hebrews. The temple in Jerusalem was a journey of several days by foot from Nazareth, so most people only went to the temple on special occasions and pilgrim festivals. At other times, they worshiped in local synagogues. When the adult Jesus later announced his public ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth, he appeared to have been perfectly at home.

At the temple (vv. 41-42)

Much of Luke’s gospel is organized around Jesus’ travels, and his journeys

He said to them, ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’ (Luke 2:49)

to the temple are a significant structural device within the gospel. Jesus’ first trip to the temple was probably for his circumcision and ceremonial naming (Luke 2:22-38). This customarily took place when a boy was eight days old, and would have taken place while his parents remained in Bethlehem, just a few miles from Jerusalem.

We know virtually nothing about Jesus’ early life. 🇺 Luke insists that Mary and Joseph were very observant Jews, however, and that “every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover.”

The law called for all Jewish men to attend the three annual major festivals in Jerusalem (Exod. 34:23). Distance and hardships involved in travel made this impractical, however, so even the most observant Jews might have gone just once per year.

While men alone were expected to attend, women often accompanied them. Since Luke insists that both Mary and Joseph characteristically attended the Passover celebration, the reader assumes that Jesus and his brothers went along, too.

At age 12, Jesus was approaching the age of accountability. Though Jewish custom varied through the years, by the 16th century it was accepted that a boy reached the “age of majority” at 13. Today most Jewish boys and girls have their *bar mitzvah* or *bat mitzvah* at age 13, marking the age when they become responsible for their own actions. 🇺

We cannot be sure if Jesus’ temple visit at age 12 served a similar ceremonial purpose, but something brought him into contact with local priests and scholars, to amazing effect.

Among the rabbis (vv. 43-47)

Still a boy at 12, Jesus would not yet have been allowed to enter “the court of Israel,” an inner part of the temple reserved for Jewish men. The rabbis, however, generally taught in one of the outer courts or on the steps of the temple. The text implies that young Jesus joined in the rabbinic dialogue and was so engaged that he wanted to stay long after his parents readied themselves for the long journey home (v. 43).

Luke makes the extraordinary claim that Mary and Joseph had traveled for a full day on the homeward journey before they realized that Jesus was not with them (v. 44). Can you imagine?

Casual readers may accuse them of neglect, at best, but Jesus’ parents were almost certainly traveling in a caravan of other pilgrims from Nazareth that would have included friends and extended family members. Children were accorded responsibility at an earlier age in those days, and it is likely that Jesus had made the journey several times before. Like most 12-year-olds, Jesus may have preferred the traveling company of his friends to that of his parents.

Once his absence was noted, Jesus could not be found in the traveling party, despite what the Greek grammar suggests was a prolonged and thorough search. At a loss, Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem. The three days it

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reportedly took to find Jesus probably includes the full day's journey toward home and a journey of the same length back to Jerusalem before locating Jesus the following day (v. 45-46a).^U

Luke's narrative style expresses his delight in the story of how Jesus was found in the temple itself, sitting among the rabbis, both listening and asking questions (v. 46b). Rabbis typically taught by raising questions and reviewing the opinions of recognized authorities. They often took disciples and trained them in the study and interpretation of the law, but others could listen in on their sessions.

Jesus had already advanced beyond the beginning student role of listening and asking, however. His questions not only revealed a high level of discernment: Luke says he was also expressing his own opinions, and "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (v. 47). When the adult Jesus later read the scripture and interpreted it in the synagogue in Nazareth, the people were likewise amazed (4:17). The Greek word is different, but the effect is the same.^U

At odds with parents (vv. 48-52)

An interesting interplay occurs in vv. 48-49. Some frosty moments passed when Jesus' parents discovered Jesus, and they scolded him for treating them badly by causing unnecessary anxiety. Like a stereotypical Yiddish mama, Mary fumed, in so many words: "Boy, why have you treated us this way? Your father and I have been looking all over for you! We've been worried sick!"

Jesus' response, surprisingly, showed little remorse. He replied with a question of his own: "Why did it take you so long to find me? Didn't you

know I must be in my Father's house?" (v. 49, paraphrased).

Such a rebuttal seems alarmingly precocious, suggesting that Jesus was fully aware of his identity and mission even as a child. Other texts, however, clearly imply that Jesus grew and developed as other children (Luke 1:80; 2:52), perhaps not fully coming to terms with his identity until his own pilgrimage into the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). Many scholars suspect that Luke was repeating a much-loved tradition that goes beyond the actual conversation.

In any case, Luke intentionally uses the word "father" in two different ways. In chiding Jesus for causing distress, Mary referred to Joseph as Jesus' "father." This is not necessarily inconsistent with the virgin birth tradition. Luke provides the most detailed account of the virgin birth, but also uses the word we translate as "parents" with reference to Mary and Joseph (v. 43). It would be only natural for Mary to refer to Joseph as Jesus' father, since in every way other than biological paternity, he was Jesus' earthly parent.

Jesus' retort that they should have known he would be in his "Father's house" reminds the reader that Jesus was not conceived in the normal way. Whether Jesus at age 12 understood the circumstances surrounding his birth is unknown. He was likely speaking of God as a heavenly father in the same way any Jew would do. For Luke, however, it is important for the reader to contemplate the dichotomy between Jesus as son of Joseph and Son of God.

While the reader may understand the double use of "father," Luke insists that Mary and Joseph had no idea what Jesus meant (v. 50). Had the angelic visitations associated with Jesus' birth grown so old that Mary and Joseph no longer thought of Jesus as "the son of

the Most High?" Or, does this story derive from a tradition – preserved only by Luke – that does not include the virgin birth, and hence would not expect Mary and Joseph to be anything other than dumbfounded?

We cannot answer these questions with certainty, and Luke does not belabor the issue. He simply adds a few telling observations: Jesus went home with his parents and remained obedient to them, Mary "treasured all these things in her heart,"^U and Jesus continued to grow in wisdom as he grew in years, finding increased favor in both the divine and human arena (vv. 51-52).

In this way, Luke portrays Jesus as one whose origin partakes of two worlds, and who grows in wisdom and favor within both of those worlds. It is beyond our human minds to comprehend fully how Jesus could partake of both divine and human natures, for we cannot imagine where one began and the other left off.^U

When did Jesus become aware of his true nature, and how did it happen? Was he born with divine prescience, or did he receive a later revelation? Luke's story of Jesus at the temple suggests that Jesus, like all humans, grew in self-awareness gradually. Since Jewish boys were considered to be adults and often married shortly after puberty, the "temple at twelve" story suggests that Jesus' attempt to understand and claim his identity was well on its way as he approached the threshold of adulthood.^U

Jesus experienced the presence of God at the temple, but he did not leave that experience behind on the journey home: He continued to grow in every way, including his relationship with "the Father." Perhaps contemporary believers could take a lesson from that. **NFJ**

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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 2

By Bruce Gourley

Easily elected to a second term with the overwhelming support of Black Americans, President Bill Clinton hoped to expand upon his administration's economic successes that were beneficial to ordinary Americans, Black and white.

But in an increasingly polarized political climate, conservative white evangelicals, many quietly racist and loathe to give the Democratic president any credit for his accomplishments, prepared for unprecedented ideological warfare.

CONSPIRACIES

Weeks into Clinton's second term, far-right Republicans, many self-identified Christians, dug ever deeper into outlandish and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories alleged in the fallacious *Clinton Chronicles*.

Their numbers growing, the rabid anti-Clintonites became known as the Clinton Haters, or the Clinton Crazyes. Through far-right talk radio, newsletters, the Internet, and mail-order videos, they hawked these conspiracies.

The president was portrayed as a murderer and Satan's nephew to boot. A lack of evidence deterred his critics not one bit.

Reflective of an ever-greater blurring of lines between far-right politics and fundamentalist religion, Clinton's last four years as president unfolded against the backdrop of vitriol detached from reality and enabled by the expanding influence of conservative white evangelical radio.

During the decade of the 1990s, several recently formed Christian radio networks rapidly gained mass audiences in evangeli-



Portrait photograph of President Bill Clinton in the Cabinet Room of the White House.

cal households. Led by Salem Media and the American Family Radio Network, Christian radio widely reinforced white Christian nationalist ideology through anti-homosexuality, anti-abortion and anti-evolution programming.

Christian radio often broadcast extremist rhetoric, generating “satanic panic” among white evangelicals as depicted in Frank Peretti's dark Christian fiction novels. Ginned-up “spiritual warfare” took on added urgency with a Democrat in the White House.

BATTLE CALL

Putting on the “spiritual armor of God,” fearful evangelicals waged a perceived battle between good and evil, or conservative Republican (“biblical”) and liberal Democratic (“worldly”) ideologies.

Only by submitting to white evangelicals' authoritarian God could America be saved from the ravages of liberalism.

Parallel to extremist Christian rhetoric, radio personality Rush Limbaugh, parroting the satanic panic motif minus the

religious imagery, reached his peak influence as he lambasted political liberalism during Clinton's second term.

In similar fashion, television's Fox News — founded in opposition to the Clintons — spewed lies and hatred, further poisoning the political atmosphere and stoking conservative white evangelical rage all the more.

In this manufactured battle of good and evil, James Dobson's “Focus on the Family” spearheaded the so-called “pro-family” white evangelical biblical worldview. Often reinforced by contemporary Christian music, the movement preached patriarchy, white privilege, social and cultural conservatism, and the godliness of the Republican Party.

MIDDLE GROUND

Buffeted by the ideological hurricane-force winds of extremist, politicized white evangelicalism bent on destroying him, the second-termed president, in reality more moderate than liberal, focused on governing from the middle.

By the end of his presidency, Clinton's economic accomplishments alone were outstanding: the longest economic expansion in American history, the most jobs (22 million) created during a single presidential administration, and the lowest unemployment rate since 1970.

By the year 2000, not only was the American economy far stronger than prior to Clinton's presidency, but the federal government also was running on an annual surplus and paying down the federal debt.

If Republican Ronald Reagan had achieved half of what Bill Clinton did economically, Republicans would have been ecstatic. Instead — and despite supporting Clinton's deregulation of banks and his work in pushing George H.W. Bush's North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) through

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.

Congress — Republican opposition to the president on social and cultural issues grew all the louder as the Democrat’s successes mounted.

On the other hand, by continually tacking to the political center fiscally, Clinton elicited criticism from Democrats during his second term. Governing conservatively on issues of welfare reform, immigration and crime — to the delight of Republicans — Clinton’s social policies negatively impacted minority communities of color and infringed on the civil rights of individuals, drawing the ire of liberals.

Even so, Democrats cheered — and small-government Republicans jeered — Clinton’s unprecedented successes in expanding federal lands, including the creation of five national parks and 11 national monuments.

Apart from policy achievements that alternately angered or pleased Republicans or Democrats, the president’s Cabinet picks often, but not always, met bipartisan approval.

Taking a chapter from the inclusive playbook of former President Jimmy Carter, Clinton appointed more African Americans, women and Hispanics to his Cabinet than any prior president. Non-Black minorities in particular garnered the support not only of Democratic senators, but also their Republican colleagues.

By unanimous votes the Senate confirmed the nation’s first female Attorney General (Janet Reno), the first female Secretary of State (Madeleine Albright) and the first Asian-American Cabinet secretary (Norman Y. Mineta).

Mineta, a Japanese-American, had spent his childhood in a World War II internment camp. He briefly served as Secretary of Commerce near the end of Clinton’s presidency, after which the George W. Bush administration appointed him, by unanimous Senate vote, as Secretary of Transportation.

All told, Clinton’s domestic legacy reflected a centrist character grounded in his administration’s economic successes, and his ability and adaptability in enacting major legislation during an increasingly polarized political climate.

POLICIES

Success, however, proved more elusive for Clinton in foreign policy, particularly in efforts to help maintain peace in Africa. Bloody conflict in Somalia remained despite interventions by the U.S and the United Nations.

As mass government-sponsored genocide in Rwanda reached hundreds of thousands of lives lost, both the U.S. and the U.N. failed to intervene effectively, drawing widespread criticism.

On the positive side, the Clinton administration persuaded Russia to withdraw troops from the Baltic republics of Estonia and Latvia, brokered peace negotiations between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, and allied with NATO to bring an end to ethnic wars in the Balkans.

As Clinton deftly achieved domestic successes and worked alongside world allies in addressing foreign crises, the epicenter in Washington, D.C., shifted from policy-focused to cultural and social warfare.

White Christian nationalism — a racist ideology with roots in colonial America and formally embodied in the Southern Confederate States of America during the Civil War of 1861–1865 and racial apartheid of the early 20th century — during the Civil Rights era had evolved into opposition to all things deemed liberal.

Hostility to church-state separation, communism, socialism, human equality and human rights characterized the 20th-century religious movement that eventually merged with the Republican Party in the 1980s during Reagan’s presidency.

Under the overarching banner of “family values,” Christian nationalists pursued an anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality and pro-white privilege agenda through the Republican Party.

RACE

Early in Clinton’s presidency the white privilege bent of the Republican Party revealed itself in a controversy over the president’s nomination of University of Pennsylvania Law School professor Lani Guinier — a Black woman with Jewish heritage — as Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division.

Conservative media, white evangelical leaders and Republican U.S. senators fiercely opposed Guinier’s nomination, condemning her for “championing a radical school of thought called ‘critical race theory.’”

Although critical race theory represented a realistic and truthful analysis of systemic racism inherent throughout American history, white conservatives, long dismissive of America’s racial shortcomings, labeled Guinier a “racial polarizer.” Amid the fierce backlash, Clinton pulled her nomination.

In the broader political world, white evangelical Christian nationalism in the guise of family values played a dominant role at the ballot box in the 1994 midterm elections, placing the House of Representatives under Republican control for the first time in 40 years.

FAMILY VALUES?

Republican Representative Newt Gingrich (GA), subsequently elected speaker of the House, recognized the new power base of the party. Seeking greater political gain, he allied with conservative evangelicals.

Doing the bidding of Christian nationalists, Gingrich brought a proposed constitutional amendment to allow government-sponsored school prayer up for a House vote. It failed, but the effort pleased white evangelicals.

Gingrich also presided over the congressional adoption of the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act, but it was vetoed by Clinton. Persevering, Gingrich succeeded in enacting the Defense of Marriage Act, legislation signed by Clinton in 1996.

Forbidding the U.S. government from recognizing gay marriage, the anti-homosexual bill thrilled conservative Christians.

Under the banner of family values Gingrich also led the way in an unrelenting campaign to force Clinton, long dogged by scandalous accusations, out of the White House.

As many Republican-allied evangelicals spun a dark web of far-fetched conspiracy theories portraying the Democratic president as Satan incarnate, two pragmatic charges subsequently emerged in conservatives’ quest to oust the president: Clinton’s

questionable business connections and his alleged sexual liaisons.

Congressional Republicans' ideological assault on Clinton began in 1994 with an independent federal investigation into the Clintons' business partnership in the Whitewater Investment Corporation, a real estate entity, during Clinton's earlier years as Arkansas governor.

Initially, investigators found no fault on the part of the Clintons in the Whitewater inquiry. Unsatisfied, two judges removed the lead investigator and replaced him with Republican ideologue Kenneth Starr, a lawyer with no prosecutorial experience. Starr also proved unable to find fault on the part of the Clintons.

Undaunted, Starr, with the encouragement of Republican Party leadership, in January 1998 steered the stalled investigation toward the president's denial of sexual affairs.

Previously, presidents' sexuality and sexual follies had largely been considered off-limits for Capitol politicians and journalists alike. But no more.

'WHOLE AFFAIR'

Tumbling into public view, Clinton's escapades included the alleged sexual harassment of Paula Jones, a state of Arkansas employee, by the former Arkansas governor. Nevertheless, a federal judge dismissed a lawsuit by Jones against Clinton, and months afterward Jones agreed to drop the lawsuit in lieu of a cash payment from the president.

Ultimately, prosecutor Starr homed in on an alleged sexual relationship between the president and a young White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. Soon the viciousness of Starr's dogged, partisan investigation into the president's sex life overshadowed the nation. Lurid details of the affair, uncovered by puritanical prosecutor Starr, played out in news media worldwide.

From afar Pierre Lellouche, a French politician, summarized the global angst over the Starr spectacle: "The highly publicized search of Mr. Starr and his friends for total 'transparency,' their relentless drive for 'purity,' is an alibi for the absolute power in their hands and an invitation to populism,

to demagoguery and, in the end, to a form of dictatorship."

"This whole affair," Lellouche concluded, "is endangering American democracy and with it all democracies."

Amid the onslaught Clinton initially denied the allegations, only to backpedal and attempt to extricate himself through carefully parsed and deceptive language. In time, Republicans and Democrats alike became frustrated with Clinton's stonewalling of the truth.

Having supported former President Richard Nixon to the bitter end while staying silent on Nixon's crimes and lies, white Christian nationalists dramatically changed course. Stoked by Starr's investigative report, far-rightwing radio personality Rush Limbaugh, and television station Fox News, they led the angry chorus against Clinton.

Condemning Clinton under the pretense of moral superiority, the nation's most prominent white evangelical leaders set themselves up as God's stewards over America. Determined to make America a Christian nation, they hammered the president's immorality and warned of God's wrath.

Conservative white evangelists believed "the nation is facing moral collapse," a 1998 *New York Times* article noted. "They have cited the end of prayer in schools, the high rates of teenage pregnancy and the disturbing incidents of youth violence. They have attributed social problems to the increasing secularization of society, and said they were seeking to return the nation to its 'Christian roots.'"

Although Clinton was far from secular, his woes represented an opportunity for his political enemies to bludgeon not only him, but also Democrats — and hence liberals — at large.

CHARACTER COUNTS

Claiming that "character matters," the Christian Coalition's Ralph Reed skewered Clinton: "We care about the conduct of our leaders, and we will not rest until we have leaders of good moral character."

Televangelist Jerry Falwell, referring to the president's denial of an affair with Lewinsky, deemed Clinton an "ungodly liar."

Franklin Graham, son and successor to evangelist Billy Graham, in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* criticized Clinton's immorality and declared that "private conduct does have public consequences," and "the God of the Bible says that what one does in private does matter."

James Dobson, lamenting that the strong economy under Clinton led many "of my fellow citizens to rationalize the president's behavior" and "lying," declared "our most serious concern ... is with the American people."

Deeming the nation's "disregard for morality ... profoundly disturbing," Dobson wondered how America found "itself in this sorry mess."

It began "many years earlier," Dobson insisted, as the secular media "sought to convince the American people that 'character doesn't matter.'" Clinton's "barrage of lies and half-truths" were unconscionable.

"How foolish it is to believe that a person who lacks honesty and moral integrity is qualified to lead a nation and the world," said Dobson.

Gary Bauer, president of the conservative Christian Family Research Council, bemoaned Clinton's lies. "Day after day, children hear adults saying that it doesn't matter if the president lied," he said.

Meanwhile, a number of prominent evangelicals and Republican congressmen, the latter including Gingrich, were revealed to also be having sexual affairs, as would prosecutor Starr later.

Observing the partisan attack on Clinton as a distracting and self-righteous crusade, American voters punished the Grand Old Party in November 1998 by reducing the Republican majority in the House.

FAITH & FORGIVENESS

Despite far-right Republicans' and evangelicals' dismissal of Clinton as immoral and ungodly, Clinton in reality was one of the most religious presidents in American history.

As *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. noted retrospectively of the Southern Baptist president: "Bill Clinton was religious" and "could quote Scripture



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons / Hayden Schiff

with the best of them” and “preach with the best of them. He gave some very powerful speeches at Notre Dame, where he sounded Catholic; at African-American churches, where he sounded AME or Baptist.”

Clinton’s fervent religious faith and powerful preaching contrasted with his sexual affairs, leading mainline Protestant and Catholic leaders, along with religious progressives, to struggle in response to the president’s failings.

Unable to agree on whether or not Clinton should resign or be impeached, one diverse group of Christian clergy and scholars declared that “an extended discussion about constitutional, ethical, and religious issues will be required to clarify the situation and to enable a wise decision to be made.”

The statement concluded: “We hope to provide an arena in which such discussion can occur in an atmosphere of scholarly integrity and civility without partisan bias.” But it was not to be.

Still other Christian leaders leaned toward understanding and forgiveness. To a few of these latter ministers Clinton turned.

On Labor Day 1998 the Southern Baptist president called American Baptist evangelist Tony Campolo with both a confession and a plea for help.

“I’ve made some terrible mistakes and I’ve messed up my life,” said Clinton, who, from his Baptist upbringing and long-time church involvement, understood the need to

repent for one’s sins. “Will you help me?” Clinton asked of Campolo.

Having occasionally visited the president earlier in Clinton’s White House years, Campolo shared with Clinton a passion for social justice. With Clinton now needing personal redemption, Campolo became a regular in the White House, where the president and the evangelist discussed personal morality and spirituality.

Evangelical minister Gordon MacDonald, previously chairman of the board of the Christian nonprofit World Relief and president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, also became a confidant of Clinton’s.

MacDonald understood the president’s distress, having himself fallen from grace due to an extramarital affair, and thereafter writing a book — *Rebuilding Your Broken World* — about his journey of repentance, confession and renewal.

During this time Clinton claimed to have read MacDonald’s book twice. For his part, MacDonald, in an ABC *20/20* interview, spoke of meeting regularly with the president. While perceiving Clinton as having a “deeply personal walk with God,” MacDonald also impressed upon the president the need to confess his sins and “avoid all excuses and rationalizations.”

Heeding the advice of his spiritual advisors, Clinton in late October 1998 wrote a letter to his home church in Little Rock, Ark. — Immanuel Baptist Church

— expressing repentance and asking church members for forgiveness of his sins. The letter was read aloud following a morning worship service.

Southern Baptist leaders had demanded that Immanuel Baptist revoke Clinton’s church membership. Brushing aside such calls, Pastor Rex Horne, also a counselor to Clinton, affirmed the president’s contriteness.

“The president expressed repentance for his actions, sadness for the consequence of his sin on his family, friends and church family, and asked forgiveness from Immanuel,” Mr. Horne declared. “It was the right thing for the president to do.”

SURVIVAL

As Clinton publicly strove to maintain political normalcy while privately wrestling with his personal shortcomings, in December 1998 Republicans in the U.S. House impeached the president, finding Clinton guilty of perjury and obstruction of justice for lying under oath.

The second president impeached — Andrew Johnson being the first — Clinton was nonetheless acquitted by the Senate. Emerging from his ordeal with good public favorability ratings, Clinton’s two White House terms concluded with a strong economic track record.

Russell L. Riley, professor in the University of Virginia’s Miller Center, evaluated Clinton’s presidential legacy several years following Clinton’s departure from office.

“[I]t is probably the case that few Clinton historical retrospectives will get very far before noting that this was only the second American President to suffer the disgrace of impeachment,” Riley wrote. “It is evident from the presidency of his successor that any harm Clinton did to the institution of the presidency was, all things considered, rather meager ... but the damage done to Clinton’s place in history is far more pronounced and probably permanent.”

He continued: “Future historians will likely evaluate not just what Clinton did, but also what he did not accomplish, because he was tied up in a second-term

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struggle for political survival. It is this consideration of ‘what might have been’ that may be Clinton’s greatest obstacle to gaining historical stature.”

Clinton’s scandals served both to detract from an otherwise successful presidency and deflect personal accountability in an emerging era in which sexual harassment, long swept under the proverbial rug, increasingly became socially and culturally taboo.

Appreciative of many — but not all — of Clinton’s political accomplishments, progressives and liberals nonetheless were left to navigate the dangerous waters of the president’s treatment of women. All told by the time he left office, four women had accused Clinton of sexual harassment, including one of rape. None of the allegations was ever proven, but Democrats struggled with the implications.

While Clinton was in office progressives and liberals, resisting calls by extremist politicians and religious leaders for Clinton’s resignation or impeachment, treated the president’s immorality cautiously.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, declined to endorse a “Christian conservatives’ narrow definition of morality” limited to “sexual behavior.”

“To other people,” Lynn asserted, “morality is a balance and could even include questions like, ‘Are more children going to bed hungry under this president than before?’”

Some liberals went further, defending Clinton without reservation. In a March 22, 1998 *New York Times* op-ed, famed feminist Gloria Steinem took just such a position.

“[T]he president is not guilty of sexual harassment,” Steinem argued. Even if he did make “a gross, dumb and reckless pass” at one of his accusers, and “dropped his trousers” in front of another, when the women refused his advances, “President Clinton took ‘no’ for an answer.” At the same time, Clinton’s sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky was consensual, a “yes means yes” relationship in which “the power imbalance ... increased the index of suspicion” but did not violate Lewinsky’s will.

“What if President Clinton lied under oath about some or all” of the alleged sexual incidents? Steinem asked. “According to polls, many Americans assume he did. There seems to be sympathy for keeping private sexual behavior private. Perhaps we have a responsibility to make it OK for politicians to tell the truth — providing they are respectful of ‘no means no; yes means yes’ — and still be able to enter high office, including the presidency,” she concluded.

Nevertheless, following Clinton’s presidency cultural progressives and liberals traveled a path toward understanding all unwanted sexual advances and relationships of unbalanced power as wrong, while many conservatives defended sexual aggressiveness within their own male ranks.

DYNAMICS

These dynamics played out in corresponding liberal and conservative circles, coming to a head in the 2016 presidential election pitting Hillary Clinton — Bill Clinton’s long-suffering wife — against Donald Trump, a man with a long history of sexual predation.

In a larger perspective, many contemporary political analysts and historians point to the Republican and Christian nationalist vilification of Bill Clinton — mirrored in shrill and biased news media outlets — as the beginning of the contemporary, hate-filled extremism of religiously-driven, right-wing politics.

For his part, in his early post-presidential years Clinton channeled his energies into speaking engagements, writing a memoir, and creating his presidential library in Little Rock. Over the longer term, the former president has focused on the work of his Clinton Presidential Foundation — combating HIV/AIDS, advancing racial and ethnic reconciliation, and alleviating poverty.

In addition, Clinton is yet recognized within the Democratic Party as a leading political thinker. He also remains publicly and privately religious. A popular speaker on the progressive and liberal religious speaking circuit, his knowledge of the Bible and preaching prowess are widely recognized as exceptional. **NFJ**

Trust your doctor, not your Facebook feed

BY KEVIN HEIFNER, M.D.

Self-medicating with Ivermectin (used to address parasites in animals) to treat or prevent COVID-19 led the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to issue a consumer warning. “You are not a horse. You are not a cow... Stop it,” the FDA warned via Twitter — along with a link to their consumer update.

The American public should never “treat itself.” The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded me of this truism learned over 30 years in clinical medicine.

Medications are potential poisons — and the more familiar and readily available, the more likely they are misused with possible severe and sometimes lethal effects. Overdoses of Tylenol and aspirin are two of the most common.

Modern medicine operates under the risk-benefit ratio principle — that the benefits of a medication in a particular situation for a specific condition must be carefully considered against the negative, unintended consequences or side effects.

The drug is deemed worthy to be used only when a consensus has been reached that the benefits of giving a specific drug outweigh potential deleterious effects. The caveat is that the drug must be used for the intended purpose in the correct dose.

Medical science has made a pact with society to be entrusted with the privilege of safely and consistently making these calls and recommendations for society’s benefit.

In return, society gets peace of mind in knowing that when it uses prescribed medication, or receives chemotherapy or other medical treatment, these are the results of the accumulated knowledge of professionals.

Society is also the beneficiary of “evidence-based medicine.” Any drug that reaches the market, even over-the-counter

medications, has undergone an extensive, scientific vetting process before it is offered to the public.

This does not mean these drugs are risk-free, but it ensures that, when taken as prescribed, they are as safe as possible given the available data at that particular point in history.

The non-medically trained lack the knowledge of the complexity of human physiology, the interaction with other drugs, and the myriad other factors required to prescribe and take many drugs safely. I have seen several errors — consistent, predictable and understandable — during the pandemic.

People will grasp at various explanations during times of emotional distress or physical threat to placate the troubled mind or body. When these options are poorly considered, they can lead down the path of medical perdition.

First is the error of transferability. Some people erroneously think that because a medication is good for one condition, it can be applied across the board for others, including circumstances for which it was not developed or studied. Because a medication is good for one condition does not mean its value transfers to others.

Second is the error of anecdotal medicine. Instinctively, some people will practice medicine on themselves arbitrarily. Their reasoning for taking a certain pill or pursuing a particular course of treatment is often flimsy.

Emotion may cloud their better judgment, leading educated, intelligent people to make medical decisions based on statements such as, “My friend said,” “I know someone who took this and got better,” or “I saw a video on Facebook.”

Who said? What training do they have? Are their assertions defensible by rigorous science? Has this claim been studied and published in a peer-reviewed journal?

These simple questions should be asked before sticking anything into your body. Lacking important nuance, detail and context, using such anecdotal information to treat oneself will consistently lead to poor outcomes.

Third is the error of false causation. Just because a medicine was taken, or a vaccine given, and the recipient subsequently developed another problem does not automatically mean the former caused the latter.

Human nature makes simple logic and discernment difficult in the heat of battle — particularly when it involves one’s life or that of a loved one.

This emphasizes the importance of the pact between the public and the medical community in navigating through difficult emotional and medical issues. The medical community has been trained to do so dispassionately and with adherence to strict scientific protocol, which results in evidence-based decisions.

Fourth is the error of degree. Thinking “if a little is good, a lot must be better” is incorrect and sometimes lethally so. Professionals spend years studying concepts that most laypersons have never heard of so that they can safely prescribe medications.

It is not necessary that these nuances be studied or even understood by the general public. Rather, there must be a basic level of trust in your medical professionals that they will not lead you astray.

My plea, as a physician, is to follow the science by trusting the advice of your physicians. We have spent years in training and decades in practice to give you the best advice regarding your health.

Your medical community is here to serve you. And remember, our first rule is “do no harm” — and, because of our knowledge and training, we can do this better than you can. **NFJ**

—Kevin Heifner, a nephrologist in Little Rock, Ark., serves on the governing board of the Good Faith Media. A version of this column first appeared at goodfaithmedia.org.



Making a significant discovery

BY LARRY KINCHELOE, M.D.

A 2,000-year-old seal bearing a *semelon* (see picture), which is Hebrew for sign, was discovered near the city of Akko. The tiny stamp was used to identify members of the early Christian church.

Made of ceramic, the stamp was discovered in excavations the Israel Antiquities Authority is currently conducting at Horbat Uza east of Akko, prior to the construction of the Akko-Karmiel railroad track by the Israel National Roads Company. The find belongs to a group of items referred to as “unknown semelons” because they were found sometimes as jewelry or small pieces of clay tablets or as a pottery decoration.

According to Gilad Jaffe and Dr. Danny Syon, directors of the excavation, “A number of semelons are known from different collections.”

The first were discovered more than 50 years ago, but until recently their meanings were not understood. A recent scrap of tablet was found, giving a translation of the symbol.

It seemed that early Christians around the city of Akko developed this symbol as a way of identifying themselves to other Christians. It appears to have been a very local phenomenon — particular to the area.

This is the first time such a semelon has been discovered in a controlled archaeological excavation, according to Syon, thus making it possible to determine its provenance and date of manufacture. The semelon is important because it gives evidence of a Christian-Jewish community existing in the settlement of Uza in the Christian-Byzantine period.



The symbolism of the number four was based on the contemplation of the quaternity as found in the universe, which included both heaven and earth. The number four connoted heaven as the throne of God.

The Holy of Holies was in the form of a cube, and the Holy Place was a double cube in length. All the vessels of the Temple in Jerusalem (except the candlestick) were rectangular.

According to Ezekiel, the number four symbolized the divine revelation, while in the view of Philo it was the number of complete harmony. The four lines radiating to the east and the west represent the four Major Prophets on the left side including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

The four lines on the right side represent the four gospel writers — thought to demonstrate the early Christian community around Akko that still had strong ties to their Jewish traditions.

The first square represents God and is inclusive of all the other symbols. The second line represents the Holy Spirit. The third line is actually two very close lines that represent the dual nature of Jesus Christ.

The fourth line represents the Jewish Christian, and the smaller fifth line represents the Gentile Christian with a briefer religious background. The horizontal line

represents the separation of life and death. The square underneath the line represents those souls who have died and will be resurrected in Christ Jesus.

Horbat Uza is a small rural settlement where previously found clues alluded to the site being a Christian-Jewish settlement: a clay coffin, a Shabbat lamp, and jars with unique semelon patterns.

What is unclear is why this small community felt the need to have their own secret symbol of Christianity. Were they under special persecution from the Jewish community? Was this a break-off sect in conflict with the larger Christian community? Was there some type of Roman persecution unique to this region?

Well, actually, this is what can accurately be called FAKE NEWS. I just made it up to show how easy it is to present false information.

The image is actually an altered photo of our bathroom tile. I added some historically accurate pieces of information about current archaeological digs near and around Jerusalem to give the article more authenticity.

The theology was totally contrived. I present this as a cautionary tale of how easy it is to be confused and misled.

In a world where people are dying because of medical misinformation, it is important to understand just how fragile the truth can be when searching the Internet. Anyone can be self-identified as an expert since usually their credentials cannot be verified.

Jesus warned his disciples: “Behold, I’m sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16).

Trust the science, and trust your physician. And get vaccinated. **NFJ**

—Larry Kincheloe, M.D., is an obstetrician-gynecologist and a Baptist layman in Oklahoma City.

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STAYING THE COURSE

Pastoral ministry is hard but fulfilling when managed well

BY BRUCE SALMON

There were plenty of challenges, obstacles and difficulties during my 33 years as pastor of Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Md., as there are in any pastoral ministry. While extremely fulfilling, being an effective pastor is also hard work.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the Church of England, agrees.

“The hardest work I’ve ever done, and the most stressful, was as a parish priest — mainly because it was isolated, insatiably demanding and I was on the whole working without close colleagues — and that wears people down,” he said to the Church’s synod in 2017, according to *The Guardian*.

According to Pastoral Care Inc., a nonprofit that supports ministers across a broad spectrum of Christian denominations, 72 percent of all pastors work between 55–75 hours a week — and 84 percent feel on call 24/7.

I never stopped to calculate how many hours on average I worked per week, but I was on call 24/7. My home telephone number was published in the weekly worship bulletin, and many church members also had my cell number.

Here is another statistic: 73 percent of pastors have had vacation and personal time interrupted with ministry duties. That certainly was true for me.

Most people in the church knew that I took Thursday as my day off. If people did call me on a Thursday, they usually were apologetic about it. But people knew that they could call me any time — day or night — in case of an emergency or a crisis or some other pressing need.

I had a few vacations interrupted

or even canceled because of the needs of families in the church. Once my wife Linda and I were scheduled to go to Augusta, Ga., for the Masters Tournament.

A family who had been in our church had moved to the Augusta area, and one year got rare passes for us to attend this elite golf event, and invited us to stay with them. Well, a longtime member of our church died, and we canceled our trip to remain in town to support the family and conduct the funeral.

On another occasion, Linda and I were in Houston to attend the annual meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. We had purchased our tickets for the Religious Liberty Luncheon sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee when we got a phone call.

A member of our church and his 10-year-old daughter had been killed in an automobile accident. We canceled our hotel reservations and changed our flight schedule to return home to be with the widow who had lost her husband and only child.

Dealing with tragedy is a part of pastoral ministry. Being there for people is a pastor’s calling.

One critical experience that shaped my ministry at Village over the second half of my long tenure was when our church building was destroyed by fire. We had been at Village for 15 years, and things were going well.

The church was growing. We had added a second Sunday morning worship service, featuring contemporary music and an informal atmosphere. The church was becoming more diverse and increasing our ministries.

The church building was only 20 years old, and we were coming close to paying off the mortgage. Then, the building caught fire

and burned.

Investigators concluded the fire was started from an electrical wiring shortage in my office. Books in my library provided plenty of fuel for the fire.

I got a call about 7 o’clock in the morning from a church member who was out walking his dog. He said, “Pastor, did you know the church is on fire?”

Linda and I threw on some clothes and rushed over to the church. Police had blocked off the road, but after I identified myself as the pastor, let us through.

We stood in the parking lot for several hours and watched the firefighters put out the fire. The building was destroyed. It took almost three years to rebuild the structure, and longer than that to rebuild the congregation.

We found another place to meet. And the first year after the fire, people stuck with us. But the second and third years, we began losing people to other churches, or people moved away or simply stopped coming to our temporary location.

By the time we entered our new building, we had lost about a third of the congregation. Those three years of rebuilding were the most difficult years of my ministry. Some Sundays I would go home after worship and just hold my head in my hands.

There were some unforeseen blessings, however. The new structure was larger and more functional than the one that had been destroyed. And as we began to rebuild the congregation, we became much more diverse.

Those who remained with us after the fire were determined to welcome everyone, and that was what we did. Before the fire we had some minority members, but the church was predominantly white.

By the time I retired in 2018, our Sunday morning congregation was about half white and half people of color.



Our church staff came to reflect that diversity as well. Our associate pastor, our administrative assistant, and our choir director/organist were African Americans.

One of the biggest challenges of long-term pastoral ministry was preaching to the same congregation year after year and coming up with something “new” to say. Of course, the congregation was not exactly the same year after year.

But some people heard me preach more than 1,000 times. (One member heard me preach more than 2,000 times because he came to both worship services most Sunday mornings!)

I learned the importance of storytelling in preaching. In fact, earlier in my tenure at Village I wrote a book titled, *Storytelling in Preaching*.

It was based largely on my Doctor of Ministry research project. But over the course of my ministry, I learned more and more how to use stories to draw connections between the biblical story and our

lives today.

I also wrote a cover article for *Preaching* magazine called, “Preaching Without a Net,” based on learning how to preach without notes for the less formal contemporary service we had begun after I had been at Village about six years.

After I retired, I finally had time to reflect upon 33 years of pastoral ministry at the same church. Frankly, while I was serving as a pastor, I was just too busy to do that kind of reflection.

In retrospect, I was able to recognize some strategies I had used for avoiding pastoral burnout. One strategy simply was to take a day off every week.

Most Thursdays I played golf with some ministerial friends, who also took Thursdays off. A second strategy was to take vacations.

I never had a sabbatical because the church budget was not large enough to allow for me to be gone for months at a time. But I did have four Sundays off each

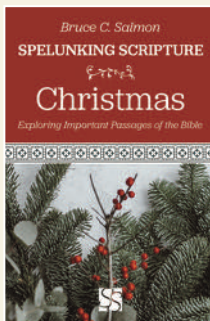
year, and Linda and I took vacations that included those four Sundays.

A third strategy for avoiding pastoral burnout was to develop friendships with people in the church. Some church members became our closest friends.

We took vacations with some of them. We celebrated birthdays and holidays with some of them. We played golf with some of them. We went out to lunch or dinner with some of them. Friendships were a key to pastoral longevity and avoiding burnout.

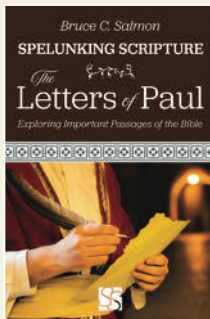
Finally, I wrote the book, *Preaching for the Long Haul: A Case Study on Long-Term Pastoral Ministry*, published by Nurturing Faith. The book tells how I was able to stay the course all those years. Being a pastor is a hard job, but it is also a deeply fulfilling job.

-Bruce Salmon retired from the pastorate of Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Md., after 33 years. Nurturing Faith has published three of his books, including two recent releases. NfJ



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Spelunking Scripture: Christmas is the first book in the “Spelunking Scripture” series and focuses mostly on the account of Jesus’ birth as told in the Gospel of Luke. Author Bruce Salmon also digs into the subsequent visit of the wise men, the prophecy in Isaiah 9 about a child being born unto us, and the prologue to John’s gospel.



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PRAY AWAY

Film documents trauma inflicted by ‘conversion therapy’

REVIEW BY ISIAH ANTHONY

Multitude Films’ *Pray Away*, directed by Kristine Stolakis, shares stories of former members of the “ex-gay” movement and details the history of evangelical organizations seeking to “convert” LGBTQ persons through so-called conversion therapy.

As detailed in the film, in the U.S. approximately 700,000 people have self-subjected or been subjected to conversion therapy, undergoing a process of non-scientific “treatment” where individuals are conditioned to reframe their sexual identity.

The urge of same-sex attraction is framed as a spiritual struggle between God and Satan, and symptomatic of a deeper wrong inside the individual preventing them from being worthy of God’s love.

The impact of this process is evident, with national surveys revealing that LGBTQ youth who’ve undergone conversion therapy are twice as likely to attempt suicide.

Julie Rodgers, a former member of Exodus International, a now-defunct conversion therapy organization, said: “For many people who don’t commit suicide, we’re killing ourselves internally by not embracing who God created us to be.”

After Rodgers came out as a lesbian to her mother when she was a teenager, she underwent a decade of turmoil at the hands of religious groups instructing her to hate a part of herself. This internal struggle, in addition to her exploitation as a poster child for the ex-gay movement, led her to the depths of depression and self-harm as she continued to feel as if something was wrong with her, something that made her sinful in the eyes of God.

“God forgive me for having such evil

flesh,” she recounts thinking. It was not until she broke from the grip of the religious right that she realized the farce of conversion therapy.

“I have seen the dark power of pointing to God, to a Bible, and telling LGBTQ people to essentially hate themselves,” said director Kristine Stolakis.

Stolakis was partially inspired to create this film by the experience of her uncle who came out as transgender as a child and suffered at the hands of conversion therapy programs.

Pray Away highlights a contradiction that religious-right groups seem to have no interest in reconciling: a professed belief in an all-knowing, all-powerful God who loves all creation, coupled with a belief that this same God approves of the distress, self-hatred and self-harm they are

inflicting upon the LGBTQ community.

The film includes interviews with former members and leaders of Exodus International and of Living Hope, an organization based in Arlington, Texas, who have since left the organizations and condemned the practice of conversion therapy.

“We have to face the fact that the vast majority of people running conversion therapy organizations are LGBTQ people themselves, who have been taught, in a larger culture of homophobia and transphobia, to hate themselves in some way,” said Stolakis. “Where do those leaders in the conversion therapy movement learn to hate themselves? They learn it in their churches.”

Exodus formed and grew alongside the AIDS epidemic, which decimated LGBTQ communities, and in giving right-wing rabble rousers a trove of misinformation available to spawn false stigmas, labeling the community as sinful, disease-ridden and worthy of the virus killing them in droves.

The hypocrisy of the conversion therapy movement is demonstrated in *Pray Away*, which recounts survivors’ stories of seeking God in the dark days of the epidemic, when death and loss were a ubiquitous feeling in the LGBTQ community. They sought the healing grace of God, but were taught that they only had their own sin to blame for their torment.

“Something I’ve found very consistently in this world,” Stolakis said, “is that people view love from God as coming in the form of tough love — that to be loved by God is to suffer — and that only encourages the self-hatred, the shame, the self-harm, the existence of suicide and the continuation of harm. It is a very damaging message, and I have watched it get into the crevices and cracks of people’s souls in a way that does not leave people.”

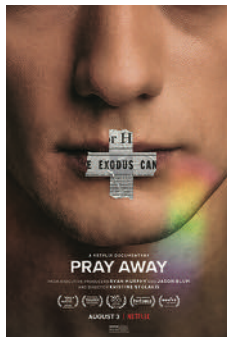
At the film’s end, Rodgers weds her girlfriend beneath the pristine white altar of a church. With the healed scars of her self-harm visible on her arm, she gripped the hand of her partner and sanctified in loving matrimony a truth that once tortured her.

“It’s been really important for me to sort of separate Jesus from the Christians who hurt me,” Rodgers says in the film, detailing how she found healing in faith free from hate and denial.

Exodus International acknowledged failure and ceased operations in 2012, but its impact on the perception of LGBTQ persons remains. Children and adults still choose death over living in their truths, coaxed by religious dogma and bigotry-laced rhetoric to believe themselves unworthy of life, of God’s love, of the world’s acceptance.

Conversion therapy still persists, tainting the message of God’s love with human-spawned notions of right and wrong. **NFJ**

—Isiah Anthony, a journalism student at Emerson College in Boston, served a summer internship with Good Faith Media.



Choosing the right path

By John D. Pierce

Why are Jesus' beatitudes — widely considered the ethical essence of his teachings — so absent from what is often called Christianity today?

The values, priorities and character traits Jesus calls for in what's known as the Sermon on the Mount don't align well with much of what drives Americanized Christianity today.

Merciful? Pure in heart? A thirst for righteousness? Hardly.

Peacemakers? Willing to suffer for doing good? No thanks; let's talk about our privileges and rights being taken away.

Meekness? That sounds like weakness to me; I'm no sheep.

Americanized Christians don't appear too interested in that wimpy stuff. They prefer a more power-driven religion that tacks Jesus' name on it while largely ignoring what he said and demonstrated so clearly.

Trading away the beatitudes like a high mileage Buick, evangelical Christianity keeps going after something far "better" than what Jesus imagined.

There is little interest in truly following Jesus — the primary call of the Gospels. Rather the emphasis has shifted to the manufactured concept of simply "accepting Jesus" as a way of gaining eternal acceptance.

Then the demands of Jesus are replaced with an authoritarian requirement to "believe the Bible" (another nonbiblical concept) that has morphed into nothing more than a religious/political ideology of favoritism and self-preservation at odds with what Jesus called his followers to be and do.

Beatitudes be gone. We have come up with something better: our own version of "Christianity."



The beatitudes point us to that which is real and true, and assures us we are not helpless.

This preferred form of faith allows for embracing power politics, discriminating against vulnerable people, and pursuing preferential treatment as a divine favor.

(What Jesus said to those gathered around him two millennia ago was probably what they needed to hear. But, by God, we're Americans; we don't need no teacher blessing the poor and persecuted.)

"If you set out to compile a list of values that contradict the highest aspirations of popular American culture, you couldn't do much better than the beatitudes of Jesus, where Christ blesses the poor, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers," wrote author and activist Shane Clairborne, endorsing the book, *The Ninefold Path of Jesus*, by Mark Scandrette (InterVarsity, 2021).

Scandrette traces the roots of the book to a conversation with a Zen Buddhist friend, who after explaining the Eightfold Path, asked: "Mark, you identify as a follower of Jesus. When you wake up each day, what do you seek to do and be?"

Scandrette said his first impulse was to explain how he became a Christian, but that wasn't the question. He spoke of the dual commands to love God and neighbor, but wondered exactly how that is done.

Then Scandrette turned to the Sermon on the Mount — which Dallas Willard called the best example of a "curriculum for Christlikeness." Delving into those blessings, he began thinking of those formative teachings as the Ninefold Path of Jesus.

"The beatitudes name nine distinct areas of human struggle that Jesus addresses in his teachings on the hill," writes Scandrette. And they "name the illusions and false beliefs that have kept us chained and imprisoned."

The beatitudes, he said, point us to that which is real and true, and assures us we are not helpless. These blessings "invite us to a new way of life, into a path of recovery," said Scandrette.

He takes readers down each of these paths, with insight and conviction. There is never a soft sell — because that wasn't Jesus' approach either.

When reading this book — or Jesus' words as found in Matthew 5 — one can discover or rediscover the contrasting ways of living between what Jesus taught and modeled, and how we often choose to live and relate to others.

As Scandrette puts it, "Each day I have a choice."

"I can live by first instincts: anxiety, denial, competition, apathy, contempt, deception, division, anger and fear," he writes, "or I can choose to live from a higher state of consciousness: trust, lament, humility, justice, compassion, right motive, peacemaking, surrender and radical love."

May we who seek to follow Jesus choose our paths wisely. **NFJ**

FROM SAINT TO SANTA

Exploring the religious, historical roots of this popular, seasonal gift giver

Editor's note: At times the subjects of various articles published over the past 20 years come to mind as having particular interest. This is one of those occasional, updated features based on earlier topics and writings.

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The jolly ol' elf whose arrival is anticipated later this year — along with the birth of Jesus — has a history. Even a religious history.

Those who want to know it don't visit ancestry.com. They reach out to Adam English or read his writings on St. Nicholas.

English, chair of the Christian studies department at Campbell University in North Carolina, is author of the 2012 book, *The Saint Who Would Be Santa Claus* (Baylor University Press), and contributed the section on St. Nicholas in the massive *Oxford Handbook of Christmas*, published in 2020.

This latter resource, said English, is helpful to anyone looking to go deeper into the broader study of Christmas traditions and of St. Nicholas.

In the conversation below (from the December 2014 issue of this journal), English traces the modern figure of Santa Claus to the life and legacy of an ancient saint. But first, some updating.

UPDATES

Recently, I asked English for any new discoveries in the study of the saint who became Santa. Here is his response:

Since our conversation in 2014, I would highlight two major developments in the world of St. Nicholas. The first involves archae-

ological work done at the original burial spot of St. Nicholas in Turkey. Teams of university scholars have made significant progress excavating the Church of St. Nicholas in Myra, where Nicholas was first entombed.

Because the church and its adjacent port town were covered in more than 30 feet of silt when the river changed course during the 13th century, the process of unearthing it has been monumental.

Discoveries turn up regularly. In 2016, a museum opened to the public, featuring new findings around the port area. In 2017, Turkish news sources widely reported that excavators found the body of St. Nicholas. The over-exuberant report was false, but it is true that archaeologists continue to expose new frescoes, tunnels and sections of the church.

The second development since 2014 regards Zwarte Piet, or “Black Pete,” the companion of St. Nicholas in the Netherlands. Traditionally dressed in a brightly colored harlequin costume, feathered hat and blackface — including an Afro wig and exaggerated lips—the character has become the focal point of controversy.

In 2014, Prime Minister Mark Rutte could shrug off the contro-

versy. But since then, the public outcry for change has grown in intensity. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., organized protests and demonstrations have raised awareness.

Numerous Dutch parades have banned the appearance of Zwarte Piet, as have municipalities including the Hague, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Others are attempting to reintroduce the character without the blackface as simply “Piet.”

I mention additional research and recent developments in the chapter on St. Nicholas in *Oxford Handbook of Christmas*.

CONVERSATION

NFJ: So, who was St. Nicholas?

AE: Nicholas was a Christian bishop of the early fourth century who performed works of charity and generosity and attended the Council of Nicaea in 325, a watershed event for Christian history.

He was born in Patara sometime after 260 and was elected bishop, or head pastor, of the church in the nearby city of Myra, on the coast of what is today Turkey. According to Acts, Paul founded churches in both Patara and Myra.

Nicholas was so well loved in Myra by believers and non-believers alike that when he died sometime around 333, a special church was built outside the walls of the city in his honor and to hold his tomb. The remains of the church and the tomb can be seen and visited to this day.

Does he live at the North Pole with reindeer and elves? Unfortunately, no.

NFJ: How did he get associated with Christmas?

AE: The feast day of St. Nicholas has always been Dec. 6. For that reason, he has always been associated with the season.

In early 19th-century America, different holiday practices were tried and tested. America was this melting pot of influences from the British, Dutch, German, French and so forth.

Traditionally, parents surprised their children with simple gifts of oranges, nuts and chocolate coins on or around Dec. 6 (and they still do in places like the Netherlands). However, exchanges of gifts also occurred on New Year's Day between colleagues, friends and employees.

Eventually these various gift-giving customs combined to create the new custom of St. Nick arriving with presents on the eve of Dec. 24.

That's a condensed answer to a big question — or should we say an “elf” answer to what could easily become an “abominable snowman” question?

NFJ: What do people often get wrong about St. Nick?

AE: The presumption has often been that St. Nicholas is just as fictitious as Santa Claus, that they are both made-up characters. Or, if Nicholas was a real person, he must have lived a long time ago and we probably don't know anything about him.

I am happy to report that after spending years researching the question and going back to the original sources, I can testify with full confidence that Nicholas of Myra really did exist.

When I began to look for historical facts, I quickly became frustrated because, so it seemed, no one considered or even knew of any of the historical documents and primary records. Until now, writers have been content, even in books supposedly about Nicholas, to repeat legends and stories they had heard from who-knows-where.

My own frustration over the lack of precise information about Nicholas pushed me to investigate further and find documents—still not translated—from the 500s, 600s, 700s, and beyond that narrate

the deeds of Nicholas. I also studied scholars who have found firm archaeological evidence that supports the stories.

NFJ: What is helpful to get right about this historical figure?

NFJ: No matter how big and glossy the American commercial Santa Claus becomes in the theaters and shopping malls, the original St. Nicholas will always be way more interesting.

Here is someone known for sacrificial generosity, but also someone of deep faith who had a fiery passion for justice.

Many of the earliest stories tell us about these other layers of his character. Many times he refused to back down in the face of power, but defended the innocent and advocated for the needy.

On one occasion, he threw himself into harm's way and personally halted the beheading of innocent citizens. Just as soon as he secured the situation at the executioner's chopping block, he marched off to the judge's house to reprimand him to his face for his miscarriage of justice.

He was a lightning rod for justice.

NFJ: Does he really keep that good/bad list?

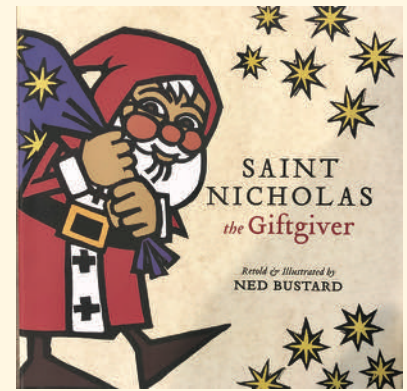
AE: The faint glimmer of the original Nicholas' concern for justice can still be seen in the naughty/nice list of Santa.

We in America have blunted Nicholas' sharp edge or turned it into a toothless threat given to misbehaving children: “You better shape up or you'll get put on Santa's naughty list.”

In many places in Europe, however, St. Nicholas visits the home in his bishop's robes and sits down with the children, asking them pointed questions about their behavior and manners and lessons.

And here in the United States, I know some men who impersonate Santa Claus but who do not ask children what they want for Christmas. Instead they ask, “What have you done to deserve a present this year?”

They find a way to direct the conversation away from the child's wants to his or her actions. And in general, it means a lot to children to be asked such a question and



ST. NICHOLAS FOR CHILDREN

In a new line of children's books, InterVarsity Press has just released *Saint Nicholas the Caregiver*, retold and illustrated by Ned Bustard. The attractive book acquaints children with a story of the kind and generous bishop in whom Santa Claus is rooted.

Adam English, who has researched and written extensively on this topic for adults, called it “a lovely production.”

“I liked the pictures best of all — with lots of little symbolic gestures and references to other Nicholas stories tucked away in them,” he said.

While the story is compact and moves along well, English notes that the writer, as others often do, conflates the story of St. Nicholas of Myra with St. Nicholas of Zion. That is where the part about Nicholas being raised by his uncle and taking a sojourn to the Holy Land is derived.

“It's a mistake so common that it hardly counts as a mistake,” said English. “It's simply the ‘received tradition’ about Nicholas.”

Admitting he's no child development expert, English questioned the efficacy of cramming an entire biography into a rhyming children's book.

“I mean, he mentions Emperor Diocletian, Constantine, the Council of Nicaea, and Arius, as well as the words ‘priest’ and ‘bishop,’ and the death date of Dec. 6, 343,” he said. “Will children understand or care about any of that? I just don't know.”

However, English favors any effort to introduce children to the real, historical Nicholas, noting that doing so is not an easy task. **NFJ**

to be able to tell Santa Claus how they have helped around the house or done something nice for a neighbor.

NFJ: How have people reacted to your book and further commentary on St. Nicholas?

AE: The response has been extremely positive and gracious. One surprising outcome of the book was that I have been introduced to the world of professional Santas.

I had no idea that there were schools and seminars and associations of guys who impersonate the man in the red suit. Some do it as a seasonal gig, but others see themselves as year-round Santas and take the craft very seriously.

Even more interesting, a number of them are former pastors and ministers who in their retirement have found a ministry of compassion and comfort to children. These cheery fellows go to children's hospitals and military bases to meet with families.

They bring joy all year round. Can you think of a better retirement ministry than that?

I have relished meeting them; their jolliness is contagious — if “jolliness” is a word.

NFJ: You've gotten a good bit of press over this book. What does the media want to know?

AE: [In 2013], news agencies from New York to Los Angeles called me asking if St. Nicholas was in fact a “white” guy.

You may remember [the previous] Christmas Megyn Kelly caused a flap on Fox News when she said that Nicholas and Jesus were both “white.”

NFJ: What are the best lessons from the evolution of St. Nicholas into Santa Claus?

AE: You may be surprised to learn that I have no problem with Santa Claus. I love the Santa Claus Christmas Eve traditions.

Santa Claus reminds me not to take myself too seriously. Look, we take ourselves way too seriously.

The 24-hour news cycle, constant updating of social media, work email, text messages, and the avalanche of commitments we labor under — Ask anybody and

Adam English at a statue of Nicholas in Demre, Turkey



they will tell you they're stressed, exhausted, busy, tired.

We take all of that into our churches and homes, and it's not healthy.

Our salvation is found in the joy of Advent, in the child born in a manger. We need to know that the joy of Advent makes room for the bowl-full-of-jelly silliness of Christmas, and it is just this silliness that might rescue us from our overgrown seriousness.

Smirking seriousness is easy. Genuine laughter takes hard work.

NFJ: Is there something to learn here about the difference between commercialism/materialism and the generosity that can mark the seasons of Advent and Christmas?

AE: Let me tell you about the home I grew up in. My parents always seemed conflicted about Christmas.

They wanted us to sing carols, hang stockings, string lights and find presents under a tree on Christmas morning. But, they also felt convicted by the “true meaning” of Christmas — our Savior's birth.

For this reason, Santa Claus was never viewed as a fellow worker in the vineyard of the Lord. Santa was secular. At best he

represented the commercialization and greed of the season; at worst he was the pied piper of paganism, luring children away from the true meaning of Christmas with his sack of goodies.

Even as my dad opened the flue to grant Santa Claus access to our chimney on the 24th, he reiterated that Jesus, not some elf from the North Pole, was the reason for the season.

The tension that I saw manifested in my mom and dad's struggle with Christmas drove me, in part at least, to learn more about St. Nicholas. What I discovered was a committed Christian pastor who, as it turns out, was the perfect fit for Christmas.

Commercialism and materialism are always at work bleaching out the beautiful and richly dyed facts of the history, and it is our job to recover and preserve them.

NFJ: Personally, what is your favorite Christmas tradition?

AE: We love to decorate our home for Christmas. There is something about hauling a live tree into the living room with its smells and feel.

Limbs cut off the bottom become greenery on the mantle and the whole house takes on the excitement of the season. **NFJ**

A “How To” Guide

to **GOOD FAITH MEDIA's**

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YELLOWSTONE STORIES

Bruce Gourley talks about the history, inspiration of America's first national park

BOZEMAN, Montana — Not only a colleague, Bruce Gourley is my longtime hiking buddy. We have walked countless miles through the High Sierra, the Blue Ridge, the Rockies, Hawaiian canyons, lush rainforests, and along the wild beaches of the Pacific Northwest and the rugged Big Bend border.

But no place keeps drawing Bruce's time and attention like America's first national park, Yellowstone. After hundreds of personal visits, he continues exploring the marvels of this western wonderland that covers 2.2 million acres touching upon three states.

Now, Bruce has brought together his knowledge, enthusiasm, and skills as a writer and historian, to share the stories of this storied and unique place called Yellowstone.

In this conversation, Bruce shares about the land that nurtures him spiritu-

ally, emotionally and physically, and his new book titled *Historic Yellowstone National Park: The Stories Behind the World's First National Park* (Globe Pequot/Lyons Press, 2021).

NFJ: How did Yellowstone first catch your attention, and why has your affection for the park grown rather than diminished?

BG: While spending a summer in Wyoming as a college student, I visited Yellowstone and was fascinated with the park. I had grown up in rural South Georgia, and had never traveled west of my home state.

My early years consisted of much time spent outdoors — fishing, hunting and camping with my family. But nature in the West, and in Yellowstone in particular, is much more vast, sweeping and wild than in the southeastern U.S.

I have since roamed over much of Montana — hiking, fishing and camping. But no one place in the region, or anywhere else, has been as captivating as Yellowstone.

It is home to spectacular marvels, unspoiled beauty, quiet backcountry, and more wildlife than anywhere else in the nation. And no two days in Yellowstone are exactly alike.

A sense of anticipation, adventure and discovery is always present, alongside a feeling of contentedness and comforting familiarity in simply being in the park.

NFJ: You made an intentional plan to live within driving distance of the park while finding or creating work to allow for that. How has that developed over time?

BG: I returned to the West for a second summer, this time living in Cody, Wyo., east

of the park. Both summers I worked with churches through Baptist Student Union (BSU) summer missions.

During the second go-around I spent much more time in Yellowstone, and by the end of the summer knew I wanted to live somewhere near the park.

My wife, Debra, and I moved to Montana in 1993, first settling in Billings, where I served as a campus minister while teaching college history courses, and she taught special education at an elementary school.

On the side, I also got involved with other projects including web design and writing my first book. Eventually my web work and BSU connections led, while working on my doctorate at Auburn University, to a part-time job creating and maintaining the then-Baptists Today website, in addition to writing a column for the publication that is now *Nurturing Faith Journal*.

Since 2007 we have lived just outside of Bozeman, one of the most dynamic towns in the U.S., and an hour and a half from two different Yellowstone entrances. Bozeman offers a stimulating intellectual environment, complementing the wildness of Yellowstone.

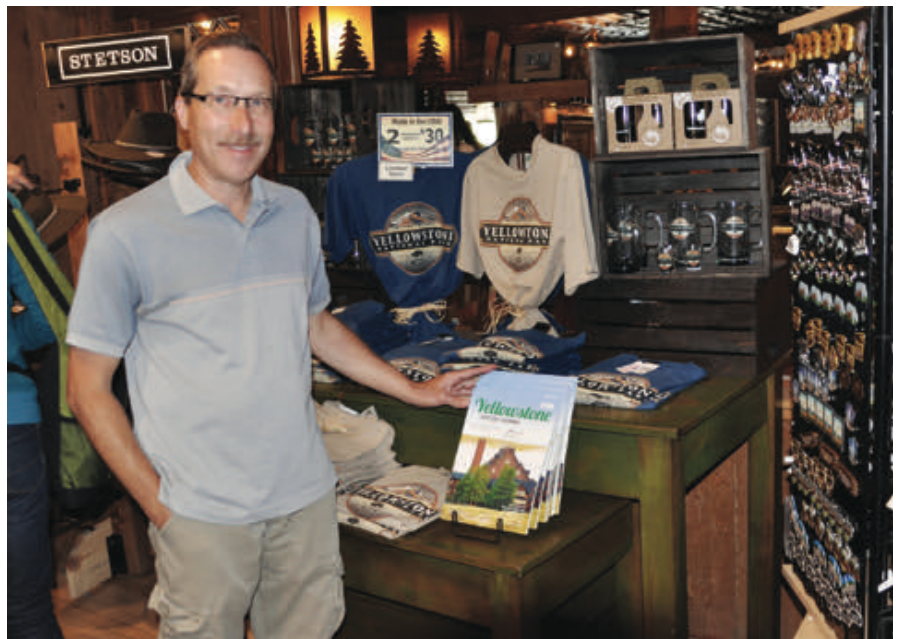
For several years after moving to Bozeman I worked remotely with Mercer University, then for seven years served as the executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, all the while continuing to work part-time with Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith.

Now, in addition to managing publications and directing experiences with Good Faith Media, I teach part-time for Montana State University's lifelong learning program.

NFJ: Why did you create the website yellowstone.net, and how has it evolved?

BG: Long before home computers became common, I started teaching myself computer programming around 1980. I also took several computer-programming courses my first year of college.

Soon after the Internet emerged — as we know it, interfaced with web browsers — I bought the yellowstone.net domain with the intent of developing a hobby site. I wrote many articles about the park for



Bruce Gourley, founding editor of *Yellowstone History Journal*, with the inaugural issue in 2018 on display in the gift shop at Old Faithful Inn.

the site, and within a few years the website became a side travel-related business, a bit of a pioneering enterprise at the time, but very niche.

For a number of years the website assisted visitors in booking vacation reservations, and afterward was a successful regional online advertising platform.

Time in the world of online technology passes quickly, and big businesses have emerged and dominate today's online world. A business partner and I still maintain the website, which now exists in a vastly different digital world, but still offers site visitors a wealth of information about the park's hiking trails, geology, thermals, history and more.

NFJ: How have you been involved with other Yellowstone-related projects and organizations, either formally or informally?

BG: Over the years I've gotten involved in several local organizations at one time or another, from a stint on the regional Yellowstone Country tourism board to, currently, the board chair of the Yellowstone Historic Center and Museum of the Yellowstone.

On a volunteer basis, in 2018 I started (and serve as founding editor of) *Yellowstone History Journal*. Published annually and sold in Yellowstone's gift shops, it is the

first academic journal devoted exclusively to Yellowstone's history.

My experience as editor of *Baptist History & Heritage Journal* and many years of writing for *Nurturing Faith Journal* paved the way for the creation of the Yellowstone journal. Good Faith Media colleagues Jackie Riley and Vickie Frayne lent their respective copyediting and design skills in helping take the journal from concept to reality.

I am also involved in helping to coordinate triennial regional Yellowstone conferences focused on history and collecting.

NFJ: Climate change is impacting the western U.S. significantly. How concerned are you about the rising temperatures, raging wildfires, disappearing glaciers and other results?

BG: I am worried. Very worried.

The West — where water has always been scarce, large forests cover much of the landscape, and development ever encroaches upon wild lands — is facing an existential crisis due to climate change.

Due to the planetary warming effects of enormous amounts of atmospheric heat-trapping gasses generated by extractive industries and the automobiles we drive, temperatures are rising dramatically in the western states.

Amid the increased heat paired with the water demands of rapidly growing cities and towns and large agricultural operations throughout the West, water volume and flow in rivers large and small have been steadily shrinking over recent decades.

Many constructed lakes and reservoirs — created in the 20th century to harness and distribute water to cities and agricultural lands throughout the West — are now so low in volume most summers as to be insufficient to meet the needs of this vast portion of the U.S.

Landscapes of the West reflect the crisis of climate change. Few glaciers remain in Glacier National Park, and glaciers in the Yellowstone region are also shrinking.

Snowfall, vital each year for spring and summer snow melt to feed rivers, lakes and reservoirs, is decreasing due to warming atmospheric temperatures. And rain, too, is scarcer across much of the West.

Less moisture and more heat, in turn, dry out forests and grasslands and lead to more wildfires that — on a scale unimaginable just two decades ago — burn fiercely and widely throughout much of the summer. In addition to the localized conflagrations and attendant destruction, smoke increasingly hovers over much of the West during July through September.

Plants and trees struggle to adapt to changing seasonal patterns. And wildlife, sensitive to temperatures directly or as part of the food chain, are impacted.

Some small mammals, unable to thrive in hotter weather, are forced to move higher and higher up in elevation, including in Yellowstone. Grizzlies are adapting to disruptions in food supplies due to changed growing seasons and a decline of Whitebark Pine brought about by hotter temperatures and drought.

Trout, cold-water fish, are stressed during the months of July into September due to rising river and stream temperatures in the Rockies, while salmon and other fish suffer on the West coast. And the list goes on, a figurative cascade of effects growing in breadth and depth.

Within my lifetime, the temperatures in the Mountain West may be more like today's Georgia climate, minus the moisture, with catastrophic consequences.

NFJ: What are the main things you tell friends who want to visit Yellowstone for the first time — or for a better time?

BG: Plan early and secure lodging somewhere in the park. Spending your nights inside Yellowstone is far better than lodging outside.

Magnificent, historic and rustic Old Faithful Inn is recognized by some as the most famous lodge hotel in the world, while the Lake Yellowstone Hotel, also historic, is luxury in the wilderness.

But there are plenty of other options, from hotels to cabins to campgrounds, and all provide a good lodging experience and nearby access to the wonders of this extraordinary park.

Time is uppermost: at least four days is necessary to begin to truly experience Yellowstone, and a week is better. Visit the roadside geological attractions — the geysers, hot springs, Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, Lower Falls — and observe wildlife from the road.

But don't stop there. Obtain a map of hiking trails; put on your hiking shoes; wear a hat to protect from the intense summer sun; make sure there is ample water in your backpack; carry a canister of bear spray (first learning how to use it!); and then go for a hike.

Most visitors do not, so you would be among the 5 percent or so of visitors who immerse themselves in Yellowstone's amazing backcountry.

NFJ: Several years ago during one of our Yellowstone hikes, you asked: "Do you think any of our readers would like to come out here?" That question led to the formation of what we now call Good Faith Experiences. What is it about these small-group ventures that are so enjoyable?

BG: These small-group nature experiences in the West, with friends new and old, are a way of immersing oneself in beautiful and amazing places in ways few others ever do.

Few visitors to some of the most fascinating western destinations know where and when to see wildlife, or the most awe-inspir-

ing views, or the best places for an outdoor picnic or indoor dining, or which trails are outstanding as well as accessible.

With Good Faith Experiences, small groups get all of the above, accompanied with stimulating companionship and camaraderie.

Next year Good Faith Media is offering experiences to the Pacific Northwest Coast and the Big Island of Hawaii. I'll be there. I hope you can join me.

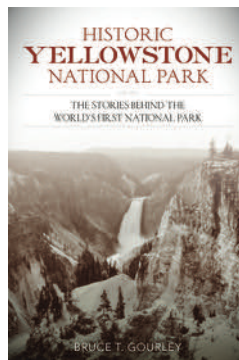
NFJ: As a professional historian and someone intimately familiar with the park, it is clear you were the right person to write a new history of Yellowstone. How did that opportunity come about, and what did you seek to do with this book that others have not?

BG: Getting to know other Yellowstone historians over time, a track record of published books — including a local Montana history volume — and the founding of *Yellowstone History Journal* all led to an invitation from publishing house Rowman & Littlefield to write the Yellowstone history volume.

This publisher had produced the last, and most authoritative, general history of the park, *The Yellowstone Story*, a lengthy two-volume set of books (1977, revised 1996) by the late legendary Yellowstone historian Aubrey Haines.

The project they recruited me for was a far more modest undertaking: a brief general history, narrative style, and for a general audience. Other than a title (*Historic Yellowstone National Park*), word count (65,000), and image limit (60), I was given leeway on how to approach the topic.

As the world's first and most storied national park in which natural history is vast, human discovery is thousands of years in the making, hundreds of thousands have worked for the park service or concessionaries, and about 100 million have visited at this point (many writing of their experiences), Yellowstone's history — including historical records — is massive, complex and multi-dimensional.



Both in volume and geographical dispersal of archival holdings, it is impossible for any one historian to know everything. For my book I focused on overarching themes, condensing each into a chapter and threading within the narrative some lesser known and engaging stories of wildlife, conservation, people, infrastructure, early transportation, themes and inflection points in the park's history.

From page one the story of Yellowstone in my book is unique. My goal is to draw readers into the park's story, helping them to see, feel and even hear this fascinating place that for much of its history was known as "Wonderland."

NFJ: How close did we Americans come to losing this vast and amazing wonderland to destruction and commercialization?

BG: Too close. Repeatedly, in Yellowstone's early decades, some commercial interests working in cahoots with allies in Washington D.C., strove to wrestle control of the park from the federal government.

But just as passionately and with equally strong allies, Yellowstone's advocates fought back, ultimately thwarting those who would have built rails inside the park, mined for gold, or diverted water from Yellowstone Lake to reservoirs.

NFJ: What our appetites by telling us one of the stories you uncovered and shared in the book, please.

BG: Days of intrigue marked August 1883 in Wonderland, a time when the dueling forces of tycoons and conservationists maneuvered for control of Yellowstone by wooing U.S. President James Garfield, who was touring the park with a large escort.

At Mammoth Hot Springs' National Hotel — and in the park's wilderness — the drama unfolded.

It was marked by braggadocios claims by one of America's wealthiest and most audacious men who considered Yellowstone his personal commercial playground; British elites swaggering, conniving and smelling financial profit; the editor of *Forest and Stream* magazine on a mission to save Yellowstone; a staged holdup and robbery



Coffee and a view — Bruce Gourley, who has visited Yellowstone National Park hundreds of times, never tires of the relaxing settings such as the front porch at Lake Lodge.

in a remote corner of the park; threats of murder; mysterious undergarments; plentiful alcohol; an all-night snipe hunt on the shore of Yellowstone Lake; a game of presidential hide-and-seek in the hotel; and a mysterious cowboy who bent Garfield's ear.

In Shakespearean fashion the future of federal western lands, as well as the fate of America's emerging conservation movement, teetered on edge. It happened in Yellowstone National Park.

NFJ: How does nature, in general, and Yellowstone, specifically, nurture you spiritually and help create community?

BG: From deserts to mountains, natural landscapes have long played a prominent role in the birthing and historical trajectory of religions and faith movements.

Life emerged from Earth, and without Earth we would not exist. There is a primitive connection between nature and humanity, a connection both immersive and transcendent of our human senses; a connection once commonly experienced but

now rare in modern, developed societies.

In the wildness of Yellowstone I see it in the eyes of a grizzly or wolf, hear it in stillness of silence or the gentle rustling of the wind through an aspen grove, smell it in the sweetness of spring, touch it as fine granules of former volcanic rock but now sand sift through my fingers — moments present yet ancient, tangible yet mysterious, near yet far.

Human constructs of God have always been inadequate. Nature untrammelled provides insights not bound by our constructs.

A sense of community, too, I find in Yellowstone: hiking with friends old and new, meaningful conversations emerging from the expansive landscape, marvels of nature experienced by someone for the first time, and friendships with people who work and live in the park.

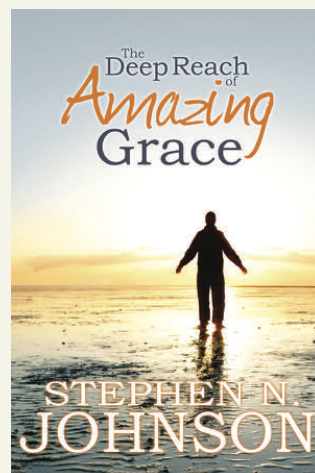
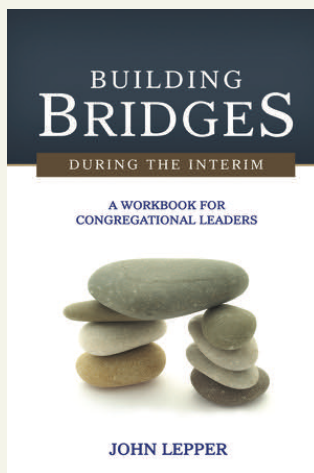
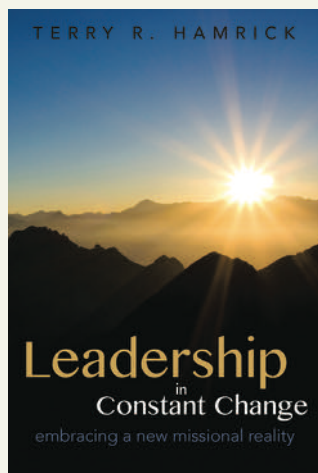
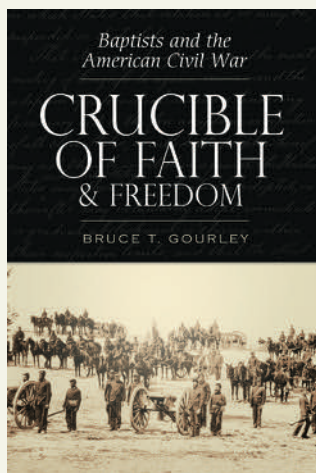
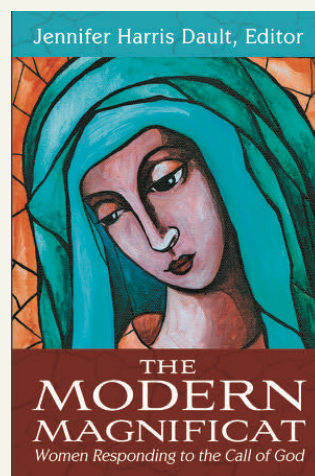
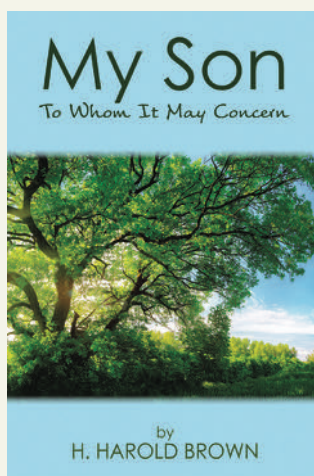
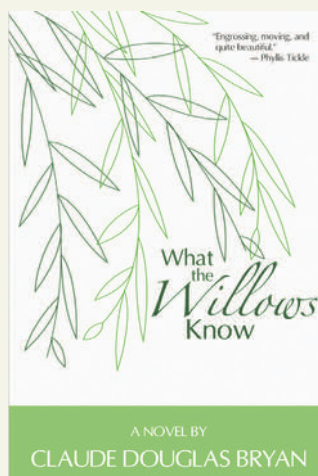
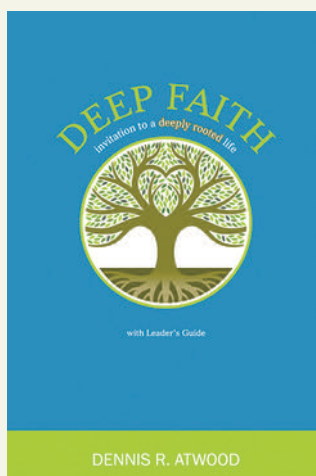
I grew up in a small town and close to nature tamed by many generations of human impact. But not until visiting Yellowstone did I encounter nature in raw wildness.^{NFJ}



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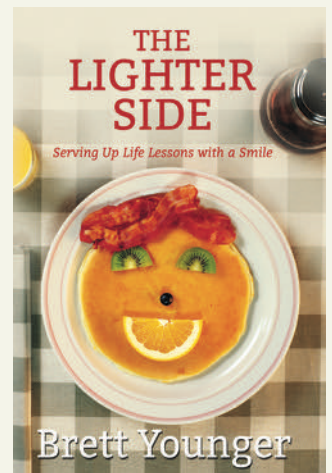
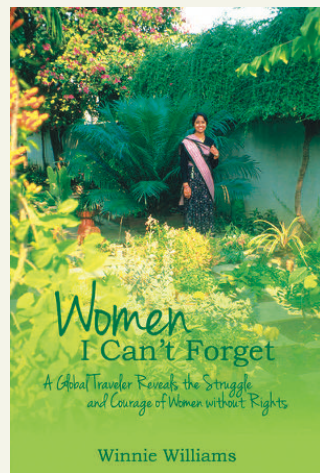
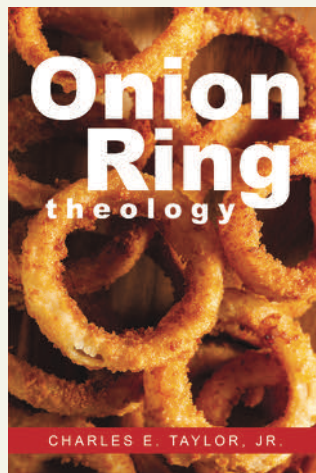
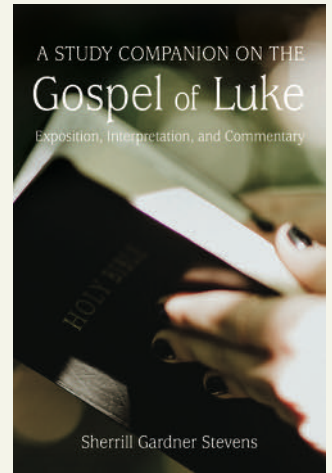
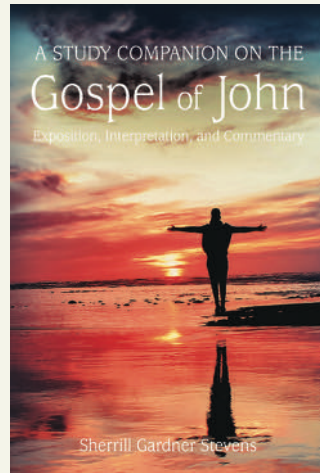
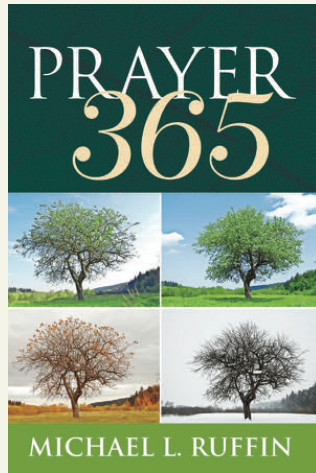
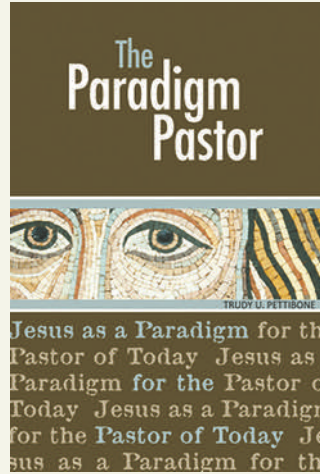
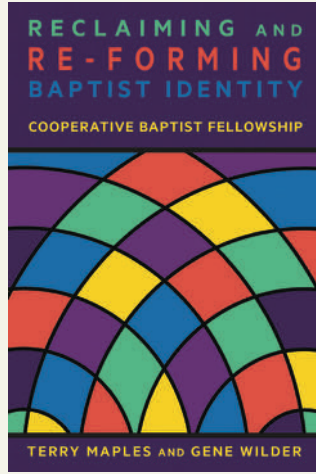
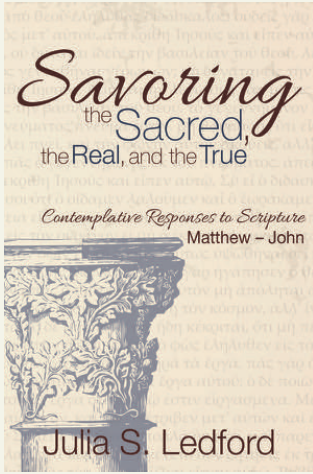
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Questions Christians ask scientists

Is the universe really “finely tuned” for life, and if so, what does that mean?

Numbers describe certain aspects of the universe with uncanny precision. This should come as no surprise to anyone who has taken a class in physical science.

The fields of chemistry and geology and biology contain heavily quantitative subfields, medical professionals deal with numbers all the time, as do some sociologists and anthropologists. But the field of physics assigns mathematics a more central and profound role than any other science.

Galileo explored the mathematical nature of the physical world more deeply than anyone before him, and Johannes Kepler, Galileo’s contemporary, proposed the first true mathematical natural laws. Since then physicists have discovered no limits to the mathematical structure of the universe.

When Einstein wrote that the single most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible, he was referring largely to mathematics, and the idea that mathematics saturates the cosmos remains a bedrock idea of all the physical sciences.

Cosmology, the branch of astrophysics that explores the universe on its largest scales of space and time, is full of staggering numbers. Some boggle the mind not because of their large or small values, but because of their scientific and philosophical implications.

In 1999 Sir Martin Rees, former Master of Trinity College of Cambridge University and the UK’s Astronomer Royal, wrote a book called *Just Six Numbers*. Although the book is 22 years old, its thesis remains valid.

In this short and conversational volume

Rees lays out a simple but astonishing idea: the large-scale structure of the universe is governed by just six numbers, and if any of these six numbers differed even slightly, life as we know it would not be possible.

What’s more, these numbers seem to be independent of each other, so any of them could be different than they are without affecting the others.

Imagine that you are the master chef of the Cosmic Kitchen. In front of you stands an oven, used not for baking casseroles or cookies but for baking *universes*.



It is controlled by six dials and a single large button. Each dial controls one of Rees’s six numbers, and your job is to bake a universe in which life can exist. The recipe consists of just six numbers. Which ones do you pick?

The first dial is labeled N and allows you to control the relative strengths of two of the fundamental forces that act in your universe. If N is less than one, gravity is stronger than the electromagnetic force; if N is greater than one, the electromagnetic force is stronger than gravity.

You dial up a value of 10^{36} , which is a short way of writing the number 1 followed by 36 zeros. So your electromagnetic force is *incomprehensibly* stronger than gravity.

But this is the number you *must* choose, for if N were just slightly smaller, stars would burn their fuel at a higher rate and have much shorter lifetimes. They would not persist for the billions of years required for life to evolve.

The second dial controls the factor Ω , which controls the density of your universe. For a life-supporting cosmos you must set

this number very, very close to 1. If you set its value lower, stars and galaxies will never form; if you set it higher, the universe will collapse back on itself shortly after you press the big BAKE button, again not persisting long enough for life to develop.

The third dial is marked D . It allows you to determine the number of spatial dimensions in your universe. You may be surprised that you have the option to choose 2 or 4 or 5 or any other number of dimensions, but you do.

It’s your kitchen! But if you don’t choose 3, then all kinds of barriers to life will show up, one of them being that the orbits of planets and moons will not be stable. And life needs a nice stable environment in which to flourish, so you pick $D=3$.

The fourth dial is marked with the letter Q , and this one adjusts the rest energy of matter to the strength of, again, the gravitational force. The details do not concern us, but for life to be possible in your universe you must set the value of Q to be about one hundred thousandth.

If it were a little smaller, star formation would be very slow and the raw material needed to build up planets would not survive long enough to do so.

If Q were a little larger, the universe would not be populated by many billions of bright stars but by many billions of black holes.

In both cases your universe would be lifeless.

You use the fifth dial to adjust something called *nuclear efficiency*, represented by ϵ , the Greek letter epsilon. It tells you how easily light elements such as hydrogen and helium combine to make heavier ones like carbon and oxygen.

The smaller this number, the easier it is to sustain nuclear fusion in stellar cores; the

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.

higher this number, the harder. If you want life in your universe, you must set $\epsilon=0.007$.

If you turn it down to 0.006, there will never be elements other than hydrogen in your universe; if you turn it up to 0.008, all hydrogen will be immediately converted into heavy elements and there would be none left over to power stars or create water.

The final dial on your oven is called the *cosmological constant* Λ , which measures a kind of anti-gravity effect. Einstein worked this parameter into his equations in his theory of general relativity, but later believed that doing so constituted the worst blunder of his career.

But now scientists think he may have been on to something after all. In the actual universe Λ clocks in at a remotely tiny value — 122 zeros after a decimal point, followed by a 1 — and if it were to exceed this value by much, then there probably would be no stars or galaxies at all, and again, no life.

So, if you want to bake a universe in which life is even *possible*, your six dials must be carefully set to the values we find in the actual universe. Some have more flexibility

than others, but overall you, as the master chef, are very tightly constrained.

You can have four dimensions. You can have a universe in which the gravitational force is stronger than the electromagnetic. You can have a universe with stars that burn hydrogen rapidly. You can have a super-dense universe.

But you can't have any of these and life too.

This fact — that the actual universe seems to be finely tuned for life — has been lifted up as evidence for God by some scientists and philosophers. Others have countered by pointing out that, if the universe were not fit for life, we would not be here to talk about it.

The skeptics are of course logically correct, and there are other reasons to be wary of rushing to a supernatural conclusion. For example, we do not yet know why these numbers have the values they do, and the day may come when we see that they are *not* independent.

We may come to understand that they could not in fact be other than they are.

Further, perhaps our understanding of life is too provincial, too earth-centered.

It seems possible that alien creatures could thrive in circumstances far beyond what we have yet imagined, including in some of the universes we have written off as incompatible with life. So perhaps the God conclusion is premature. Maybe, as scientists like to say, we need more data.

But for myself, I do find some significance in these six numbers. I am surprised and happy that life seems to have missed oblivion by the narrowest of margins.

It is like standing against a wall, blindfolded and faced by a six-member firing squad on a clear windless day. Then the unthinkable happens: the shots ring out, but every single bullet misses you.

Now the probability of such an event is vanishingly small, but not zero, and it seems you have simply drawn the most improbable card ever. If you hadn't, you wouldn't be around to know it.

Even so, as you walk away you involuntarily look up at heaven and ask: Why am I still alive? **NFJ**

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Hope and a bright future

BY MITCH RANDALL

Good Faith Media began this year with hope in our hearts and a vision for a brighter future. After the devastation of 2020, we entered the new year optimistically believing our better angels were about to rise up to take us to new heights.

However, on Jan. 6, 2021, our optimism came crashing down when Christian nationalists attacked the U.S. Capitol and breached the hallowed halls of democracy.

In that one moment, GFM staff, boards, and supporters had a decision to make. Would we accept this new reality of extremism into our world without any response? Or, would we rise up to demonstrate another path forward following the words and actions of Jesus?

We made the concise decision not to be silent. Over the course of 2021, we have vocalized the love and justice that Jesus demonstrated in the Gospels.

From combating the dangerous ideals of white Christian nationalism to broadening the church's tent to include more individuals, Good Faith Media struck a tone in 2021 to seriously follow the words and actions of Jesus and to invite all people of good faith along with us.

We understand that many of the topics we address are controversial, complex and at times difficult. There are moments when we too grow tiresome of the struggle, but thank

goodness we follow a Savior who is willing to let us hitch ourselves to his yoke (Matt. 11:28-30). When we are weak, he is strong.

As the second year of Good Faith Media continues, we are once again filled with hope. We continue to encounter incredible people of faith around the world doing remarkable and life-altering things.

From our book authors to podcast hosts, we are working hard to bring love, inclusivity and justice to all people.

For example, I give thanks to God for Miles and Maralene Wesner in Southeastern Oklahoma sharing their passion for education. I give thanks for Chaplain Monty Self for continuing the fight against COVID-19.

I give thanks for Kyndall Rothaus and Gillian Drader for bringing our attention to the perils of spiritual trauma. I give thanks for the Lott Carey missional community as they shape the next generation of Black Baptist leaders.

There are so many other kind and passionate people making a difference, and Good Faith Media is honored to tell their stories and provide a platform for them to amplify their voices.

In addition, I want to give thanks for the greatest-ever staff. In each of our four divisions (Publishing, News and Opinion, Media Productions, and Experiences), the Good Faith Media team has gone above and beyond during these strange and shaky pandemic days.

Each has performed splendidly, providing the very best reflections, resources and services in the faith-based market. We are working together in pursuit of inclusion for all, freedom for all and justice for all.

We thank the many contributors, readers, listeners, viewers, participants and supporters who make up the Good Faith Media community. Because of your dedication and support, GFM continues to shape conversations toward the words and teachings of Jesus.

Good Faith Media publishes and produces world-changing materials because of your generosity. As we close out 2021, please consider an end-of-the-year gift to help us further our mission.

We realize — as do you — there is so much more to tell and more work to do. We are eager to continue this important mission.

Gifts to this 501(c)3 charitable organization are tax-deductible. And your financial support empowers the work of our staff, provides for six journalism interns per year, enables us to pursue stories other organizations cannot, and allows for networking with people of good faith all around the world.

Good Faith Media, with your support, is making a difference. On behalf of the staff, boards and larger GFM community, thank you for being part of the hopeful change driven by our faith community. **NFJ**

—Mitch Randall is CEO
of Good Faith Media.

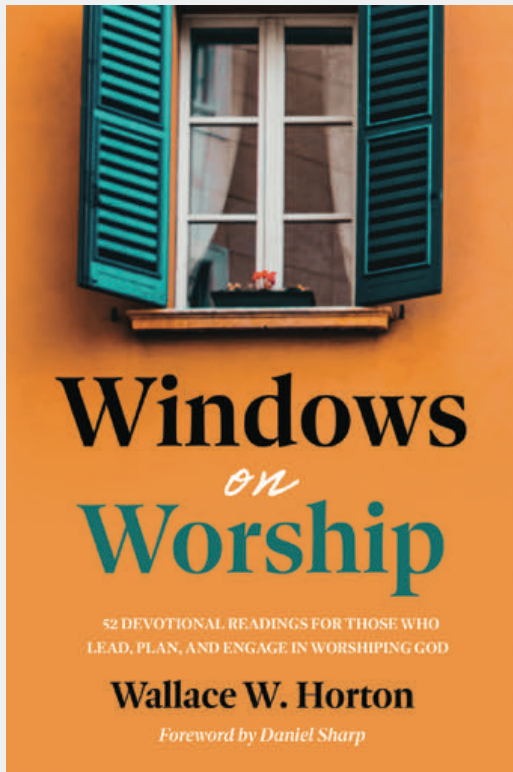


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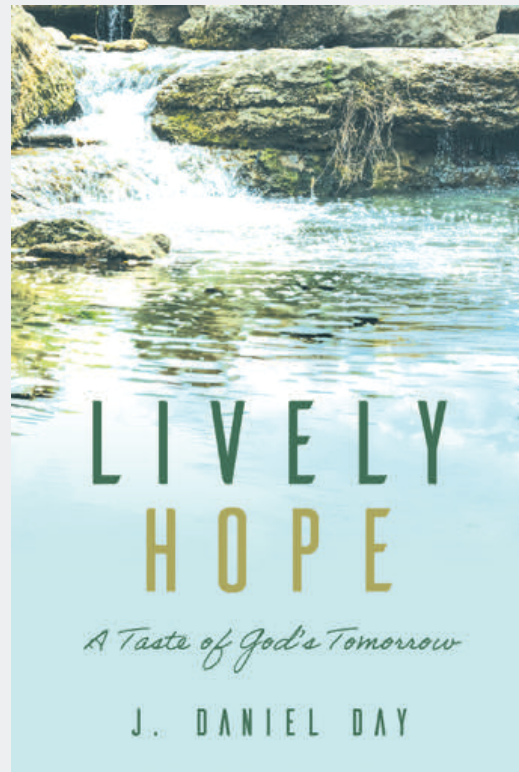


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