

MARCH-APRIL 2022

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Journal & Bible Studies

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embrace a hard, but chosen life

TWISTS & TRUTH

*Religion in the South as
interwoven as a muscadine vine*

"BAD FAITH"

*Randall Balmer on the origins,
ongoing of the Religious Right*

A publication of Good Faith Media

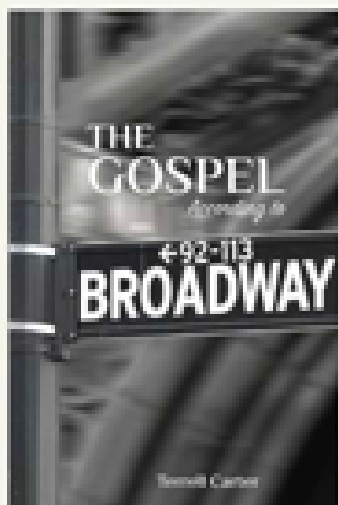
Check out these new titles

from Nurturing Faith —

the publishing arm of Good Faith Media

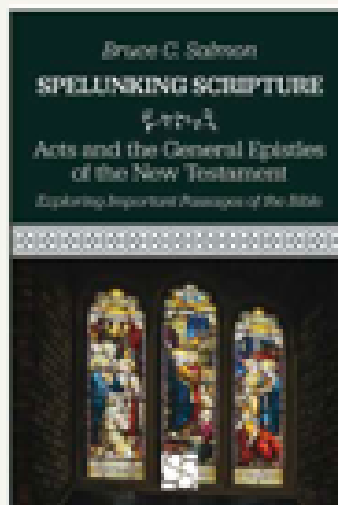
The Gospel According to Broadway

Torrell Carter examines the characters, setting, plot, conflict and resolution in various Broadway plays — interweaving biblical stories to explore the implications of God's love for all creation.



Spelunking Scripture

Acts and the General Epistles of the New Testament
Exploring Important Passages of the Bible

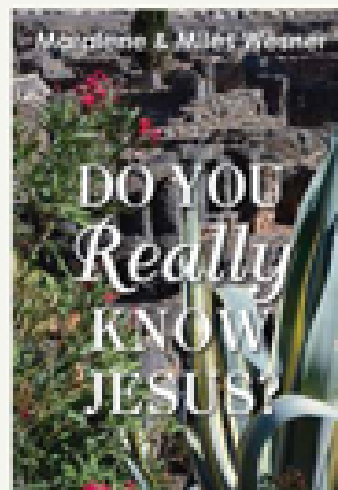
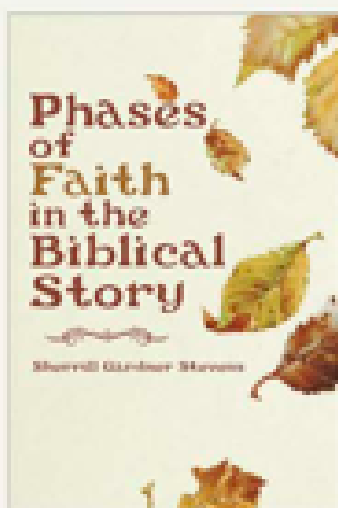


Acts and the General Epistles of the New Testament

This third installment in the Spelunking Scripture series moves readers beyond the “what” question to the “so what” question by reading scripture texts to the modern world without losing sight of Jesus’ message.

Phases of Faith in the Biblical Story

Sherrill Gardner Stevens’ chronological exploration reveals how perspectives of God and faith evolved — and the various ways people have expressed their faith over time.

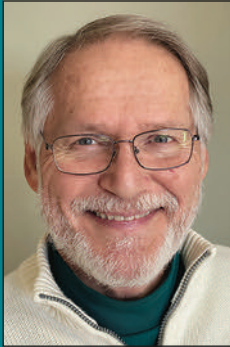


Do You Really Know Jesus?

Marjorie and Miles Winer guide readers in understanding the human personality of Jesus, moving away from stereotypes not based on scripture and instead coming to know him as a savior and friend.



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.

Editor's Letter

Everything doesn't suit everyone. I keep that in mind when writing, editing and selecting content for the journal.

When emerging writers seek input on getting their work published, I advise them to write to communicate rather than to impress. Clarity is more important than wringing a thesaurus dry.

Whether you hold this journal in your hands or access it digitally, the 64 pages of content form a mixture of thoughtful analysis, feature stories and stimulating Bible study.

We have deep respect for our readers — knowing you to be of bright minds and compassionate hearts. So we don't dumb down content or make claims that our



understandings of God and faith outrank yours.

At best, we raise timely issues and ponder possibilities in a shared effort to be more faithful in following Jesus. Rather than claiming to deliver definitive answers, we seek to contribute to important conversations.

Also, we don't avoid topics that are clearly impactful but often ignored or downplayed out of fear that someone might take offense. Too much is at stake during a time when Jesus gets blamed for things he would not own — and the word "Christian" gets tagged onto attitudes and actions at odds with the basic values and teachings of the Christian faith.

In such a time, we cannot cede Jesus and the Christian faith to those who seek to shape it into religious legalism and/or a self-serving political ideology. How

we respond to those redefinitions and deflections are debatable.

But whether we participate through our silence or speak up for the basic idea that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life is not — if we indeed call ourselves his disciples.

So please join us in this effort to be well informed and responsibly engaged in ways that lead us to be more thoughtful and faithful followers of Jesus — as individuals and communities of faith.

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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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Worth Repeating

“Am I supposed to pray over leftovers?
‘Lord, it’s me again with this spaghetti.’”

Shane Harjo on Twitter



“Character develops only when one adheres to deeply held values when it’s not easy to do so.”

Pastor and author Bill Ireland in *Driven: A Field Guide to the Wilderness* (2021, Smyth & Helwys)

“We have the first right of refusal.”

Professor Teresa Fry Brown of Candler School of Theology, preaching at a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia meeting, on Jesus’ words: “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6)

“In the long light of human history, it is not belief in God that sets us apart. It is the kind of God we choose to believe that in the end makes all the difference.”

Richard Rohr, in a devotional drawing on the work of Benedictine sister Joan Chittister, author of *In Search of Belief* (1999, Liguori Publications)

“We’re shooting for 50 percent, so we have a long ways to go.”

Meredith Stone, executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry, noting 6.5 percent of pastors in Cooperative Baptist Fellowship churches are women

“American evangelicals demand a rigid precision for inerrancy not shared by the global church, they position inerrancy rather than Christology as the chief marker of orthodoxy, and they police inerrancy in their networks with a Taliban-esque ferocity.”

Australian Anglican priest and New Testament scholar Michael Bird (Word from the Bird)

“The bishop came to our church today, but I think he was an imposter. He never once moved diagonally.”

Pastor Reece Sherman (Facebook)

“I’ve asked a lot of people what word comes to mind when I say ‘Christian’ or ‘evangelical.’ Not once have I heard love, service or unity.”

Author Philip Yancey, whose memoir from Convergent Books is titled, *Where the Light Fell* (Uncommentary podcast)

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

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

“Conservative evangelicals currently represent a minority of American Christianity and a minority of the American population, but they continue to hold outsized influence because they are loud and they vote and they are catered to by far-right politicians.”

Mark Wingfield, executive director and publisher, Baptist News Global

“The privileges of the state do not lead to true converts. Rather, privileges encourage Christians to be nominal — more concerned with cultural favor than faithfulness.”

Alex Ward, lead researcher for the SBC’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, on what American Christians can learn from early Baptist John Leland (*Christianity Today*)

“You can love the United States and admit its flaws. The country won’t fall apart by admitting to its failures and shortcomings. In fact, the country will only get better as a result of addressing them. Idolatry will blind you from reality.”

Raymond Chang, a campus minister at Wheaton College and president of the Asian-American Christian Collaborative (Twitter)

The place to go between issues of *Nurturing Faith Journal* is

goodfaithmedia.org

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Thank you

Mark Green of Avondale Estates, Ga., made a gift in memory of his parents, Dr. Robert and Ann Green.

When the B-I-B-L-E becomes the P-R-O-B-L-E-M

By John D. Pierce

If you've never been told you don't believe the Bible, then you've never challenged those who abuse it.

Their natural reflex is to dismiss the validity of faith of any person pointing out their mishandlings of Holy Writ, rather than facing up to the much-needed critique of their errant ways in the name of biblical inerrancy.

It is odd, but accurate, to note when and how the Bible is used to harm those created and loved by God — and, in turn, harm the effectiveness of the Christian faith.

Often the Bible — or actually an allegiance to it in an inappropriate and even idolatrous way — is a major competitor to and distraction from the call to follow Jesus. This occurs when the Bible is used for a purpose other than guiding believers into a fuller commitment to following Jesus — whose life and teachings are contained therein.

Strange as it may seem, the biblical witness to God's revelation often becomes an idol in genuine leather and a most convenient obstacle to its intended purpose.

The Bible is so central to our worship, study and practice of faith that whatever someone claims on its behalf is often accepted as a divine directive. Social media, in particular, allows for ongoing uncritical proclamations such as “the Bible says” or “the Bible is clear.”

Criticism, however, is greatly needed — in the sense that we are to analyze that which is proclaimed as biblical and do so in the fuller light of the revelation of Jesus.

Being alert to how the Bible is used to advance causes at odds with Jesus is vitally important. Alarms should go off when we detect the intentional shift away from following Jesus (our primary calling)



“Much of what is misleading and harmful in our churches and society at large today comes from those who hold the Bible high while advancing ideologies that ignore the Bible's overarching messages of salvation, justice and hope.”

to someone's insistence on “believing the Bible” — which tends to come with an agenda that doesn't align with Jesus.

Separating the two — with Jesus taking a lesser or absent role — allows for the misuse and even abuse.

Weaponizing the Bible is not a new phenomenon. Its misuse has literally killed countless persons — through wars, inhumane treatment of vulnerable people, human rights abuses and unjust policies, doctrines and practices that serve to benefit those of power and privilege.

This approach continues today in efforts that seek biblical justification to prop up acts of exclusion, condemnation and harm. Without Jesus as its rightful focus, the Bible quickly becomes a deadly weapon pointed at anyone the brandisher considers to be a threat to his or her (usually his) exalted status.

It seems innocent enough — perhaps even faithful — to talk of “believing the Bible.” Yet placing that affirmation above following Jesus remains a convenient way for those who abuse the Bible for self-serving purposes to quietly reject the primacy of Jesus' life and teachings — with hopes that no one notices.

Let us become more attuned to how this is taking place so we do notice and respond.

Much of what is misleading and harmful in our churches and society at large today comes from those who hold the Bible high while advancing ideologies that ignore

the Bible's overarching messages of salvation, justice and hope. And the light of Jesus — to whom the texts bear witness — gets dimmed or snuffed out.

Familiarity with the scriptures doesn't seem to prevent this misuse. Years and years of going to worship and Bible studies don't keep multitudes of professing believers (in the Bible and presumably in Jesus) from eagerly embracing all kinds of nonsense clearly at odds with what the Gospels within tell us about Jesus and the way his followers are to live.

Many of us learned as children to revere the Bible by raising our high-pitched voices in unison to singingly proclaim: “I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.” When misused, however, the B-I-B-L-E can become the P-R-O-B-L-E-M.

There is a great need to teach discernment when exploring scripture — with keen awareness of how claims of “believing the Bible” or affirming a so-called “biblical worldview” are often used to divert allegiance from following Jesus, the personified Word of God — to embracing narrow and often contradictory religious/political beliefs and values.

Rather than replacing Jesus with someone's odd rendering of scriptures, our belief in the Bible should lead us into a better understanding of Jesus' life and teachings and a closer relationship in which his ways are lived out. [NFJ](#)

Twists & Truth

Pamela Terry's novel about family secrets set in the South, where religion is as interwoven as a muscadine vine

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Pamela Terry is the author of *The Sweet Taste of Muscadines*, a novel released in 2021 by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House. The Atlanta native had to battle her northern publisher a bit to retain the title — since the juicy *Vitis rotundifolia*, ranging in color from green to golden to dark purple, has regional appeal.

“What’s a muscadine?” she was repeatedly asked. Yet an arbor on which those sprawling, intersecting and fruitful vines grow plays a key role in the story that is full of twists and truths.

Pamela crafted a wonderful story with richly developed characters that readers get to know and care about. And the suspense is plentiful enough to cause the carving out of time and space to reach the next chapter and beyond.

Her first published work, the book’s release provided an appearance for Pamela on TV’s *Good Morning America*, and has received much praise.

One reviewer said the story “feels like a mash-up of *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *You Can’t Go Home Again* with a sprinkling of William Faulkner.”

It has been described as quintessentially Southern and, like Thomas Wolf’s tale, involves the airing of family laundry.

Her story also exposes the way elastic civil religion of the South is interwoven into every aspect of the culture — and is adaptable for justifying whatever attitude one chooses, even when resulting behaviors contrast with the supposed essence of the faith claimed.

WHAT’S IT ABOUT?

Pamela’s introspection and interests play out in the fictional story — including her love of dogs and travel, and wrangling with a religious upbringing that could deliver more judgment than grace.

When reading a novel by the late writer Pat Conroy, one could tell what geographical locations had most recently captured his heart. Likewise, Pamela’s story — though rooted deeply in the South — includes excursions to the Northeast U.S. and to Scotland.

But make no mistake: this is a southern tale.

“Growing up in the South is not for the faint of heart,” she writes, opening the second chapter. “...It’s a land where heart-stopping beauty and heartrending ugliness flourish in tandem, a land of kindness and hate, of ignorance and wit, of integrity, blindness and pride.”

With complex relationships revealing more depth than mere religious trappings, *The Sweet Taste of Muscadines* is a story about grace — which often comes at a price and really is amazing when experienced.

“To me, the theme of the book is that living your life with joy is a form of forgiveness,” said Pamela, at the cozy, suburban Atlanta home — marked by her creativity as a longtime interior designer — that she shares with her singer-songwriter husband Pat and their canine family members.

To find joy in forgiveness, she added, requires embracing uncomfortable honesty rather than uncritical idealism.

“I learned early on that image is more important than reality,” she said of growing up in the baptized South. “I’m still haunted by pictures of the Klan in front of a church

holding up signs with ‘Jesus saves.’”

As a child, the only African-American person Pamela knew was a maid at her segregated Atlanta elementary school. Like many white church-going Southerners, she heard that Martin Luther King Jr. was a troublemaker — and that his death would reduce those troubles.

Those reactions troubled Pamela instead, and made a lasting impression on her.

THE WRITER

“I’ve always written,” said Pamela. “I wrote stories when I was little. But I married a writer; that was his profession.”

So she turned her time and talents to being an interior designer. But, through the decades, the writing bug stayed alive.

In 2008 she began a blog on interior design. Yet, two days later she switched to writing essays about her observations on life in general. She titled the blog, “From the House of Edward” — named for one of her dogs — so “I could hide behind him.”

Soon she had an international following and her blog was named one of the top 10 home blogs by *The Telegraph* in London. She briefly considered compiling some columns into book form — but there was a bigger story simmering in her head.

“One night in 2016 I was cooking dinner and the first line of *Muscadines* [‘The first time Mama died, I ran off to hide in the muscadine arbor’] came through my head,” recalled Pamela. “I wrote the whole prologue.”

To sharpen her skills and find inspiration, she attended a writers’ workshop with novelist Terry Kay who died in 2020. His best-known book, *To Dance with the White Dog*, was made into a Hallmark TV movie





“The theme of the book is that living your life with joy is a form of forgiveness.”

Author Pamela Terry, with her dog George, outside her home in metro Atlanta. Photo by Pat Terry.

starring Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy.

He asked Pamela to send her early-stage writings to him. His response was: “You need to stop blogging and start writing... You need to be published.”

Pamela said her attention to the book at that time was disrupted by destructive national politics and the death of her beloved dog, Edward. She did more crying than writing.

But in 2018 she started going each day to the nearby library in Smyrna, Ga., and the fuller story began to unfold. Affirmation and advice came from trusted voices in the book-publishing industry, leading to a contract with a major publisher.

RELIGIOUS ROOTS

“Guilt is the bit in the mouth of a Baptist congregation, and when the reins are handled by an expert, he can lead them right off the pages of the Holy Scriptures and into thickets of judgment and fear, and these men were experts,” writes Pamela, in her 24th chapter, about a series of ministers the main character experienced.

Outside research was not needed for creating the dynamics of fictitious Second Avenue Baptist Church in fictitious Wesleyan, Ga.

“I grew up in a Baptist church,” she said, but was always the questioning sort.

“I was one of those kids who were a bane to my Sunday school teachers.”

Her questions weren’t always well received and even less often answered to her satisfaction.

“I was a real questioning, observing kid,” she said, once posing: “What about the people in Africa who don’t have the chance to go down the aisle?”

Pamela found more thoughtful people and places to work out her faith over time — but had a crisis in 2016 when white evangelicals en masse rallied behind the politics of deception, hostility and discrimination.

“I crashed,” she said, noting the many Christian people she knew who were expressing hateful attitudes toward people they considered as threats.

“It pushed me back to the question: ‘What do I believe?’”

Some of the wrangling with that question played out in this story of life, loss and love that forms fascinating reading. Her novel isn’t preachy or overly sentimental — or to be confused with well-branded “Christian fiction.”

Yet, this is a story about family secrets, frail relationships and risk-taking separation from one’s roots. And it’s set in the South — where religion is as interwoven as a mature muscadine vine.

THE STORY

“My characters just walked into my head,” said Pamela. Yet they feel like the people we all know — including those with open or secret same-sex relationships.

“When I went into interior design I knew so many gay people,” she said. “They were kind, wonderful people.”

Her characters are not one-dimensional, however. Their complexities and struggles match what readers know and experience within themselves and others.

“Good literature creates empathy,” said Pamela.

She hopes readers will “see the world through the eyes” of the story’s complex characters — in ways that are enlightening rather than threatening.

“Hopefully, it’s the goal of every writer to foster some empathy.”

Such empathy is a prerequisite to understanding and forgiveness — which are not always easy to achieve.

“It is easier to forgive an act than a continuing attitude,” Pamela confessed. “How do I forgive that?”

She answered her own question: “You let it go.” Only then, she said, has she been able to “start living my life with joy.”

Such freedom also allowed for the dam to break out of which this grand Southern tale flowed. And then another.

Her second novel, tentatively titled, *The Ice Storm*, has been sent to the publisher. Giving just a hint, she said: “It’s about what happens when we no longer like the people we love.”

In the meantime, the muscadine arbor — full of twists and truths — awaits the reader who dares to enter. **NFJ**

NOTE: Novelist Pamela Terry, along with her singer-songwriter husband Pat Terry and author-journalist Anne Nelson, will headline Good Faith Media’s Fall Writers’ Retreat, now set for Oct. 19-21, 2022 at Amicalola Falls State Park in North Georgia. **See more information on page 9.**

Angela Grant, Maddie Grimes serving as Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Interns

BY ZACH DAWES

Angela Grant and Maddie Grimes are serving spring semester journalism internships with Good Faith Media. They comprise the fourth group of Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Interns since the program was launched in the fall semester of 2020.

“Angela and Maddie bring remarkable talents that readers, listeners and viewers will appreciate,” said GFM CEO Mitch Randall. “We are committed to helping individuals learn more about our organization and develop their skills for future journalistic opportunities.”

Grant holds degrees from Yale Divinity School, Trinity College and the University of Connecticut. Grimes is a publishing major at Belmont University, with an

interdisciplinary ethics minor that has an emphasis in philosophy.

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

Gifts to support this ongoing engagement with the next generation of communicators may be made by contacting Mitch Randall (mitch@goodfaithmedia.org) or Autumn

Lockett (autumn@goodfaithmedia.org) by email or by phone at 615-627-7763.

Prospective interns may learn more about the internship program at goodfaithmedia.org/internships or by inquiring at internships@goodfaithmedia.org.



Good Faith Media's summer 2022 interns Maddie Grimes (left) and Angela Grant.

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Evangelical culture plays major role in defining, maintaining gender stereotypes

BY CALLY CHISHOLM

One very specific aspect of Christian culture that has always bugged me is the distinct differences between devotionals targeted toward women and those targeted toward men. To this day, I get a kick out of comparing the two.

Go to any bookstore and look at the designated “inspirational” section and you will find a plethora of gendered prayer books, devotionals and self-help guides. Everything from the color, typography, font choice and general aesthetics of the book — to the language within the text — delivers a not-so-subtle message about the so-called “God-given” roles of men and women.

The popular Bible App (bible.com/app) is handy for finding scriptures quickly if you leave your physical copy at home. But within the vast selection of digital devotional plans are interesting examples of this phenomenon as well.

Titles such as “Fighting to Be a Man of God,” “Heroic Husbandry,” and “Win! Your 5-Day Devotional Toward Victory” versus “Damsel’s Diary” and “Captivating: A 6-Day Study to Restoring Your Feminine Heart” paint a clear picture of what is expected of men and women in evangelical culture.

Through the Bible App alone, more than 7 million users all over the world are being conditioned to see men and women within certain frameworks rooted in sexism and misogyny.

The messaging of mainstream Christian media posits that a “man of God” is one who leads at every level of their lives, dominates, asserts and competes. Women reflect, emote, submit, and depend on God and others.

This gender binary controls almost every aspect of American Christian culture

— events, conferences, merchandise and other forms of media.

These observations are not new ones. There is a deep history of how the media and cultural landscape of American Christianity came to be.

The Religious Right and conservative evangelicals as a whole have done a superb job of ensuring that assumed differences between cisgendered men and women are upheld and valued over individuality and fluidity.

For two years I have studied gender and diversity at East Tennessee State University, with a particular interest in investigating Christian culture in relation to issues of identity. I came across a book that helped inspire my decision to write my master’s thesis on the role of gender and sexuality in evangelical culture.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (2020, Liveright Publishing) is a comprehensive work that details the history of white American evangelicals’ rise to prominence in our political and cultural spheres.

As I read Du Mez’s narration of events, I couldn’t help but reflect on those pink- and pastel-colored devotional guides I saw growing up. They would subtly remind me of my “female fragility” in the patriarchal society we all live in.

Though femininity is anything but fragile, it is insinuated as such through the enforcement of stereotypes in our popular media. Daily ingestion of harmful and sexist messaging damages our mental health. It can make us sick.

Du Mez touches on the ways in which evangelical culture has played a major role in maintaining gender stereotyping.

Fundamentalist and conservative evangelicals live in a world of polar opposites — of right and wrong and black

and white. They leave no room for nuance, uniqueness or difference.

If we are all beautifully and wonderfully made, why must there be an expectation of conformity? This is a question I ponder all the time.

Jesus and John Wayne also exposes the hypocrisy within conservative evangelicalism.

The Religious Right pride themselves on “limited government,” while simultaneously seeking to impose their beliefs onto others by advocating for sectarian prayer in schools, banning certain medical procedures, militarizing the police, and justifying discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community.

The broader themes of this book address the effects of white supremacy, toxic masculinity, capitalism and homophobia — and how these have corrupted the message of Christ.

Instead of encouraging us to empower others with Jesus’ message of love and justice, American Christian culture directs us to hoard power for ourselves and wield it against those who dare to challenge it.

As a member of the Gen Z generation, I did not grow up with the influence of figures such as Pat Robertson and Marabel Morgan. However, I was exposed to the intense consumer culture of modern evangelical life.

Du Mez writes in her conclusion that “Appreciating how this ideology developed over time is also essential for those who wish to dismantle it.” I am deeply appreciative of how this book has equipped me with the knowledge needed to identify and dismantle oppression within my own circles of influence.

Jesus and John Wayne raises serious issues within evangelical culture. Du Mez’s in-depth and necessary work should be required reading for people of faith. [NFJ](#)

—Cally Chisholm is Creative Coordinator at Good Faith Media



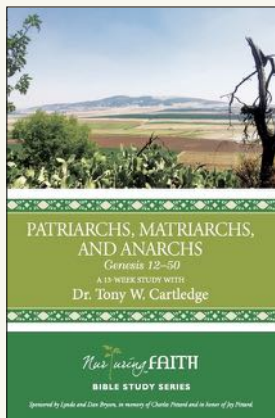
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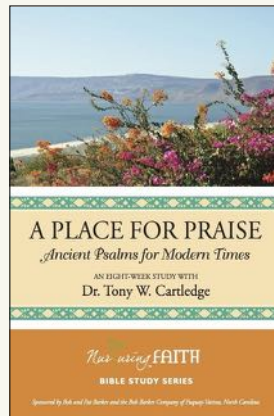


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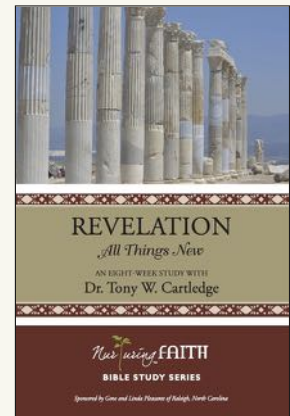
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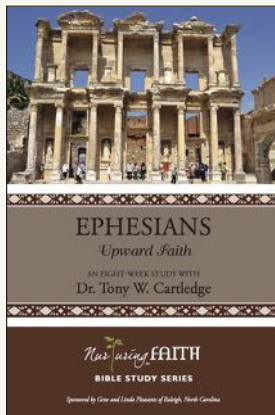
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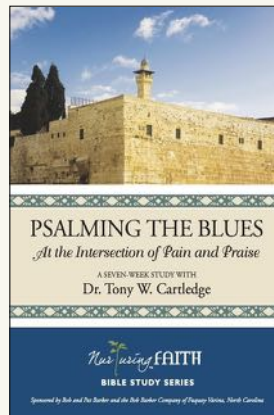
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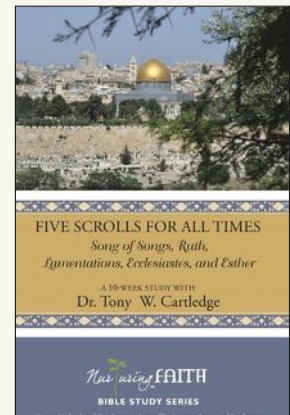
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Embracing a new normal

BY LARRY HOVIS

As we approach the second anniversary of the pandemic, most of us yearn for a return to normal, to life before we ever heard the term “COVID-19.” That is true of life in general, and it is true of the church.

We may as well stop wishing for such a day to come, however. Our lives and our churches are forever changed, and we will never go back to the way things used to be. The best we can hope for is a “new normal.”

But what will the new normal look like?

It will actually be a continuation of trends that were starting to take place before the pandemic, but that we resisted. We can resist these trends no longer, for they will become “standard operating procedure” for the church of the near future.

NEW METRICS

Throughout my life the primary metric most pastors, denominational leaders, church consultants and church members used to describe their church was Sunday morning worship attendance. In describing their church and in making decisions about staffing or programming, the most common metric discussed was Sunday morning worship attendance.

Of course, even before the pandemic, our definition of an active member, in terms of worship attendance, was changing. Church members were attending worship less often.

Today, with the adoption of online worship services by most churches, in-person worship attendance is even lower.

Some people worship online at the same time the service is being conducted in the sanctuary, while others experience it at another time during the week.

Some churches are actually experiencing an increase in total worship participants,

but the number of people in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings has significantly decreased.

NEW FINANCIAL MODELS

Though some churches have struggled financially during the pandemic, many have experienced no decline in giving, and some are actually seeing an increase. I attribute this phenomenon to the separation of giving from attendance.

Pre-pandemic, too many church members only gave when they attended a worship service. As they attended less, they gave less. The pandemic taught church members to give online, through a variety of platforms, whether they attended in person or not.

NEW FACILITY USES

In most churches, for several months to more than a year, there were no gatherings in church buildings. Yet worship, study groups, committees and ministry teams still met and engaged in God’s work.

We learned that our buildings are not as essential as we once thought. Some churches are exploring new uses for buildings, ranging from tearing them down and redeveloping property to renting them to schools and other organizations.

Our buildings were underused before the pandemic; many have become a liability over the past two years. We will learn in the future how to repurpose them as community assets.

STRENGTH IN SMALLNESS

In the church of the future, small will be big in at least two ways. First, small groups will be a primary place of engagement for many people.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many church members have found a small group to be their primary connection with the church, not the worship service. Study groups, committees, ministry teams, music groups, sports teams and other small groups

have kept many people connected to their church. Those without a significant small group have often drifted away.

Second, churches themselves are smaller. Some members have left because they weren’t connected through a small group. Others have left their churches because political divisions over reopening, vaccines, masking and other issues made them realize they no longer fit the congregation.

Many churches are smaller, but those that remain are more closely aligned. This trend will continue as part of the “new normal.”

CHURCH CLOSINGS

Prior to the pandemic, church closings were on the increase, but many church members were unaware of this reality. The majority of American church members assumed churches were supposed to live forever, even though there is no historical basis for that understanding.

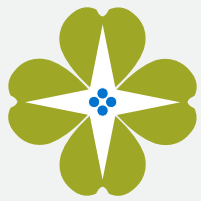
Just as COVID-19 has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable of our neighbors, so have the most vulnerable churches been threatened. Many of these churches didn’t have the strength to survive the challenges of the past two years.

We will see churches closing at an increasing rate in the coming years. Our focus should not be on how to survive at any cost but how to care for such churches by helping them to die with dignity while leaving a lasting legacy for ministry in the future.

These are only a few expressions of the “new normal” for churches in the wake of the lingering pandemic. Rather than longing for “the good old days,” may we learn to embrace new ways to be the Body of Christ. **NFJ**

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





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Jewish history offers timely lessons for today's churches

BY MATT COOK

One of the best parts of reading history is that it tends to put whatever large-scale crisis we may be facing in a helpful frame. While history doesn't repeat itself, it does rhyme. As a result, history has much to offer in ways we might respond to present challenges.

I'm not the first person to suggest the parallels between this moment in the American church and the exilic/post-exilic periods of Jewish history. When is the last time you read Isaiah or Jeremiah? But it's not just the words of scripture I find helpful.

Recently, I picked up a copy of Lee Levine's history of the synagogue. For centuries, the predominant institution in the religious life of the Jewish people was the temple.

Judaism didn't start off as an establishment religion, but it became one as the temple moved to the center of religious life. Then it all changed. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, and the temple was destroyed. And thus, out of necessity was born creativity. The Jewish people created something new.

Historians debate whether the synagogue in its later, more organized form was fully present during the exile. The scholarly consensus seems to indicate, however, that the initial form was there. But the story doesn't stop there.

As an institution, the synagogue took its most dynamic shape in the centuries after the exile. During the diaspora and after the destruction of the second temple, the synagogue continued to evolve in creative ways that shaped the nature of Judaism.

According to Levine, the synagogue decentered Judaism, made it more egalitarian, participatory, and open to outsiders. And yet, Levine affirms, the single most distinctive aspect of the synagogue in the early centuries of its existence was its role as a community center.

Within the synagogue, the community “not only worshipped, but also studied..., organized sacred meals, collected charitable donations ... and assembled for political and social purposes” among other expressions of their shared life.

Indeed, for more than six centuries, “the synagogue was the community center with an added religious component” rather than “a house of worship that just happened to include an array of communal activities.” So, I'm wondering: Is this a synagogue moment for the church?

That's how the church was born as an institution — taking its lead from the ways the Jewish synagogues organized their common life. On the heels of two centuries of institutional success, however, many American congregations still think like a temple.

Many churches' most significant goal (or at least their most significant anxiety) is about getting enough of the people out there to come inside and take part in the rituals of the faith. That's temple thinking.

But what happens when a global pandemic every bit as ruthless as Nebuchadnezzar appears? Its impact on the church, while less physically destructive, is likely to be just as devastating.

Recently, Faith Communities Today released its findings from an examination of more than 15,000 U.S. faith communities. The last year saw the single largest decline in both attendance and growth in American congregations since the survey began.

The churches most at risk before the pandemic are either at or past the point of no return. And, according to the survey, that represents some 70 percent of American congregations.

Sounds grim, right? Yet as deflating as those statistics are, they are no more deflating for Christians than the destruction of the temple was for the Jewish people. In such moments, necessity must beget creativity.

What if this moment could lead to organized expressions of faith that are more decentered, egalitarian, participatory, and open to outsiders? In many of the most dynamic moments in the history of organized religion, those components have been present.

In Christian history, monasticism began to make a widespread mark on European Christianity not just with the adoption of Benedict's rule, but when monasteries began to serve as centers of commerce and education.

The Protestant Reformation put the Bible in the hands of the general population. The Great Awakenings democratized religion by normalizing the use of music in worship and prioritizing the religious experience of the individual over doctrinal purity.

If the COVID-19 pandemic forces the American church to reexamine its assumptions about what we prioritize and how we organize, then maybe some good can come of it for the church—just maybe.

The challenge for the church in this moment is real. Ministers were already tired and frustrated, and attendance and finances were already flat or declining for many churches before the pandemic.

The great temptation for those who are tired is to do *less* rather than do *differently*. Less of the same will only work, however, if it also means more innovation and adaptation.

The good news is that the people of God have been here before. We just have to pay attention to the lessons those who have lived through crises past might teach us. [NFJ](#)

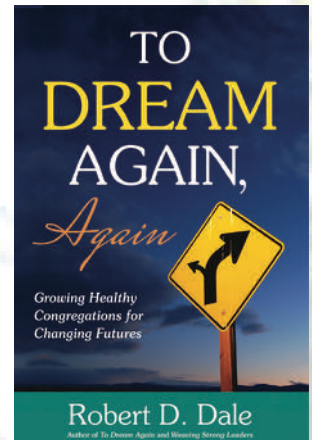
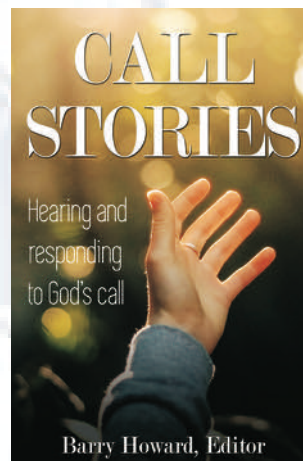
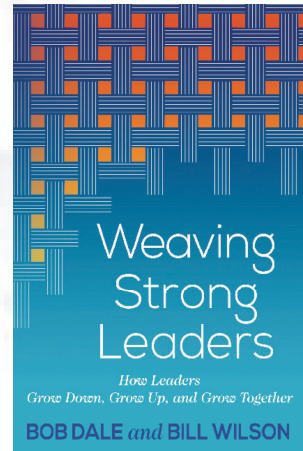
—Matt Cook is assistant director of the Center for Healthy Churches.

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



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BABY K

A family grows from disappointment to dimples and delight

BY MITCH RANDALL

The dimples alone will make you fall in love with this toddler. But after hearing his story, you will fall in love with him and his family even more.

T Tyler and Shanell Randall met in 2015 at the elementary school in Broken Arrow, Okla., where both were teachers. Their first date almost did not happen because one of them did not feel all that great. Thankfully, they rallied and decided to see a movie together, the comedy *Daddy's Home*, starring Will Farrell and Mark Wahlberg.

Shanell recalled how Tyler was always making her laugh. Yet, the main reason she was attracted to this art teacher was how he interacted with students.

After the kindergartners were not allowed to use colored markers the entire year, Mr. Randall would roll up his shirt sleeves on the last day of school so they could draw on his tattoos with “forbidine” markers.

The kids loved it, and so did one particular first-grade teacher. The two quickly fell in love, but Tyler was hesitant to propose.

He had been married previously and was still raising two teenage daughters. He was unsure of the timing. But, that summer, while on vacation with his family, he realized he could not stop thinking about Shanell.

One Advent Sunday at Haikey Chapel United Methodist Church, he had gone to the altar asking God to bring someone into his life who would help heal and complete him. As Shanell and Tyler continued to date, he realized “Nell” was that person. So, Tyler decided to propose at the same place where he made his request to God.

After Sunday worship in 2016, Tyler

convinced Shanell to go to the altar after the service ended. There, Tyler knelt and asked her to marry him. Who knew if the timing was right, but God was putting everything in place for something truly remarkable down the road.

Married in 2017, the newlyweds were eager to have a child together, but Tyler would need to have the vasectomy he had after the birth of his two daughters reversed. While the surgery was technically successful, time passed and tests revealed they had just a 2 percent chance of naturally conceiving.

Disappointed, the couple began to explore the possibility of in-vitro fertilization, but the cost was out of reach. As time passed, the couple grew weary.

At church, they found themselves resentful when watching other couples with their infants. The pair spoke openly and honestly, recounting their feelings of anger toward God. Tyler said, “Sometimes, it felt as though God was laughing at us.”

Shanell and Tyler began exploring private adoptions, but quickly became disenchanted upon seeing how agencies and lawyers profit from the process. And private adoption would prove to be even more expensive than IVF.

As a Muskogee (Creek) Nation citizen, Tyler’s Native American heritage has always been important to him. So, they explored foster care through the Muskogee (Creek) Nation.

Their research revealed 345 Muskogee (Creek) children in foster care, but only 11 authorized tribal homes. Tribes attempt

to place children in tribal authorized homes because of the history of boarding schools in the U.S. and the disappearance of so many Indigenous children.

The process was long and arduous, but Tyler and Shanell were finally approved as an authorized tribal home ready to receive a Muskogee (Creek) child in 2018. Almost immediately after their approval, their phone began to ring. The first few calls did not work out, but soon they received a call that changed their lives.

A baby boy, born prematurely a few days before, was in need of a home as soon as he was strong enough to be released from the hospital. Baby E was born with drugs in his system and relied on a feeding tube for nourishment. No one came to see him for the first six days of his little life.

For two weeks, Tyler and Shanell visited the NICU daily to get to know this child. They expected to have several days to prepare for the infant’s arrival at their home. But then, Tyler received a call from the hospital: Baby E had pulled out his feeding tube. The NICU nurse told Tyler, “He’s ready to go home!”

Baby E brought happiness and joy to their new little family. After so many disappointments with the medical procedures and the cost associated with private adoption, Tyler and Shanell finally felt they were starting their family. From the beginning, they knew they wanted to adopt Baby E.

Caseworkers from the tribe and Department of Human Services told them this would be a “slam dunk” adoption. The biological mother was out of the picture,

“While the rest of the world dealt with a global pandemic, Tyler and Shanell began to prepare their home for two babies under the age of two.”

and the father was unknown. Everything was heading in that direction until one day, six months later, they received a call from the tribe.

The Muscogee (Creeks) had located the mother, who then identified the father. A DNA test confirmed him as Baby E's biological father. Tyler and Shanell were crushed. Their days with Baby E were numbered, but they found solace in the fact DHS promised a gradual transition.

Soon the phone rang again. Another baby boy needed a home, but this was an emergency. DHS needed a decision immediately. Tyler called Shanell to tell her about the new baby.

They had to give an answer while still processing the news about Baby E. Not knowing if she could open herself up to potential heartbreak again, Shanell asked Tyler through sobs, "What if this is our forever baby?"

Tyler quickly called the caseworker back to let her know they wanted to foster the baby. The caseworker responded: "Good, because I am already halfway to your house." Within 30 minutes, the caseworker walked into their home with five-day-old Baby K.

Tyler and Shanell now had two infants in their home — one they were struggling to say goodbye to and one they were afraid might lead to the same heartbreak.

Four days later, a court hearing granted custody to Baby E's biological father. Tyler was asked if he had anything to say. With tears streaming down his face, he turned to Baby E's biological father:

"Sir, this is the most difficult thing I have ever been asked to do in my life. We know having Baby E with his biological father is the right thing to do, but it's so hard. We love Baby E so much. Please take care of him and love him as we would. And, if possible, we would love to keep in touch."

Baby E's father walked over to Tyler and threw his arms around him. Both men wept openly, standing as though making a public pledge to love this precious baby. To this day, Baby E's biological father has kept his promise, and both families meet regularly to spend time together.

Still clinging to the promise of a gradual transition, they went home to spend



Randall family photo courtesy of LA Productions.

their final days with their precious Baby E. However, later that same day, DHS called and notified the couple they had 90 minutes to gather Baby E's things and say their goodbyes.

Tyler and Shanell were left weeping as the baby boy they loved, and for six months expected to adopt, was taken away. With a huge hole in their hearts, they turned their sole attention to Baby K.

Almost immediately, questions began to arise: How could they love this baby as much as they loved Baby E? What if DHS lied again? What if they came again to take Baby K away?

After the horrifying experience of losing Baby E and feeling deceived, the couple started out cautiously with Baby K. However, after just a few short weeks, they began falling in love all over again.

They were eager to officially adopt him. Then, COVID-19 hit. The process ground to a halt. Baby K had now been in foster care for more than a year with no hope of progressing toward adoption anytime soon. Then came another life-changing phone call. This time it was Shanell, who was crying. Anxious, Tyler asked, "What is it?" She responded, "Tyler, I'm pregnant." The

2 percent chance of having a biological child had come to fruition.

While the rest of the world dealt with a global pandemic, Tyler and Shanell began to prepare their home for two babies under the age of two. In August 2020, Shanell gave birth to a son they named Trapper. While they celebrated his arrival, this sweet family would not feel whole until Baby K was legally theirs.

In November 2021, Tyler and Shanell finally got the call telling them a court date for Baby K's adoption was scheduled for just before Christmas. On Dec. 14, 2021, a judge at the Okmulgee County Courthouse ordered that Tyler and Shanell were now the legal parents of Baby K, with all of the rights and responsibilities of biological parents.

Their family is now complete — well, for now at least, because the couple left their home "open" for other children. But after 940 days as a ward of the State of Oklahoma, Baby K is no longer in foster care.

As long as I live, I will never forget watching my brother and sister-in-law wipe away tears when the judge called Baby K by his new name: Kaysen Miles Randall. **NFJ**

-Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.

Discipleship and the Kingdom of God

By John R. Franke

In my previous column, I explored the misunderstanding that the message of Jesus and the good news he proclaimed about the coming Kingdom of God primarily concerns the *next* life rather than *this* life.

Over against this view, Jesus proclaims another reality: good news for this life, and not merely the life to come.

Jesus, in continuity with the Hebrew prophetic tradition, envisions a new world breaking into and displacing the ways of sin and death that have ruled for so long: a reality in which the will of God is done on earth as it is in heaven.

How does this new world come to be? Jesus begins the revolution of the Kingdom of God by making disciples. The Gospels narrate not only the teachings of Jesus, but also the means by which he intends his message to be embodied and passed on to succeeding generations.

He carefully trains his followers in the principles and practices of this alternative way of life and then sends them out to spread the good news. A central component in the generational continuance of this work and its establishment throughout all the earth is the making of disciples.

This mandate is articulated at the end of Matthew's gospel and has come to be known as the "great commission" to make disciples of all the nations by teaching them to obey the commands of Jesus. This is not a calling to dominate and rule over the nations of the earth, but rather

"We are called not only to believe the gospel, but also to become the gospel by being the disciples of Jesus."



to instill in them the patterns of a new way of life that is beneficial to all the people of the world and not just a privileged few.

The making of disciples is God's plan for creating a new world and establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. As the work moves forward and the number of disciples expands and multiplies, so the Kingdom of God expands, gradually transforming life on earth into that which is intended by God.

God's vision for the world is profoundly captured in Isaiah 65 — a world in which "no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress."

The realization of God's dream for the world is a slow process that requires longstanding faithfulness in the face of difficult and seemingly insurmountable circumstances.

This is why Jesus compares the Kingdom to a mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32):

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

The growth of the Kingdom is slow and sometimes even imperceptible, but in time it produces a harvest of righteousness for all. This leads me to three concluding points.

First, the work of making disciples for the Kingdom of God is dependent on the lordship and presence of Jesus, and it proceeds by his direction. The followers of Jesus are not left to fulfill this

task on our own.

Jesus is with us in this work, and ultimately it belongs to God—not us. However, it is also important to understand that God has chosen human beings created in the divine image to share in this work, and it will not happen without faithful participation.

We are called not only to *believe* the gospel, but also to *become* the gospel by being the disciples of Jesus. In this way we share in God's life by sharing in God's work of bringing about the world God intends.

Second, the work of making disciples needs to reflect the scope and purpose of God's intentions for the world. It involves sharing the good news of God's alternative and revolutionary kingdom and teaching the ways of life that bring this kingdom into reality.

As we learn these new ways of life, we are transformed and begin to respond more fervently and faithfully to human need both individually and corporately as we work to transform unjust structures in our society for the sake of our neighbors and fellow citizens.

Finally, the work of making disciples should be viewed as the calling of all the followers of Jesus and not just a select few. Everyone has a role in this task. However, we cannot make disciples if we are not disciples ourselves.

The commission to make disciples is a challenge to continually take stock of our own faithfulness to the way of Jesus. Let us join with him in the task of transforming our world through discipleship so that everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid. **NFJ**

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

Everybody talking about race ain't talking about race

By Starlette Thomas

We've heard this four-letter word a lot in recent years. But what are we really talking about when we say race?

Why do conversations about race stir up a hornet's nest — but not enough engagement to faithfully question its legitimacy? Why not enough to disrupt social patterns and knock down the pillars of white supremacy that support the minoritizing and majoritizing of human beings?

Race has no biological basis and no biblical origin despite all the scripture twisting and turning on Africans and indigenous people to capitalize on their suffering through displacement, dispossession and slavery.

We have traced it back to the 17th century and its Enlightenment thinkers. We identify it as a social construct.

Still, we identify ourselves by racialized categories: beige (that is, mixed race), black, brown, red, yellow and white. But these are not the names of countries or continents.

To better understand how this happened, consider reading David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. If we are to understand race collectively, then we must get on the same page.

To be sure, this is not to suggest the problem of race will be solved during a book club discussion. A curated reading list will not do the trick.

Perhaps, it is because everybody talking about race ain't talking about race.

In sixth grade, I learned that "ain't" is a barbarism, a nonstandard English word. With an English degree nailed to my wall, I use it here for emphasis.

Because so often in conversations about race, time is unnecessarily spent on



grammar, on creating carefully crafted sentences that ironically don't get under our skin. This continues even after the publication of Ijeoma Oluo's book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, in which she asks us not to police tone.

"Do not require that people make their discussions on the racial oppression they face comfortable for you," she writes.

Why? Because we cannot talk about race and cross our hearts that we'll keep you cozy too.

Woe to us who wrap ourselves in controlled cross-cultural interactions through annual pulpit swaps and scheduled community days.

Woe to us who keep misogyny, patriarchy and racism warm with crocheted depictions of church, of the very body of Christ with multicultural staff pictures that intentionally center a European-American male pastor. We've got to talk about all one thousand words this picture is worth but leaves unsaid.

Because Jesus prayed that we might be one, and this is not a show of unity (John 17:21). Because his followers have yet to offer justification as to why we can't answer his prayer on Sunday mornings.

I'm guessing that it's because everybody talking about race ain't talking about race.

Race is a caste system, Isabel Wilkerson explains in her book, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*. "We may mention 'race,' referring to people as black or white or Latino or Asian or indigenous, when what lies beneath each label is centuries of history and assigning of assumptions and values to physical features in a structure of human hierarchy."

Christian believers confess that all human beings are made in the *Imago Dei*, the image of God, but then sort them

"See Ahmaud Arbery running. See Breonna Taylor sleeping. See George Floyd crying out for his mother."

according to race's pyramid scheme.

We ignore the implications of our baptism and Paul's words to the church at Galatia: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 NRSV).

Resurrected with Christ as new human beings, why haven't we expressed this transcendent identity?

Last year, there was talk of America's "racial reckoning," a kind of "come to Jesus meeting" but as a society. With increased public scrutiny and even global attention on police brutality, many Americans thought change was coming.

More videos of African Americans unarmed but shot as though they posed a threat were shared with the public. With more outrage, more protests, it was safe to say that things would be different.

It was time and the world was starting to see what African Americans had been saying for a long time. See Ahmaud Arbery running. See Breonna Taylor sleeping. See George Floyd crying out for his mother.

See them all powerless to defend themselves against bullets and knees on back and chest. See that race is but a tool we use to oppress.

If we didn't have race, we would use something else to get more power — because that is what we are really talking about. **NFJ**

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

Dressed for Success

By Brett Younger

Carol and I were delighted to spend several days at a convent. We had a second-floor balcony that looked out over a lake—a perfect spot to read. The food was wonderful. The house was quiet. The sisters have not taken a vow of silence, but act like they have.

A rosy, round sticker with the outline of a prim, proper, puritanical woman is posted on the door of the chapel, with the slogan “Modesty Matters.” The woman could be Florence Nightingale going to prom.

On the wall behind the pulpit a naked man is dying a horrifying death on a cross. You might wonder, “If the central story of our faith is a gruesome execution, how can the words that welcome people to worship be ‘Modesty Matters?’”

What happened that led to the sticker on the door? The sticker may be meant for people like me, who should not show up for worship in jeans and red polo shirts. The sticker could be aimed at those who wear clothes that clearly seem out of place—swimsuits, cut-off shorts, halter tops, Budweiser t-shirts, and Boston Red Sox caps. Perhaps there was a young nun who wore pajamas to an early morning mass. The abbess did not want to embarrass her by confronting her, so she put a sticker on the door.

The sticker is part of a long tradition of modest clothing being seen as a statement of faith. Dressing up for church was not even a thing for the first thousand years of the church. Then the pope decided church people should look more prestigious, and started encouraging better sartorial choices.

The call to wear our best clothes to worship was not about being more biblical. If we wanted to dress like the first Christians, we would wear tunics, turbans and sandals—which would raise interesting issues.

The term “Sunday best” did not refer to our most interesting outfit. Churches used to favor gray, black and white; pink, purple and yellow, not so much.

Most of the calls to dress modestly have been aimed at women. Women used to wear head coverings that were not as attractive as the hats that show up at my church on Easter.

Do you think it was a scandal the first time a woman wore pants to your church? Some Christians wish women would wear something concealing like burkas—though few would suggest burkas.

These words are written into one church’s bylaws: “We require our women to appear in public with dresses of modest length, sleeves of modest length, modest necklines and modest hose. The wearing of split skirts, slacks, jeans, artificial flowers or feathers is forbidden. Moreover, we require our men to conform to the scriptural standards of decent and modest attire. We require that all our people appear in public with sleeves below the elbows. Women’s hemlines are to be modestly below the knees.”

These rules are not from my church, where we have no problem with artificial feathers.

When Saint Paul wrote Colossians 3:12—“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience”—we can imagine that he was winking at a church argument. Some member of the church may have been wearing a robe that was too short or brightly colored. Rather than get caught up in hem lengths or when you could wear orange, Paul made a clothing suggestion that aimed higher.

This is how Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul: “The old life is like a set of ill-fitting clothes you’ve thrown away. Now



you are dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with God’s label on it. All the old fashions are obsolete. So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It’s your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.”

We can tell ourselves to feel compassion, but we might be more successful if we think of putting on compassion. Thinking of compassion as a decision like what to wear helps us choose the rich wardrobe of kindness.

“Clothe yourselves with love” sounds like a metaphor run amuck, but when we get up in the morning, look in the closet, and wonder what to wear, we can remember that Christian is a better choice than Christian Dior. *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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Teaching resources to support these weekly lessons available at teachers.nurturingfaith.net. Use the new password **(kindness)** beginning March 1 to access Tony's video overview, Digging Deeper and Hardest Question, along with lesson plans for adults and youth.



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



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

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13

When Facing Temptation

Temptation: we know it well, and we know where it leads us. Not all temptations result in sin: giving in to an occasional donut won't put us on the road to perdition, though it might open the door to extra pounds.

Other temptations can provoke more serious consequences. Surrendering to lust, to deception, or to the pride of racial or economic prejudice can lead to all manner of harm – and those are just three of many enticements we face.

It's all too easy to fall into patterns of sin, both hurting others and disappointing God. Sometimes we need to be reminded of our need to repent, and sometimes one reminder is not enough.

That's part of what Lent is all about. It emerged in the fourth century as a 40-day period (not counting Sundays) of fasting and prayer that begins with "Ash Wednesday" (March 2 in 2022) and continues until Easter.

Many persons choose to forego some favorite food or activity during Lent as a daily reminder of our call to faithfulness and the importance of resisting temptation. That makes the story of Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the wilderness a most appropriate text for

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. (Luke 4:1)

the first Sunday of Lent.

The wilderness temptation appears to have served a significant role in Jesus' emerging ministry, a disciplined retreat of self-exploration that helped to define and refine his understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah. As such, the story is strategically placed in Luke. It comes directly after Jesus' baptism – his public commitment to God's way – and just before his rejection in the synagogue at Nazareth, which Luke sees as Jesus' public entry into a life of ministry.

Temptation number one (vv. 1-4)

Luke portrays Jesus as "full of the Holy Spirit" after his baptism, and says he was "led in the Spirit" to seek isolation in the desert (v. 1). Luke offers a gentler image than Mark, who says the Spirit "drove him" or "threw him out" into the wilderness (Mark 1:14). The specific location is unclear: the word can refer to any desolate area, whether mountainous or desert.

Whether consciously or not, Jesus was following the footsteps of Hebrew heroes such as Moses and Elijah when he went 40 days in the wilderness without food (Deut. 9:9, 1 Kgs. 19:8), and his successful sojourn was a sharp contrast to Israel's 40 years of wandering. Luke does not use the specific word for fasting, saying only that "he

ate nothing at all during those days" (v. 2).

Did Jesus intend to go without food, or did he fast mainly because no food was available, or was he simply too lost in meditation to even think of eating? We don't know. Jesus was just as in touch with physical desires as we are, though, and in time his hunger became compelling. When those days were over, the text says, "He was famished."

At that moment of weakness, Luke says, the devil made his appearance. The English word "devil" translates the Greek *diabolos* (the root of our word "diabolical"). Hebrews did not believe in a personal devil during the Old Testament period, though they believed in "evil spirits." By the first century, however, probably influenced by Persian and Greek beliefs, they had come to think of a spiritual but evil being who opposed God and tempted persons to reject God's way. Whether we think of the devil as a personal being or a metaphor, the story speaks in the same way.

Many stones in the Judean desert are flat and brownish in color, similar to a Mediterranean pita, the common bread of Jesus' day. When the devil dared Jesus to miraculously change stones to bread and so assuage his hunger, the message may have been sarcastic, or more about proving his divinity than filling his stomach: Since (or "if") Jesus was truly God's son, why should he be hungry?

The temptation to turn stones to bread could have worked on three levels. First, it appealed to Jesus' physical hunger. Second, it would have fulfilled a natural desire to prove to the

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diabolos that he could do it. Third, it could have planted the thought that Jesus could win over the people by providing physical bread for them. In all cases, Jesus held firm.

With each allurement, Jesus resisted, in part, by quoting scripture from the book of Deuteronomy. Here, he recalled how Moses had criticized Israel for failing to trust God during a hungry stretch, reminding the people that they needed God, not just bread, to be truly healthy (8:3). 📖

Jesus would not make that mistake. Like the suffering servant (Isa. 50:4-9), he would trust God in the face of adversity. He would not use divine power to satisfy personal desires.

Jesus knew, as thinking believers should know, that God will not buy our love through the promise of prosperity. God calls us to faithful living even in wilderness times and on hungry days.

The text challenges us to ask what physical enticements trouble us most. Things that are good in themselves – food, material goods, leisure activities, sex, or even work – can become an unconscious substitute for the spiritual hunger that gnaws at our souls. What does the text suggest about how we can best cope with this kind of temptation? (See the online “Hardest Question” for more.)

Temptation number two (vv. 5-8)

In the second temptation, according to Luke, the adversary “took him up and showed him in a moment all the kingdoms of the inhabited world” (v. 5, my translation). Matthew said Jesus was taken to a high mountain. [DD] There is no mountain in Palestine that affords a vista of “all the nations,” of course, but one could easily look at the patchwork landscape below and imagine nations stretching to and beyond the horizon.

The Bible is clear in teaching that ultimate authority over the world is God’s alone, but the devil claimed to have been given present authority over the earth (cf. John 12:31, 2 Cor. 4:4). He offered to trade that power to Jesus in return for service and adoration.

This temptation helps to explain the tension that later caused dissent among some of Jesus’ followers. For many years, the downtrodden Hebrews had longed for a warrior Messiah who would conquer Israel’s enemies and restore the nation as a world power. By accepting the tempter’s offer, Jesus could become exactly what the people wanted. Surely he could have done much good by ruling the world in a just way, but sometimes the greatest temptations are to do what seems good but in the wrong way.

What would it mean for Jesus (or us) to worship the devil? We are not to think in terms of the modern concept of “Satan worship,” but rather the idea of seeking heavenly goals by worldly means. To worship the devil is to choose the tempter’s path of power instead of God’s chosen road of redemptive suffering. 📖

Jesus again held firm by quoting Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (6:13). In Hebrew, the same word is used to mean “worship” and “serve.” To truly worship God is not a matter of bowing down, but of obedience.

Temptation number three (vv. 9-13)

In the final temptation, the *diabolos* “takes” Jesus (whether in a vision or physically is beside the point) to “the pinnacle of the temple” in Jerusalem. Some interpreters see this as a place on the corner of the Temple Mount, standing high over the Kidron Valley. Others suppose it to be the highest point of the temple roof. In either case,

the place would have been high and in plain sight. There is nothing to indicate that Jesus and the tempter were visible, but normally many people would have been present near the temple. 📖

The devil dared Jesus to jump from that great height and float to a safe landing below. Such a public spectacle would be widely reported, and one might expect many people to regard such a wonder worker as the Messiah. The adversary even quoted scripture (Ps. 91:11-12) to reinforce the temptation, insisting that God would protect Jesus.

This episode provides a helpful warning against the dangers of proof-texting, for even the wicked can twist the Bible to their own ends. 📖

The attainment of instant popularity could have been a great temptation to Jesus, but he knew it would be an inappropriate use of God’s power. He would not follow Israel’s wilderness example of putting God to the test (Exod. 17:2). God’s power is meant to be used in accordance with God’s will – and Jesus understood that God’s will was for him to follow the path of the suffering servant, not a super-powerful warrior. Again, Jesus found strength in quoting scripture, recalling Moses’ exhortation that Israel should not put God to the test (Deut. 6:16).

Luke suggests that the tempter then left Jesus for a time, but temptation was a constant companion for Jesus, as it is for us.

There may be times when we feel “spiritually strong” and do not feel uncommonly tempted. But temptation comes most forcefully when we are weak, when we are hungry for something, when we feel most powerless, when we feel most alone. These trials of Jesus suggest that overcoming temptation in times of struggle may afford our best opportunity for spiritual growth. 📖 NFIJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 13, 2022

John 3:14-21

When Foxes Prowl

What do you know about foxes? They're secretive creatures, famously sly and not often seen, though interbreeding with coyotes and familiarity with humans has led many of them to become bolder.

People who keep chickens know to guard them well, for "The fox is in the henhouse" is more than a proverb: it reflects an age-old problem, often discovered too late.

Today's text includes both a fox and a hen. It begins with a report that King Herod had threatened Jesus, who then called Herod a fox while picturing himself as a weeping mother hen who struggles to gather and protect her straying brood. It wasn't Herod who threatened the wandering chicks of Jerusalem, however: they were in danger of losing themselves.

Dismissing distractions

(v. 31)

This story is a part of Luke's "Travel Narrative," a section of the book that begins at 9:51, where Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem," and describes his meandering journey to the city where death and the fulfillment of Jesus' ministry awaited. 📖

The account portrays Jesus as on the road to Jerusalem when someone

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luke 13:34b)

asked, "Will only a few be saved?" (13:21-30). Jesus' sharp response indicated that the door was narrow, and many who expected a reward would be surprised when they didn't make it through. 📖

"At that very hour," Luke reports, certain representatives from the Pharisees approached Jesus with a warning that he should "go away and get out of here" (my translation) because "Herod wants to kill you" (v. 31).

Luke apparently did not have a good understanding of Palestinian geography, and his travelogues are often hard to follow. We can't be sure where Jesus was when the threat arrived, but he must have been somewhere in Galilee or Perea, areas that Herod Antipas ruled.

Were the Pharisees who warned Jesus actually sympathizers who truly cared for Jesus' safety, or were they telling tales as a ruse to get Jesus – who was often critical of the Pharisees – out of their territory? The question has been long debated, with no clear solution (see the online "Hardest Question" for more). Fortunately, our understanding of the remainder of the passage does not hinge on this point.

Jesus appeared to treat the threat as real, but beside the point. Herod was the least of Jesus' worries. Death did not frighten Jesus. He knew he was on a pathway toward the cross, but Herod would not be the one responsible for it.

Jesus told the messengers to take a message to "that fox." Why would he

use that term? We commonly think of foxes as sneaky or crafty and thus read our own cultural bias into the story. In ancient times, however, foxes were seen as scavengers who might be pesky pilferers, but rarely dangerous. Calling Herod a fox implied that he was no more than a distraction, like a repellent pest living on the fringes of human society. 📖

If the Pharisees had hoped to frighten Jesus into leaving, Jesus' reference to Herod as a "fox" would be a clear message that he was not afraid. Jesus had already planned to leave the territory, but he would do so in his own time.

Holding to priorities

(vv. 32-33)

Jesus had his own priorities, and he would not be dissuaded from them. He saw his ministry as the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of one who would set free the captives and deliver the oppressed. Through "casting out demons and performing cures" (v. 32a) he was doing just that, and he would continue to do so until he reached his ultimate destination.

If read literally, "today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my work" (v. 32b) might suggest that Jesus planned to arrive in Jerusalem three days later. An optional translation would be something akin to "day by day, and one day soon." Jesus wasn't publicizing his calendar; he was saying that he intended to follow his own plan until he "finished the course."

Although Jesus was still days from Jerusalem and would apparently spend a week while there, the ominous "third day" and the term *teleiouvai* leave

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the text hanging in the shadow of the cross. *Teleiouvai* means “to finish” or “to perfect,” and is elsewhere used in the New Testament to describe the completion of God’s plan. It could be translated as “finish my work” (NRSV) or “reach my goal” (NIV, NASB). 📖

In v. 33, Jesus repeated the “today, tomorrow and the next day” statement while pointing toward Jerusalem, “because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Many people considered Jesus to be a prophet, but the Pharisees were generally not among them. 📖

If Jesus had died in an obscure rural village, few people would have known about it. For maximum effect, it was necessary that his death and resurrection take place in and around Jerusalem, the seat of Jewish power, the place of worship, the heart of the nation. Early in his ministry, Jesus had been tempted to find acceptance through a miraculous demonstration of power in the heart of Jerusalem by jumping from the pinnacle of the Temple and being saved from the fall (Luke 4:9-13). Instead, Jesus chose to suffer and die there, facilitating the accomplishment of his purpose. 📖

Reaching one’s goals (vv. 34-35)

Jesus’ touching lament over Jerusalem reveals deep grief over the great city that would reject him as surely as it had rejected the prophets before him by “killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you” (v. 34a).

The Hebrew Bible does not speak of prophets being martyred in Jerusalem, though Jeremiah was arrested and beaten there (Jer. 37:15), and Luke claims that Zechariah was killed there (Luke 11:50-51). Jesus had earlier criticized Jerusalem as a place that built

tombs for prophets “whom your ancestors killed” (see also Luke 11:47).

Historically, Jerusalem was the heart of the nation, both religiously and politically, so it was a natural place for prophets to proclaim their message – and to be rejected. Isaiah 5:1-7, like many other prophetic texts, emphasizes God’s desire for Jerusalem to follow his way, and Jerusalem’s persistent rejection of that way.

Having called Herod a fox, Jesus likened himself to a mother hen striving to bring comfort and protection to the wandering chicks of Israel (v. 34b).

The metaphor of Jesus as a mother hen grabs our attention, for it is one of a few texts that portray God in feminine terms. Culture and tradition dictated that God most often appear as male, but this text reminds us that God is beyond any human gender. Jesus could speak of the mother hen’s concern for her chicks just as easily as the father’s concern for the prodigal.

The key phrase in this verse is the last one: “but you would not.” Jesus wanted to hold Jerusalem close, to comfort and protect its people, to be its teacher and guide. This had been God’s desire throughout the Old Testament, as well, but Jerusalem consistently rejected God’s loving advances (see Hosea 11:1ff for an equally plaintive lament). “You would not” means “you did not wish it” or “it was not your will.” This emphasizes the element of free choice. Jesus wished to redeem Jerusalem and make the people recipients of his grace, but they chose a different path.

Because Jerusalem rejected Christ, he proclaimed: “Your house is desolate.” Some interpreters see this as an assertion that God’s presence had abandoned the temple, or as a reference to the temple’s coming destruction. In Matthew’s parallel version, this saying

immediately precedes Jesus’ prediction that the temple would be destroyed (Matthew 24). However, “house” probably refers not to the temple so much as to the city, or perhaps the Hebrews as a whole. Those who chose to reject God’s presence in the person of Christ would experience the desolation of God’s absence.

The concluding words foreshadow Jesus’ final approach to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. “You will not see me until you say ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” The quotation comes from Ps. 118:26, a hymn that proclaims glad welcome to both God and God’s messengers. All three synoptic gospels cite this as one of the chants shouted by the people during Jesus’ triumphal entry on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:9, Mark 11:9, Luke 19:38). In Luke, this seems to mark Jerusalem’s last opportunity to accept Jesus as the Messiah. No person can see Christ or experience God’s salvation until he or she willingly accepts Jesus, here symbolized by the welcoming invitation, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Some interpreters see “Jerusalem” as a symbol of institutionalized religion. Can you think of ways in which modern-day prophets have been squelched by the power of denominational leaders or preachers who uphold traditional prejudices? Jesus stuck to his priorities, even under great pressure from the religious elite to conform to the status quo. Does this speak to the importance of following one’s own conscience in reading and interpreting scripture? 📖

Jesus had carefully thought through his life’s plan, constantly aware of his goals and consistently committed to reaching them. Today’s text challenges modern disciples to do the same. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1-9


When Feeling Fruitless

You want to know, don't you? After some tragic event takes place, or even after some disappointing occurrence, we have all wondered why bad things happen, especially to "good" people like us.

Have you ever wished you could ask someone who should know – someone like Jesus, perhaps – why bad things happen? Why do innocent people suffer or die? Most of us, I suspect, could resonate with those who insist that "When I get to heaven, God will have a lot of explaining to do."

Today's text portrays people asking Jesus just that sort of question. As is often the case with Jesus, however, the response we get is not the one we expect.


The temple of doom (vv. 1-3)

During Lent, we're spending time with Jesus during the last weeks of his life in human form. According to Luke 12, Jesus had been calling on his followers to be prepared for a coming judgment, and this theme continues into chapter 13. 

As Jesus made his final journey to Jerusalem, "some who were present" brought a recent tragedy to his atten-


He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it." (Luke 13:8)

tion. We do not know who asked the question. It could have been people in the crowd wanting Jesus to explain why trouble comes, Pharisees looking for a reaction, anti-Rome zealots hoping to engender Jesus' support, or even some who were concerned for Jesus and warning him of danger. No matter how the question was posed, everyone present would have listened closely for Jesus' response.

Someone reported that a group of men from Galilee had come to worship at the temple and offer sacrifices. In an act of government-sponsored terrorism, a band of armed Roman soldiers had burst in and slaughtered the worshipers, mingling human gore with the blood from their sacrifices. Many people in Galilee strongly opposed Roman rule, and it is possible that the men were targeted as suspected members of a revolutionary party called the "Zealots." 

This event is not mentioned elsewhere, but Josephus, a Jewish historian of the period, detailed similar atrocities. In fact, Herod Antipas was removed from his position in 35 CE after ordering the massacre of Samaritan worshipers and religious leaders at their temple on Mt. Gerizim.

Those who brought this news to Jesus would have held the traditional belief that the victims must have been sinners who deserved their fate. Instead of affirming the popular dogma,

however, Jesus' response caught his listeners off guard. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" (v. 2). 

They probably did, because Israel's basic beliefs were based on the covenant theology of Deuteronomy, which promised rewards for faithful living and curses for disobedience.

By reframing the question, however, Jesus rejected the false notion that God directly causes every event – a view that denies both human freedom and the natural freedom of creation. Jesus refused to buy into the *quid pro quo* theology of the Deuteronomist, but he still saw an important lesson in the tragic deaths: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" (v. 3).

Jesus did not deny that the murdered Galileans were sinners, but he refuted the idea that their gruesome deaths were proof of greater sin. All are sinners, Jesus insisted, and judgment is coming: everyone needs to repent if they do not wish to perish in the judgment.

The tower of disaster (vv. 4-5)

To further illustrate his point, Jesus raised the issue of another recent tragedy. A stone tower near the pool of Siloam had collapsed, killing 18 people. The tower was probably part of a wall that was built to protect Jerusalem's water supply. Had the victims been construction workers or passersby or children resting in the shade? We don't know, and the point is largely found in the ambiguity. Who knows whether these persons were

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great sinners?

Jesus' comment was the same. The people who died beneath the tower were no worse than the other inhabitants of Jerusalem. All people are sinful and in need of repentance, lest they perish when judgment comes. The manner or timing of one's death is not a commentary on his or her level of personal righteousness, but every death is a reminder to be prepared for our own. 🇺🇸

So, when Jesus had a chance to explain why bad things happened, he passed. He rejected the idea that God causes everything, popularly expressed today by the ill-founded folk belief that "Everything happens for a reason."

Still, we may ask, why does God even *allow* bad things to happen? We have a natural tendency – sometimes mistakenly encouraged by out-of-context scriptures – to think God should step in and protect us from harm. But human freedom to choose our own paths and the freedom of natural events to run their course mean nothing if God is constantly intervening. We may want God to explain God's self to us, but the real question is how we will explain ourselves to God.

The living dead (vv. 6-9)

Jesus reinforced his call to repentance by telling a parable about a fruitless fig tree in a vineyard. When the landowner noticed that the tree had not produced figs for three years running, he instructed his gardener to cut it down lest it waste valuable soil. The gardener interceded, asking permission to cultivate and fertilize the tree for another year before giving up on it.

In the Hebrew Bible, Israel was commonly compared to a vineyard or fig tree that disappointed God by not producing good fruit (cf. Isa. 5:1-7, Joel 1:12). Some have interpreted the story

as an allegory in which the landowner is a figure for God and the fig tree represents faithless Israel, with Jesus as the gardener offering Israel one last chance to repent and do right. 🇺🇸

The story, however, is a parable, and not an allegory. It's not about Israel as a nation, but about any person. We all are faced with the option of repentance that leads to life, or of rebellion that leads to death. God is patient, but judgment is coming.

While the main point is clear, something else about this parable is very interesting, and it wouldn't be right for us to ignore it. This parable is full of manure. The gardener asked for time to dig around the tree and pile manure on it. The Greek word used here (*koprion*) is not even a very polite word. It is a crude description of dung that we would not let children use at the dinner table.

In the ancient world, as on many farms and gardens today, manure was commonly used as fertilizer. It may not be fun to work with, but it is very effective, and in this parable it is very significant. Have you ever considered the idea that there is mercy in this manure? The landowner wanted to chop the tree down, but he relented and showed grace when the gardener promised to dig the soil around the tree and treat it with manure.

In the parable, Jesus seems to point to a debate in God's own mind, whether to give us what we deserve ("Cut it down!"), or to offer what we do not deserve ("Give it more time"). The gardener's request for the landowner to "let it alone" for another year employs the same Greek word (*'aphes*) that is usually translated "forgive." In essence, he asked forgiveness for the tree and patience for another year.

Is there hope for us, unfruitful as we are? On one side is the justified judgment that we all deserve. On the other side is the miraculous, "manuri-

fied" mercy that we don't deserve. Both believers and unbelievers stand between the two, with an opportunity to repent and produce fruit while there is still time.

How will the story end? Will the dung do it? Will the formerly barren trees produce fruit? The Bible is filled with such stories: Sarah was barren, Rachel was barren, Hannah was barren, and yet they all bore children when everyone else had given up. Maybe you've given up on your life producing any fruit for God – the fruit of obedience, the fruit of goodness, the fruit of new believers coming to Christ because of your witness – but if you're still living, it's not too late.

Jesus' story, we note, is open-ended. We don't know if the gardener's attentions had the desired effect and the tree produced fruit the next year or not. The story has no ending, because it's not really about a fig tree, is it? It's about every person who lives under God, and we will all write our own endings to our story.

Jesus came into the world preaching a gospel that called for the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of life. Like John, Jesus called people to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Instead, the Gospels declare that some of those same people nailed him to a cross and then went back to their lives. Just before the earth shook and the heavens grew dark, as if preparing for a last burst of judgment, Jesus said "Let it alone" (*'aphes*) – "forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23:34).

Jesus gave himself for us, his blood dripping onto the ground, his love reaching out to our roots, offering us grace and hope and another chance to become faithful and fruitful before the landowner comes again. Will we? 🇺🇸 NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11-24, 40-47

When Far Away

Forgiveness is a wonderful thing, especially when we're on the receiving end. Being the one who offers forgiveness can also bring liberating joy: grudges are too heavy to bear without self-harm.

Sometimes, though, we may struggle to accept the idea that certain others should be forgiven. Maybe we think they are too bad, or that they should do something to deserve any grace, or at least ask for it. We may resent seeing someone else freely forgive an affront that we'd hold on to for some time.

Thoughts like that might help us get a clearer grasp of today's text, one of those stories that's so familiar we can let it walk right past without even bothering to invite it in for a chat.

It's usually called "the parable of the prodigal son," though some prefer "the parable of the forgiving father." Both titles overlook the cantankerous and resentful older brother who's the real target of Jesus' story.

One helpful way to experience the story is to try putting ourselves in the picture. Here we have an impatient and immoral runaway son, a loving and forgiving father, and a hardworking but begrudging older brother. Can you envision the story from

... for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! (Luke 15:24a)

each character's point of view? With which character do you resonate most readily? 🇺

A teacher and his critics (vv. 1-3)

This familiar parable appears near the end of Luke's "travel narrative," which has been the setting for the past few lessons. The story itself has no geographical setting and needs none, though we note that it is the third in a sequence of three stories in Luke 15 that deal with something that has been lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. 🇺

We often overlook the setting: All three stories are set against Jesus' reputation for attending parties and hanging out with sinful people, including "tax collectors and sinners" who were drawn to him (vv. 1-2). This scandalized certain scribes and Pharisees who were astonished at Jesus' behavior: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!"

So, who do you think Jesus was talking to when he told these three stories about people who went out of their way to find and celebrate what was lost?

Exactly.

If the first two stories don't make it clear, the resentful and self-righteous older brother who appears near the end of the third parable leaves no doubt

that Jesus has a message for sanctimonious folk who take offense when the undeserving get a little grace.

Jesus loved all sinners, however, including those who were holier-than-thou. To help them get past their smugness and contemplate such love, he talked to them about what it means to be lost and found.

The three parables are intentionally sequential. They move from the parable of the lost sheep (one out of a hundred), to the parable of the lost coin (one out of ten), to the parable of the lost son (one out of two). The first two parables have the same basic point: The shepherd in search of the sheep (vv. 3b-7) and the woman in search of the coin (vv. 8-10) are clear images of God, who persistently seeks for the lost and rejoices when they are found – as opposed to Jesus' critics, who showed little concern for their lost neighbors.

The parable of the lost son (vv. 11-32) goes beyond the first two. It speaks of the Father's concern for the lost and his joy over the prodigal's return, but also goes on to explore the attitude of the angry elder brother who cannot accept his penitent sibling.

A son and his father, part one (vv. 11-24)

Hebrew tradition mandated that property be passed on from father to son, with the oldest son receiving a double share. If a widow survived her husband, she would not inherit his goods; they would be divided between the sons, and they would be given responsibility for the mother's care.

It was customary, then as now, for property to be distributed after the father's death, but it could be done

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earlier. Once the inheritance was parceled out, however, recipients had no further claim on the estate.

The younger brother in this story is portrayed as having grown tired of the farm and longing to experience the world. He pressed for his share of the inheritance, and the loving father granted it. With money burning a hole in his pocket, the shiftless son left home and took off, severing ties with the father.

In that sense he was not unlike any of us who assume complete control of our own lives and leave God out of the equation.

Once in a “far country” and away from his familial and religious roots, the prodigal quickly squandered his inheritance on a newly riotous lifestyle. 📌 The young man’s behavior was clearly irresponsible and led only to sorrow. Jesus pointed to the natural results of profligate living: poverty and isolation.

As the prodigal ran out of money, the land ran out of rain, resulting in a famine. As one pundit observed, “Forlorn and forsaken, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy farmyard.”

📌 Hebrews considered pigs to be unclean (see Lev. 11:8, among others), but tending swine was the only job the young man could find, and the hogs ate better than he did. Carob pods contain bitter beans and gelatinous goo that provide some meager nutrition, but they were only eaten by the poorest people and in the worst of times.

As the young man hit bottom in a pig wallow, we notice a sharp difference between this story and the earlier ones. The lost sheep and the lost coin could not find themselves, but the lost son was different. Eating from the same trough with the hogs helped him to face reality. He “came to himself” and realized that the mess he was in was his own doing.

Thinking he would rather tend his father’s sheep than some heathen’s

hogs, the prodigal decided to return home, confess his failure before God and his father, and ask for a job as a hired hand.

Some writers consider his plea to be a skillful ruse by a scheming son who never truly repented, but the whole story rests on the fact that he *did* repent. He left the far country of rebellion and *returned* to his father. That is what the word “repent” means: to return. In returning to a father who loved him, the penitent prodigal became a model for others who needed to repent.

As we know, the young man returned to find that his father had been out looking for him already. Dismissing the son’s desire to slink into the bunkhouse as a hired servant, the father called for a ring and a robe to symbolize his continuing sonship, new sandals to replace his old traveling shoes, and a fatted calf to celebrate his return.

Did you notice the reversal? The dishonorable young man had left home so he could party, but returned home to be greeted with a party in his honor.

A grouch and his brother (vv. 40-47)

We tend to slide by the last part of the parable, but the elder brother’s reaction sums up the point of all three “lost” stories. He had remained hard at work while his selfish sibling abandoned the farm, and he was enraged by his father’s desire to honor the scoundrel’s return. Sulking and pointedly snubbing the party, he was as close to rejecting his father as the younger brother had been.

The elder brother was a prodigal, too, but he could not see it. He was blinded by his self-righteous contempt of his brother and his refusal to accept the father’s love for them both.

What we must not miss is that the father did love them both. Just as he had gone out looking for the prodigal, so he

went in search of the older brother and assured son number one that his faithfulness was well known and his inheritance secure.

The father urged his eldest to join the festivities and extend a caring welcome to his brother. There were places of honor for both at the father’s table, but also a need for both to repent and accept the father’s love.

Some might think of the father as a “prodigal” because his actions stretched beyond expected norms. He gave to the younger brother the acceptance he needed instead of the hired servant position that he asked for. And, he gave to the older brother the reassurance and responsibility he needed rather than the exclusive praise and party of his own that he wanted. When the father said “All that is mine is yours,” that included the younger brother, who would one day be dependent on his older brother’s willingness to keep him on as a supportive member of the family. 📌

Comprehending a radical father like this might require an attitude adjustment on our part, especially those who adopt a survivalist philosophy of self-sufficiency and self-interest as primary virtues, dismissing any notion of altruism and leaving the less competent to fend for themselves or fail.

Like the parable of the fruitless fig tree in last week’s lesson, this story is open-ended. We don’t know if the older brother relented and welcomed his brother home, or if he remained in the barn, nursing his offended ego. The intent of the story is that we put ourselves in the older brother’s indignant sandals, leaning against the doorpost and staring hard at the stars ...

Would we have joined the party?

NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

April 3, 2022

Philippians 3:4b-14

Living with Purpose

How do you feel about the Apostle Paul? For many Christians, he's a hero of the faith, to be admired and emulated. Other readers may have trouble warming up to the fiery apostle, in part because he held very strong and sometimes near-contradictory opinions, if the letters attributed to him are an accurate reflection. 📖

At times, we may also find Paul's high opinion of himself and his accomplishments to be a bit hard to swallow. We don't generally consider braggadocio to be an appealing attribute. If someone had confronted Paul about it, however, he might have responded as a talented friend of mine used to do: "No brag, just fact."

Paul's accomplishments (3:4b-6)

Our text this week is from Paul's letter to the Philippians, a generally warm and encouraging missive that includes several memorable passages. 📖 It begins, however, with what sounds like a heaping dose of boasting as Paul recounts his credentials as one of the most faithful Jews who ever lived (vv. 4-6).

His intent was not to brag, but to declare that his laudable accomplish-

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:10-11)

ments in keeping the law had counted for nothing when it came to knowing Christ. To understand vv. 4-6, we look to vv. 2-3 for context.

Paul was deeply concerned about a persuasive band of people who had gone about seeking to undermine the gospel of grace. Whether the "false teachers" were evangelistic Jews seeking to win (or recover) converts, or a sectarian group that believed Christ-followers should also abide by certain aspects of Jewish law, is unclear. It is also uncertain whether proponents of such a view had yet reached Philippi, though their teachings had brought confusion to churches in Galatia and Corinth.

Paul, who insisted that salvation is by faith rather than works, minced no words in criticizing those who favored requiring external rituals. He flexed his rhetorical skills in warning the Philippians to "beware of" or "look out for" persons he called "dogs," "evil-workers," and "mutilators" (3:2). 📖 Paul railed against teachers he believed had distorted the gospel by claiming that grace was not enough. He regarded such people as more than mistaken: he believed they were doing evil.

The false teachers demanded that Gentile believers be circumcised as Jews in addition to their faith in Christ, but Paul considered that to be unnecessary violence. He referred to those

who promoted believers' circumcision as "the mutilation," and to those who followed Paul's teaching as the (true) "circumcision." 📖

In vv. 4-6, Paul offered to stack his credentials against his opponents' "confidence in the flesh." His Jewish background was sterling: he'd been circumcised in accordance with the ritual requirements and could trace his ancestry through the tribe of Benjamin as "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (v. 5a). The latter expression may also imply that Paul was raised to speak and read Hebrew, unlike most Palestinian Jews, who spoke Aramaic. He was not a proselyte or convert to Judaism, but the genuine article.

Still, Paul could take no credit for being born a Hebrew, so he also emphasized his personal achievements in Jewish life. He identified himself as the most committed of Jews, a Pharisee who sought to keep the law in every respect, so zealous for the Jewish faith that he claimed to have been "blameless" and had gone so far as to have persecuted (literally, "pursued") Christians who were regarded as a threat to Judaism (vv. 5b-6). No one could claim to be more Jewish than Paul, but he had come to understand that neither his pedigree nor his piety could compare with the unmerited grace offered through Jesus Christ.

Paul's goal (3:7-11)

Paul came to see that every advantage or accomplishment as a faithful Jew counted as nothing when it came to faith in Christ. All human gains, whether religious or otherwise, were

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“as loss” compared to “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (vv. 7-8a).

We may read this with little thought, but it is helpful to realize what Paul had indeed lost: both his heritage and his achievements had made him a noteworthy leader within Judaism. He gave up his position, his reputation, and all that had previously grounded his life when he realized that none of that could bring him into a right relationship with God.

The word translated as “loss” can also carry the sense of “liabilities” (NET): Paul understood that what some saw to be spiritual assets were really impediments to faith. To trust wholly in Christ, all human righteousness would have to be disregarded. Indeed, Paul emphatically says “I count them as rubbish ...” (v. 8b). While the NRSV and NIV gloss the translation with the palatable word “rubbish,” the more common meaning of *skubala* is “dung” (KJV, NET, “filth” in the HCSB), a coarse term used for excrement. Paul’s intentional use of shocking speech is lost in most translations.

While the false teachers majored on human actions thought to have spiritual value, Paul sought a righteousness that could come only through faith in Christ, not through the law (v. 9). Most translations render *dia pisteōs Xristou* as “through faith in Christ,” but many scholars argue that a more natural translation would be “through the faith of Christ” (as in KJV) or “through Christ’s faithfulness” (NET). Both are true: Christ’s faithfulness to us makes it possible for us to put our faith in him.

Paul wanted to know Christ. The word translated as “know” was especially important to the members of a Christian sect associated with Gnostic thought, who believed that Christ imparted a special mystical knowledge to believers. In contrast, Paul was

using the word in its Hebrew sense of intimate, personal, experiential knowledge. He did not want to know *about* Christ, but to know him personally as a living, resurrected reality (v. 10).

Most believers would share Paul’s desire “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection,” but would be less anxious to join him in “the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (v. 10). Paul was not a masochist or would-be martyr in search of suffering, but he believed that knowing Christ fully required a willingness to share the subjective experience of Christ’s suffering. 🇺

But what does Paul mean by “if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead”? (v. 11). Was he implying uncertainty, or a need to achieve something? The sentence may not be as conditional as it appears, for the words translated “if somehow” could also mean “so, somehow” (NET). It is likely that Paul was simply speaking from humility rather than expressing any doubt about the truth of Christ’s promises or the efficacy of his own faith.

Paul’s primary thrust was that he wanted to be like Christ in every way, from suffering to death to resurrection.

Paul’s determination (3:12-14)

If anyone could claim to “have arrived” as a Christian, it would be Paul, who was obsessed with knowing and serving Christ. He believed, however, that Christians should never slack off in their efforts to experience Christ fully and serve him faithfully.

To this end, Paul employed metaphors that could apply to either hunting or foot racing. With the goal of knowing Christ always before, Paul said “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” The word for “press on” (*diōkō*)

is derived from the same verb he used in v. 6 to describe how he had “pursued” (sometimes translated as “persecuted”) the church. It was often used to describe a hunter who resolutely pursued his quarry.

Paul, recognizing that he had not yet gained a full knowledge or experience of Christ, was like a hunter who did not turn aside to bemoan past mistakes or celebrate past victories, but focused entirely on what lay ahead (v. 13). Paul was focused fully on Christ.

With v. 13, Paul continued the same theme but shifted to an athletic metaphor, as he pressed on (using *diōkō* again) toward the goal – literally, the “goal-marker” that would gain him the prize he sought so earnestly.

And what was the prize Paul hoped to attain? He described it as “the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). The NRSV translation is interpretive, apparently assuming (as many commentators do) that Paul referred to his hope of heaven. The word for “heaven” is not present, however, but a word meaning “upward.” Thus, the phrase more literally speaks of “the upward calling of God.” Some have suggested that Paul was thinking of the Christian’s call to live on a higher plane, or that he had in mind the rewards ceremony at the Olympic games, when winners were called forward to be recognized.

Whatever the nuances of Paul’s memorable phrasing, his goal was clear: to know Christ as fully as Christ had known him. That, he believed, should be the goal of every believer. That, he knew, would require a focused effort that few would adopt without powerful encouragement.

Do we come anywhere close to Paul’s high aspirations? He felt called to a single-minded focus on becoming more like Christ. That may seem excessive to us – but should it? NfJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 10, 2022

Philippians 2:1-13

Living Mindfully

Somewhere around 10 percent of the world's people are left-handed, and I am among them. That hasn't always been popular: the English "sinister" comes from the Latin *sinistros*, for "left." *Gauche*, used to suggest unsophistication or clumsiness, is the French word for "left." The word "left" itself comes from the Anglo-Saxon *lyft*, which means "weak." During the Middle Ages, lefties were sometimes associated with the devil or accused of witchcraft.

Even so, we natural southpaws take some comfort in the knowledge that, since the body's motor controls are generally controlled by the opposite side of the brain, we can claim to be the only ones who are in their "right minds."

In his very personal letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul had a lot to say about being right-minded, though in a very different context. What does it mean to have the right mind for following Christ?

Have one mind ... (2:1-4)

Today's text, a favorite of many readers, demonstrates Paul's rhetorical and persuasive skill. In poetic, perhaps even hymnic language, the

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:4)

apostle pleads with the Philippians to overcome apparent divisions among themselves by uniting with a common mind, namely, the mind of Christ. 📌

In vv. 1-4, Paul carefully constructs an appeal for harmony that includes three sets of thoughts, each containing four units. The first of these, v. 1, consists of four clauses that appear to be conditional, but only to make Paul's appeal more forceful.

Paul reminds believers of how they have been blessed with "encouragement in Christ," "consolation from love," "sharing in the Spirit," and "compassion and sympathy."

The Apostle challenged those who know such fourfold blessings to respond in four related ways: He calls them to "make my joy complete" by being "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (v. 2).

The first and last responses both relate to the way we think, using the verb *phroneô*, one of Paul's favorite words. The opening "be of the same mind" could literally be translated "think the same," and the closing call to be "of one mind" means "the same thinking." Paul is not suggesting that church members become mental clones of each other and agree on every point, but that they orient their thinking toward harmonious service to Christ. It is not so much that they agree on all the same ideas, but that they share the same cooperative attitude. 📌

Believers can unite their think-

ing in common cause because they share the same love and are united in spirit: "being in full accord" translates *sumpsuchoi*, which combines "with" (*sum*) and "soul" (*psuche*) to mean something akin to "fellow-souled" or "united in spirit." A common love and a common spirit give rise to a common purpose, a common way of thinking.

Paul then pleads with the believers to demonstrate their loving attitude through mutual service and humility (vv. 3-4). Again, his appeal has four components. The first and third relate to what they should *not* do: they should not act from selfish ambition or conceit, or focus on their own interests. The second and fourth challenges explain what they should do: they *should* humbly regard others as better than themselves, and look out for the interests of others.

Readers may be troubled by Paul's admonition to "regard others as better than yourselves" (v. 3b), but Paul's concern is not with a qualitative assessment of competency or maturity, but a measure of importance. The word translated "better than" is the participle of a verb formed by combining "above" or "higher" (*huper*) and the verb of being (*echo*). To regard others as "being above" us is not to make a value judgment about either their competency or our own, but to consider their needs as more important than our own.

Even that nuance does not make the advice any easier to follow. We live in a culture largely defined by the mantra "Looking out for Number One." We've all had someone push into line ahead of us, as if assuming they are more important than us or their time

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is more valuable than ours. If we have learned what it is to live in community as followers of Christ, however, we have heard Jesus' insistence that those who would be great must learn to be servants, unselfishly loving others as he loved us.

What are some practical ways we might see this attitude being worked out within the fellowship of a church? How can the church adopt this approach toward its larger community?

How are we acting now to "not look after our own interests, but after the interests of others"? What are some ways we could do that more faithfully?

The mind of Christ ... (2:5-11)

Having called for harmonious love and self-giving humility, Paul grounds his appeal on the example of Christ as a model for emulation. Reverting again to a form of *phronein*, Paul calls the Philippians to think as Christ thought, to have the same selfless disposition toward others that Jesus modeled and instructed his disciples to follow. 📖

What follows in vv. 6-11 is so artfully arranged and carefully worded that scholars typically refer to it as a hymn, though without agreement as to whether Paul quoted it or wrote it. Arranging the text into symmetrical verses requires deleting a few phrases as later additions, however, and even then scholars disagree on how the text should be arranged.

The text moves in two stages. In the opening section (vv. 6-8), Christ acts to empty himself, take on human form, and live as a servant so obedient that he was willing to die a humiliating death on a cross. In the second part (vv. 9-11), God acts to exalt Jesus and give him the highest name of all.

Interpreters and theologians have long debated the precise meaning of these verses, but we need not worry

about every nuance. In some way, we are to understand that Christ was pre-existent and on equal standing with God, but he did not consider this position something to be grasped or held onto.

Rather, Christ was willing to "empty himself." Does this mean he stopped being divine? That he gave up divine attributes and powers? That he surrendered divine prerogatives? We cannot claim to understand every shade of meaning, but the result of Christ's "emptying" was the incarnation, Christ's coming to earth in human form. Jesus called himself the "son of man." He became susceptible to temptation, hunger, thirst, and every other desire known to humans. Yet, while Christ became "fully human," we believe he was also "fully divine."

In vv. 7-8, Paul insists that Christ did more than simply become human: he became a slave, a servant to others, obedient to the end. Paul's picture of Christ's earthly servitude that led to heavenly glory is not unlike Jesus' own instruction to his disciples, who struggled with each other for positions of leadership: "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44). 📖

None of Christ's followers, however, could pretend to contend for Jesus' position as the one who has a "name above every name" (v. 9). On the surface, this might appear to be the name "Jesus," for v. 10 says "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend ..." It is more likely, however, that the "name above every name" is not "Jesus" – a common earthly name that he already possessed – but "Lord." Paul goes on to say that all tongues will confess "that Jesus Christ is Lord" (v. 11).

The word *kurios* was commonly used in the Septuagint (the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the divine name Yahweh, commonly translated as "LORD" (all uppercase) to distinguish it from "*adonai*," which could also mean "Lord," but in a less personal sense.

Paul's declaration, whether quoting from a hymn or composing on his own, would have been encouraging, but also dangerous. "Jesus Christ is Lord" is often regarded as the earliest Christian confession – and is no doubt something the Philippian Christians already professed. That claim, however, ran squarely in opposition to Rome's political dogma that "Caesar is lord." This may have contributed to the oppression Paul hinted at in speaking of their opponents (1:28).

Obedient minds ... (2:12-13)

While v. 11 would be an ideal place to conclude this study, the lectionary text continues through the next two verses, where Paul begins a series of exhortations for the Philippians to follow Christ's example and live obedient lives. 📖

"Therefore" connects vv. 6-11 to the following section: It is because of the Philippians' devotion to Christ, the perfect model of humble obedience, that they should also demonstrate similar fidelity.

The NRSV and some other translations add the word "me" to v. 12, as if Paul refers to them obeying him, but the addition is unnecessary. The subject at hand is obedience to God, not to Paul.

Believers, inspired by Christ, are called to live in obedience *to* God and reverence *before* God, as they are empowered *by* God to live out their salvation in Christ. How are we doing?

NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 17, 2022

Luke 24:1-12

Living with Questions

Could there be a happier story than the one Christians celebrate on Easter Sunday? It is such a familiar account, retold multiple times every spring, and yet it remains fresh and inspiring.

Try to imagine it yet again. Feel the cool damp of dawn. Hear the chattering of birds in the shadows. Remember how they came, in the misty morning moonlight, to the garden with the rock-cut tomb. Up to the tomb they came, trembling with grief, these women who loved Jesus so. Mary Magdalene was there, striding purposefully ahead, and Joanna, and another Mary, and yet others behind them.

Laden with fragrant spices they came, myrrh and aloes and ointments made for the dead. Laden with heavy hearts they came to extend this one last kindness, to prepare the Lord's body for his everlasting rest.

This they did because they knew Jesus was dead, truly dead—not sleeping, not in a coma. The gospel writers take great pains to make sure we understand that Jesus was as dead as any man can be. And, so far as the women knew, so far as the men knew, so far as anyone in Jesus' world knew, death was final. So far as they knew, when the stone tomb itself had been

The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." (Luke 24:5)

worn away by the ravages of time, death would still be young and strong. ↓

A morning mystery

When the women arrived, Luke tells us, the massive stone disk that sealed it was no longer propped in place, but had been rolled to the side, and when they went to investigate, the tomb was empty: the body of Jesus was gone (vv. 1-3). ↓

Gone! One would think the women who clambered sorrowfully into the dark and chilly tomb would erupt from it with great rejoicing, but not one of the women said "Hallelujah, he is risen just as he told us!" or "I never doubted that he would rise again!" The story makes it clear they had not expected a resurrection: their whole purpose in visiting the tomb was not to see if Jesus was still there, but to prepare his body for permanent residence.

In Luke's story, not one of the women responded with a happy or hopeful thought. Instead, Luke says "they were perplexed" (v. 4). The word he used can mean "to be at a loss," or "to be bewildered." Had the tomb been robbed? Had the Romans removed Jesus' body? It's not surprising that confusion reigned.

And *then* comes the good news. Then comes the angel into the picture: not a young man as in Mark or one

angel as in Matthew, but two of them as Luke tells it — grand, shining figures in dazzling clothes who beamed into view before the women, driving them from perplexity to distress.

"They were terrified," Luke says, "and bowed their faces to the ground."

But that was before the angels spoke, before they heard those scintillating, fascinating, captivating words: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?" (vv. 5-7). ↓

And as they did remember, they dropped the heavy spices and ran from the garden as quickly as their sandaled feet could carry them. They rushed back to the place where the male disciples were hiding, breathless but bubbling with the good news. In voices still shaking and quaking, through lips still shivering and quivering, the women proclaimed: "He's not there! ... He is risen, just as he said! ... We saw angels!" (vv. 9-10). Or so we might imagine.

The men, though — the pragmatic, sensible men, the chosen apostolic men — did not believe them. Lost in their own grief and bewilderment, they thought the women had lost their minds. "But these words seemed to them an idle tale," Luke says (v. 11). The word he used describes foolishness or utter nonsense.

Surely the men wanted to believe, but how could they accept the word of women who babbled on about angels and an empty tomb? Surely they were delusional. Still, one of the men wanted to believe so fiercely that he had to see

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for himself – and so Peter ran from the room and sprinted to the tomb. The same Peter who had promised to die for Jesus and then denied him in a single night, the one whose name meant “Rock,” ran through the awakening streets to see if the stone door was indeed ajar and to see what was in the tomb – or not. When he found the garden deserted, he stooped and looked into the cool, dark chamber, seeing nothing but empty grave clothes lying in a deflated heap.

And how did he react? Peter turned and went back to the others, not running, not victorious, not even convinced that Jesus had risen. He went back puzzling, wondering, “amazed at what had happened” (v. 12). 📌

“Amazed,” Luke said. The word can mean marveling, wondering, surprised, astonished, stunned. Can you imagine how Peter was feeling, what he was thinking?

A dawning truth

Could there be a less triumphant way to tell such a victorious story? At first the women witnesses were “perplexed.” Then they were “terrified.” They proclaimed the good news only to hear the men accuse them of spreading nonsense. Peter went to check out their story, and could only shake his head, dumbfounded.

Even the earliest witnesses had a hard time believing that Jesus had truly risen from the dead. Modern folk may also have a hard time believing. Rational, enlightened people don’t like being perplexed, or terrified, or befuddled by thoughts of Jesus’ resurrection.

But there are good reasons to believe the resurrection is true. Think about it. Could the early church have arisen from nothing – and in the face of persecution – if there had been no resurrection? Can you imagine that Paul and other early believers would

have followed Christ to the point of dying for the sake of a wishful tale someone had made up?

For another thing, if we were going to invent a story about Jesus’ resurrection, wouldn’t we paint the disciples in a better light? Instead of showing them as perplexed and astonished and doubting, wouldn’t we have them accept the joyous news immediately and celebrate in triumph and sing “Christ the Lord is risen today, a-a-a-lle-lu-u-ia”?

No, if we were to concoct a story like this, we would never portray such forgetful disciples greeting Jesus with so much ambivalence. We would portray them as confidently expecting Jesus to rise, then gathering to greet him and to sing hosannas when he walked from the tomb. But the whole point of the stories as we have them is that even Jesus’ closest friends did not expect him to rise from the dead. They were as shocked as anyone. Jesus had to appear to them repeatedly just to pound it into their skulls and their spirits that he really had arisen from the dead.

But when Jesus convinced them, they stayed convinced. They came out of hiding and into the light. They changed their speech from shameful denial to courageous confession. The same disciples who were so defeated in Luke 24 became the ones of whom Luke later said “With great power the apostles gave witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33).

It’s hard to imagine any way to account for that change except that the gospel writers were telling the truth – that Christ did in fact rise from the dead, that he has conquered death, that his reign is ever-living and everlasting.

The earliest Christians certainly did come to believe it. When Peter preached

his first sermon, he proclaimed “This Jesus has God raised up, whereof we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:32).

What the Apostle Paul described as his “first gospel” was an account of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-8).

When Paul and his companions called for a confession of faith, it was this: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:8-9).

Modern mornings

In our own day, we remember that first Easter every time we gather on Sunday to worship God. The Jews worshiped from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. The gospel testimony that Jesus was raised on “the first day of the week” had such an impact on the early Christians that they began to speak of it as “the Lord’s day” (1 Cor. 16:1, Rev. 1:10), and that is the day they chose to worship the God whose love was revealed through Jesus Christ.

The tradition has continued through the years, and today every Sunday service is a reminder that Jesus was raised on the first day of the week. Every congregation that gathers on Sunday testifies to the belief that the resurrection is real, that Jesus lives on. 📌

Reading the Easter story is more than something we do to remember. The story also demands that we ask ourselves if there is evidence of the Lord’s resurrection in *our* lives. Christ was not simply raised from death to walk on the earth again. The scriptures insist that Christ, through the Spirit, not only lives, but lives in us, and the way we live should be an ongoing testimony to Christ’s life-transforming resurrection in us.

And that’s a thought worthy of long meditation. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 24, 2022

Rev. 1:1-8

A Hopeful Promise

Do you love the Book of Revelation, or avoid it like the plague? The Apocalypse of John inspires both responses. It was written to both challenge and encourage believers facing severe persecution, but its message is shrouded in metaphors that leave it open to multiple (but not necessarily responsible) interpretations. ↓

Revelation can't be read in the same way as other New Testament books. It is not a historical account, as in the Gospels and Acts, or a personal letter, similar to the epistles. Though framed by elements common to first-century letters (a greeting and blessing [1:4-6] followed by the main body of the letter [1:7-22:20] and a closing [22:21]), the "body" of the letter is very different from other New Testament writings. (See the online "Hardest Question" for more.)

The book belongs to a literary genre known as "apocalyptic," a particular type of "crisis literature" that emerged during desperate times when traditional beliefs ran afoul of present reality and a new worldview was needed to make sense of life. When one has always believed God is both in control and concerned for God's people, but the horrifying situation on the ground leads one to think God has gone missing,

"Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him ..." (Rev. 1:7a)

one possible explanation is that the present age is ending and God is about to vanquish all enemies and bring in a new age to vindicate those who are suffering and oppressed.

Revelation fits clearly into the apocalyptic pattern with the exception that its author does not write in the name of an ancient hero, as was often done. He identifies himself as a man named John. Longstanding tradition holds that he lived in Ephesus before being exiled to Patmos. ↓

Since apocalypses arise from times of persecution or crisis, they rely on metaphorical language and images that would be known to believers but not to their enemies. Unfortunately, that also makes them a mystery to modern readers. Failing to understand this, many readers regard Revelation as a programmatic text designed to predict the end times in graphic detail. Combining numbers and symbols from the books of Daniel and Revelation, they seek to relate various characters to the current day and predict a spiral of events leading up to a final world war centered at Armageddon and the resulting end of the age. ↓

This interpretation fails to recognize that the book was initially intended for a particular time (the late first century) and a particular people (the believers in Asia Minor) who faced a particular set of circumstances (persecution by the Romans, both real and perceived). It also fails to appreciate

the unique characteristics of apocalyptic literature. ↓

Understanding Revelation is less about decoding information and more about sharing John's experience of an almighty God who rules over all things and all times. For this reason, reading passages aloud and sensing the power of the imagery can sometimes be more helpful than trying to dissect inscrutable puzzles. ↓

The purpose of books such as Revelation is not so much to forecast future events as to assure believers that God is in control of the future.

A message for a prophet (vv. 1-3)

John begins his testimony by putting readers (or hearers) on notice that what follows is no ordinary writing: it is a revelation (*apocalypsis*) both from and about Jesus Christ. ↓

The purpose of the revelation, John says, is to show Christ's servants "what must soon take place." This may bring us pause when we stop to realize that the epoch-changing events John spoke about did not take place "soon," unless one rationalizes that "soon" in God's time may seem like forever in our time. ↓

John apparently believed that the persecution of Christians was increasing, evil was ramping up its influence, and the only solution would be for God to bring about cataclysmic, world-changing events – soon. That nearly 2,000 years have passed without such events does not change the core message of the book: Christians are challenged, in whatever circumstances, to remain faithful to God. As Mitchell

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Reddish puts it, “The importance of John’s message lies not in chronology, but in theology” (*Revelation*, Smyth & Helwys Commentary [2001], 33).

John claims to have received his revelations from Christ or a direct representative (1:12-18), and to have written a faithful testimony to the words he heard and “even to all that he saw” (v. 2). This is a reminder that John’s revelations came in a series of visions, symbolic experiences that often stretch language to and beyond its limits.

Grace for the churches (vv. 4-6)

The first two verses serve as an extended title of the book, after which John offers a blessing for those who read aloud and hear its “words of the prophecy” and keep them (v. 3). Few people in John’s time would have a personal copy of the book, but they would have heard it read, appreciating the dramatic nature of its content. John’s contemporaries would not have copies to parse and analyze in an attempt to construct a timetable for the second coming; they would simply be overwhelmed by the imagery and reminded that God is Lord of the present and the future, the living and the dead.

As mentioned above, the introduction and conclusion of the apocalypse have the form of a letter, and in v. 4 we find the address: John writes to “the seven churches that are in Asia,” the western part of what used to be called Asia Minor (now Turkey), near the coast of the Aegean Sea. 📍

To the churches, John extends grace from God, from “the seven spirits who are before his throne,” and from Jesus Christ. The reference to God as the one “who was and who is and who is to come” is repeated in 1:8 and 4:8.

Some readers think of the seven spirits as seven archangels who do God’s bidding, but it is probably best to think of the seven spirits as a rough equivalent of the Holy Spirit, of God’s divine presence at work in the world and in those churches (compare the reference to seven horns, seven eyes, and seven spirits in Rev. 5:6, which recalls Zech. 4:2 and 10). Seven is an important number in religious symbolism, and is the most significant of several numbers that play important roles in Revelation. Three, 10, 12, and 24 also figure prominently.

John describes Christ as “the faithful witness,” “the firstborn of the dead,” “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” and the one “who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (vv. 5-6a).

This latter imagery is drawn from Exod. 19:6, in which God promised to make Israel a “kingdom of priests.” Other Exodus themes will follow: the Roman emperor is similar to a new Pharaoh who must be deposed through plagues, signs and wonders so that God’s people may pass safely through the sea. Christ, as ruler over all other kings, could accomplish this. 📍

Good news for believers (vv. 7-8)

Apocalyptic literature, as we have noted, grew from troubled times when believers perceived their position as being so dire and the world so evil that their only hope was for God to intervene in history and usher in a new age. John saw his era as such a time, when the best news he could offer was that Christ would soon be “coming with the clouds” so that “every eye will see him” (v. 7).

This mental picture, though immensely popular in hymnody and

pulpit rhetoric, should be understood as a metaphor rather than a specific description of the manner of Christ’s return.

The image of Jesus sky-boarding through the heavens on a billowy cloud is appealing, but such theatrics would only be visible within a limited horizon. Like all people of his day, John envisioned a flat earth that would allow all people a common plane of vision to the highest reaches of the sky. The point of the metaphor is that when Christ returns, in some fashion everyone on earth will know it, friend and foe alike. 📍

John’s double affirmation (literally “Yes! Amen!”) is reinforced by one of the few statements directly attributed to God in the Apocalypse. God self-identifies, according to John, as “the Alpha and Omega ... who was and is and is to come, the Almighty.”

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. When John uses the same expression in 21:6 (attributed to God) and 22:13 (attributed to Christ), he adds “the first and the last.” This expression, a literary device called a “merism,” uses the beginning and the end to indicate everything in between, an artistic way of insisting that God’s presence pervades all times and all places.

What does this curious text have to say for modern believers who don’t live under persecution, but who do face daily difficulties and the constant temptation to assimilate fully to a culture that has no place for God?

When we face violence, poverty, terrorism, and other threats that seem to make the world a desperately forlorn place, we too can trust in a God whose rule is supreme, and who offers the hope of a brighter future where goodness prevails – but we still work for it now. **NFJ**

SERMON LISTENING

Observations from the other side of the pulpit

BY BRUCE SALMON

After I retired from the pastorate in 2018, my wife Linda and I had to figure out where to go on Sunday mornings. We served Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Maryland for 33 years, and the decision of where to worship had not come up before.

Occasionally we would seek out a place to worship when we were away on vacation, but this was the first time in our married life we had to find a new church home.

Three of my best friends were pastors of nearby churches. But I wasn't going to choose one over the other two! So, on the first Sunday after I retired, we picked a neutral site — The First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C.

It was a bit of a distance from our home in suburban Maryland to the church on 16th Street in our nation's capital. But we could take the subway downtown, and the church was only a three-block walk from the Dupont Circle Metro station.

I had met Pastor Julie Pennington-Russell earlier and had heard her preach at a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly, but we did not know her well.

Our primary reason for choosing to worship there was James Langley, a former executive director of the D.C. Baptist Convention and a friend for many years. He had given my name to the pastor search committee in Bowie in 1984, without my knowing it.

He and his successor, Jere Allen, once invited me to join them for a round of golf. It was the beginning of a group of minister friends who would play on most Thursdays at courses throughout the D.C. area.

Our friendship extended beyond golf. Linda and I would meet Jim and his wife

Jean at the National Gallery of Art where she was employed and volunteered as a docent. They would invite us to view the latest exhibit and then join them for lunch in the National Gallery dining room.

Tragically, Jean died unexpectedly in 2002. Jim asked me to give the eulogy for her funeral. Linda and I continued to meet Jim for exhibits at the National Gallery and for lunch. Eventually he gave up golf, but would often call me on Fridays to see how our Thursday golf group outings had gone.

So Linda and I went to worship at First Baptist because Jim was a member there. We sat with him that first Sunday, and we continued to sit with him in worship every Sunday after that.

Sadly, Jim suffered a brief illness and died in 2018. He had asked me to give the eulogy for his memorial service, which was held on a Saturday at First Baptist. The next day we joined the church, in part, in tribute to him.

What we learned during our first six months of attending worship at First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., is that Julie Pennington-Russell is an excellent preacher. She is thoughtful, articulate, and her manner of delivery is so natural that you almost forget you are listening to a sermon.

Julie preaches on texts from the Lectionary. That itself is a bit of a challenge. One year during my pastorate at Village I tried preaching from the Lectionary. Some weeks none of the selected texts spoke to me, and I struggled to create a

meaningful sermon.

Pastor Emily Holladay, my successor at Village, also preaches from Lectionary texts. During the pandemic shutdown, when all worship became virtual, we would listen to Julie most Sundays online and then listen to Emily.

Not surprisingly, they often preached from the same texts. It was interesting to hear their different approaches to interpreting the same passages of scripture.

Emily is also an excellent preacher. She has not been at it as long as Julie has, but she grew up listening to another excellent preacher, her father, Jim Holladay.

He and I have been close friends since seminary days, and it was an amazing coincidence (dare I say, providential) when my former church called Emily to succeed me as pastor.

In addition to hearing Julie and Emily preach, I've heard some other excellent preachers in the four years since I retired from the pastorate. Julie has invited some renowned guest preachers to our church: Tracy Hartman, professor of homiletics at the former Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond; Bill Leonard, founding dean of Wake Forest University School of Divinity; and Kenyatta Gilbert, professor of homiletics at Howard University School of Divinity.

Also, Amanda Tyler, executive director of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty; Paul Wallace, author and professor at Agnes Scott College; author and preacher Diana Butler Bass; and Chanequa Walker-Barnes, professor of practical theology at Columbia Theological Seminary; among others.

Having heard sermons from many



“Having heard sermons from many different preachers over the past four years, I have made some observations from the other side of the pulpit as a sermon listener.”

different preachers over the past four years, I have made some observations from the other side of the pulpit as a sermon listener.

First, delivery is important. Speaking slowly, distinctly, with proper enthusiasm, inflection, animation and eye contact, is important. It's not enough to write a good sermon. How the sermon is delivered orally and visually can mean the difference between a compelling and a boring message.

Second, the selected scripture text is important. That is one of the limitations of preaching from the Lectionary. Not every text is of equal value.

Lectionary editors know that. Yet sometimes I question their selection of scripture passages. In the interest of covering a wide range of biblical texts, sometimes I think they err on the side of including a multiplicity of passages rather than the most important passages.

Third, moving from what the text says to what the text means is important. Exegesis is not enough. Of course, the preacher should explain what the text says. But the sermon is more than an explanation of the

text; the sermon is also an interpretation of the text.

The sermon should seek to connect the text with life today, offering possible applications of the text to our present context.

Fourth, the sermon should be memorable. In other words, some aspects of the sermon should help the listener to remember what the sermon was about. That is where storytelling can be an important technique.

Stories can help illustrate what the scripture passage might mean for us. Too often, I have listened carefully to a sermon and then found myself struggling to remember anything about it, much less apply it to my own life.

Fifth, the sermon should not be too long. In most cases, 15 or 20 minutes is enough. Presenting more ideas does not necessarily produce a better message.

Sixth, it's okay to include personal accounts — so long as the preacher is not the “star” of the sermon. The aim of such personal accounts is not to demonstrate

what a great person the preacher is, but to provide some points of contact that the listeners can apply to themselves.

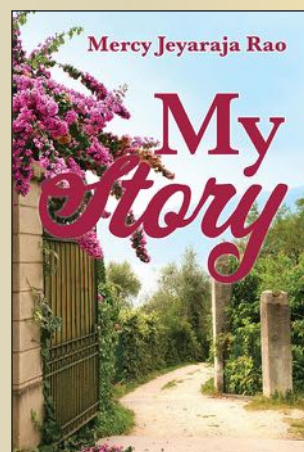
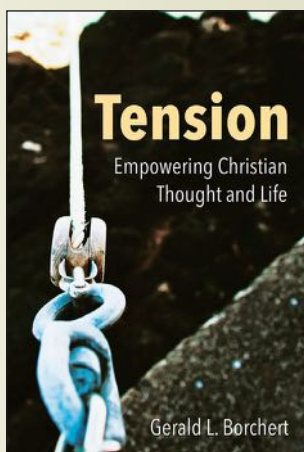
Frankly, when the preacher shares something from her or his own story, I feel a sense of empathy and connection.

Seventh, listening to sermons is just as important as preaching sermons. As a pastor, I took my job as a preacher very seriously; but listening to sermons is serious business as well. Listening to sermons can be an impetus for Christian growth and community and service.

I still deliver sermons as a guest preacher, either in my current church or in other churches. But sermon preacher is not my primary role anymore. Being a sermon listener is one of my primary roles now. And sermon listening is important too. **NFJ**

-Bruce Salmon is the author of five (and counting) books published by Nurturing Faith, including Preaching for the Long Haul and four volumes in the Spelunking Scripture series: Christmas, The Letters of Paul, Acts and the General Epistles of the New Testament, and Easter.

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George W. Bush (2001–2009): Part 2

By Bruce Gourley

“I don’t do nuance,” President George W. Bush, early in his presidency, told long-time Delaware U.S. Senator Joe Biden.

When Bush chose to go to war against Iraq, based on a flimsy rationale and despite widespread misgivings on the part of many Americans and world leaders, he shut out of his mind the possibility that he might have made the wrong decision.

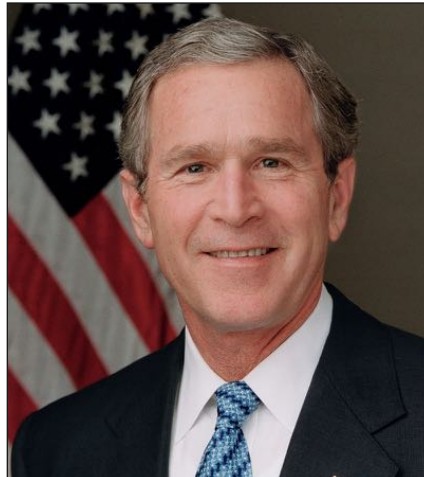
“Bush rejects nuance not because he’s mentally incapable of engaging with it but because he has chosen to disavow it,” Bush biographer Jacob Weisburg later reflected.

MORAL CERTAINTY

“Applying a crude religious lens that clarifies all decisions as moral choices rather than complicated trade-offs helps him fend off the deliberation and uncertainty he identifies with his father,” Weisburg added.

Former president George H.W. Bush’s failure to bring an end to Saddam Hussein in the first Iraq war certainly figured on the mind of his son. Key to the junior Bush’s hoped-for success as president was his alliance with conservative white evangelicals, Christian nationalists who conflated “Christian” with American triumphalism in baptizing the second war in Iraq.

“Evangelical politics is a subject on which he has exercised his intellect,” Weisburg concluded of George W. Bush’s



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

political version of Christianity, “and perhaps the only one on which he qualifies as an expert.”

Having expertly rallied Christian nationalists to his side in going to war with Iraq — or perhaps the opposite, Christian nationalists having pulled a willing president to their side — Bush cemented a dark, zero-sum alliance that would last for decades.

Political scientist Eric Uslaner of the University of Maryland described Bush’s Christian nationalism ideology as “part of a worldview: If you’re not with me, you’re against me.”

Echoing Weisburg, in the election year of 2004, Uslaner described Bush’s “born again evangelical Christianity” as absent “too many areas of gray” and exhibited as a moral certainty “that makes it difficult for him to reach out to the other side.”

Praying daily, studying the Bible and believing himself called of God to wage war on God’s enemies foreign and domestic, Bush, while dropping bombs in Iraq, year after year as president set about attacking the constitutional wall of separation between church and state.

Bending America toward theocracy, Bush ironically sought the very form of fundamentalist religious governance upon which he was waging war in the Islamic Middle East in the wake of 9/11.

THEOCRACY

“[M]y style, my focus, and many of the issues I talk about...are reinforced by my religion,” Bush declared of his approach to politics. Only one prior president, Democrat Jimmy Carter, had voiced similar convictions.

But whereas Carter’s religious convictions were derived from a concept of an inclusive God, Bush projected a narrow, authoritarian God. And while Carter made a point of not letting his personal, longtime conservative evangelical faith dictate social policy, Bush was eager to make America more Christian.

“I have faith that faith will work” in solving America’s problems, Bush declared, as his faith-based initiatives channeled more and more federal money to religious organizations, primarily conservative Christian churches and entities.

Critics noted the lack of evidence that faith-based social services were more effective in uplifting Americans than secular organizations. Bush ignored the doubters. Criticized throughout his presidency for openly mingling church and state, Bush refused to own up to his constitutional violations.

Domestically, Bush pleased conservative Christians by appointing anti-abortionists to key cabinet positions and decreasing funding for family planning services and contraception. Disingenuously, his administration spread evangelicals’ false message that contraceptives were ineffective.

However, in limiting access to contraceptives, Bush’s presidency failed to reduce

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

abortions, whereas abortions had dropped dramatically during Clinton's presidency due to the widespread availability of contraceptives.

Bush's abortion policies stemmed from a so-called "biblical worldview" that in reality had little to do with the Bible. Biblically speaking, life begins with one's first breath (Gen. 2:7). In addition, Numbers 5:11-31 gives a prescription for inducing abortions, while Exodus 21:22-25 equates a fetus as something other than a person.

Long after those ancient times, traditional Christian teaching, since largely forgotten, taught that life begins at "quickening" — the first movement of a fetus in a mother's womb, indicative of the "soul" having arrived in the developing fetus.

Not only did Bush and his conservative evangelical allies ignore biblical teaching and Christian tradition, but also science, which offered no definitive answer as to the point at which a fetus becomes a person.

On the other hand, the ancient biblical worldview did inform the true rationale behind conservative evangelicals' anti-abortion ideology: the subjugation of women, necessary in their minds to make America Christian.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Even as Bush celebrated his anti-abortion achievements, he elicited conservatives' approval by withdrawing U.S. support for the United Nations' efforts to prohibit discrimination against women. He also reduced federal funding for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, crippling efforts to investigate workplace discrimination against women, and tried but failed to shut down the Labor Department's efforts to inform women of their workplace rights.

Bush's thinly veiled attempts to subjugate noncompliant women in private and public life also focused on proper marriage, a subject his predecessor had weighed in on. Although an evangelical like Bush, Clinton's politics had been flexible.

In 1996 Clinton had sided with conservatives in signing the Defense of Marriage Act passed by Congress, legislation pushed by Christian nationalists to thwart growing

popular sentiment to allow homosexuals to wed.

Initially during his first presidential run Bush had recoiled at conservative evangelical hostilities toward gays, declaring: "I think it is bad for Republicans to be kicking gays." But he found common cause with his religious base on the issue of gay marriage.

Voicing approval of the Clinton-era anti-gay marriage legislation — which deemed marriage as "the legal union between one man and one woman as man and wife" — Bush insisted that mere legislation did not go far enough. During the 2004 election season as he ran for a second presidential term, Bush called for a Federal Marriage Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would permanently thwart the "aggressive judicial assault on traditional marriage."

Pleasing his base, Bush made a speech for the proposed constitutional amendment. "The union of a man and a woman is the most enduring human institution, honoring — honored and encouraged in all cultures and by every religious faith," he said.

"Ages of experience have taught humanity that the commitment of a husband and wife to love and to serve one another promotes the welfare of children and the stability of society," he continued. "Marriage cannot be severed from its cultural, religious and natural roots without weakening the good influence of society. Government, by recognizing and protecting marriage, serves the interests of all."

Publicly, Bush and his evangelical allies referred to "traditional marriage," but within the enclave of Christian nationalism proponents often equated "biblical marriage" with "traditional marriage." In reality, neither term was truthful.

In the Bible, marriages were arranged, polygamy was common, women were the legal property of their husbands, and men were allowed to divorce their wives for most any reason and sell their daughters into slavery (Exod. 21:7).

In reality, conservative evangelicals had no intention of returning to biblical marriage and family values in their entirety. Instead, they advocated for a modern, updated version of an ancient patriarchal worldview that broadly subjected women to male dominance, absent — at least

publicly — the Bible's most odious expressions of female oppression.

DOUBLE DOWN

Still soaking in a widespread public sentiment of solidarity following 9/11, President Bush easily won reelection in 2004 against Democratic candidate John Kerry, a military veteran whom some Republicans slandered over his heroic service to the country, and a quiet Catholic who refused to put his religious faith front and center on the campaign trail.

Unleashed from the need to seek another term, Bush doubled down on his Christian nationalist crusade of steering America toward a theocracy.

In his second inaugural address and with 9/11 still fresh in the public mind, the president reiterated his commitment to ending tyranny, hatred, and violence abroad and furthering the spread of democracy. He made many references to God, including, "Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it." And he spoke of "the unfinished work of American freedom."

But for Bush, American "freedom" meant dismantling the federal government as a protector of Americans' rights, thus leaving "every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny." Bush envisioned an America detached from federal care and protection of citizens, and grounded upon "private character," the "governing of self," and ancient religious dogma.

Referencing the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Quran, Bush pointed Americans to "ideals of justice and conduct that are the same yesterday, today, and forever."

Unsaid was that the U.S. had long ago rejected many of those ancient religious ideals shared by Abrahamic religions, including human slavery, male ownership of women and theocratic rule. Unstated was an acknowledgment that Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount ran counter to the Old Testament's partial portrait of God as authoritarian and warmongering, a God who was anything but — in Bush's words — the "Author of Liberty" for all.

Reflecting his ability to frame freedom within an authoritarian construct, mere weeks after his inaugural address Bush went to work on abolishing senior citizens' financial safety net of Social Security. In place of the FDR-initiated program, Bush proposed replacing seniors' guaranteed retirement income with "voluntary personal retirement accounts" invested in stocks and bonds.

For conservatives who despised government's role in providing for the basic needs of lesser-advantaged citizens, defunding Social Security — a retirement annuity program of guaranteed income jointly funded by employee and employer taxes and administered by the federal government — was a political holy grail.

Disdainful of the federal government's generations-long alleviation of poverty among aged Americans, ideological opponents of the program — including much of corporate America — advocated for social Darwinistic individual "freedom" in which the strong and wealthy prevailed over the undeserving weak and powerless.

But Bush's ideological Social Security gambit proved to be a massive miscalculation. Faced with the choice of a guaranteed financial safety net in retirement or the prospect of retirement with no safety net, middle- and lower-class Americans made their displeasure known. Deluged with constituents' angry phone calls and correspondence, Republican and Democrat congressional leaders refused to support Bush's proposed privatization of Social Security. The effort was dead by October 2005.

In its wake, the failure of Bush's privatized Social Security plan disappointed many wealthy business owners who would have paid less in payroll taxes under the plan.

SOUL BATTLE

A decade later multi-millionaire tech entrepreneur and Christian nationalist Greg Gianforte summarized the political and religious ideology that still fueled some ideological opponents of Social Security.

"There's nothing in the Bible that talks about retirement," Gianforte said in

a 2015 address at fundamentalist Montana Bible College. "And yet it's been an accepted concept in our culture today." But "Nowhere does [the Bible] say, 'Well, he was a good and faithful servant, so he went to the beach.' It doesn't say that anywhere."

"The example I think of is Noah," Gianforte continued. "How old was Noah when he built the ark? 600. He wasn't, like, cashing Social Security checks; he wasn't hanging out; he was working. So, I think we have an obligation to work. The role we have in work may change over time, but the concept of retirement is not biblical."

In the wake of his unpopular opposition to Social Security, paired with the ongoing and increasingly troublesome war in Iraq, Bush's popularity plunged. Polls indicated that about two-thirds of voters disapproved of his presidency, while a smaller majority believed he should be impeached if, in fact, he had lied about his reasons for going to war in Iraq.

As Bush's claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction increasingly failed to hold up to scrutiny, in the fall of 2006 Democrats gained control of both the House and the Senate.

Bush's false Iraq narrative, it seemed to some, had been a cover for his personal ambitions. Mere months after American troops had set foot in Iraq in 2003, it had become rather obvious that control of Iraq's oil wells was of utmost concern to Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, both oilmen-turned-politicians.

From the moment they had taken America's highest offices, Bush and Cheney had dreamed of American oil companies profiting from Iraq's oil fields. The events of 9/11 provided an opening to begin executing their plans. Financial accounting of Iraqi oil sales became murky, and by 2005 some \$9 billion in revenue had somehow gone missing.

Even as the Bush administration's deceptions increasingly soured the general public on the trumped-up-war, white evangelical Christians remained enthusiastic. However, American capitalistic opportunities in the Middle East represented but part of the nationalistic support for the war.

One of their own, Gen. William Boykin, highly placed as Deputy Undersecretary for Defense Intelligence in the Bush administration, spoke for many. In public lectures in 2003, Boykin revealed the Christian nationalistic nature of far-right evangelicals.

America was a Christian nation with a Christian army, led by God's chosen man [Bush], the general enthused. In the Middle East, America's godly army was fighting against the satanic forces of radical Islamists.

Acknowledging that in 2000 "George Bush was not elected by a majority of voters in the United States," Boykin declared: "He was appointed by God; he's in the White House because God put him there."

Speaking to a Southern Baptist evangelism conference at First Baptist Church of Daytona Beach, Florida, Boykin asserted that God had a plan for America.

"The battle this nation is in is a spiritual battle; it is a battle for our soul. And the enemy is a guy called Satan ... Satan wants to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army."

Boykin was far from alone in his views. Some 77 percent of white evangelicals in 2003 felt the same way, approving of the Iraq war. Three years later and despite revelations of Bush's deceit, their enthusiasm was barely diminished, standing at 68 percent.

RISING NATIONALISM

Perceptive observers within and without evangelicalism noticed the dramatic rise of Christian Nationalism during the Bush years. Evangelical historian George Marsden, in the 2006-published second edition of his classic *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, put his finger on the pulse of a "militant" religious fundamentalism as expressed in early 21st-century, white evangelicalism that treated the U.S. with such reverence that America became "an agency used by God in literal warfare against the forces of evil."

As Marsden lamented the militarization of evangelicalism that Boykin celebrated, conservative Christian Lawrence M. Vance, a Bible translator specializing in

A picture of the Orlando Sentinel's 9/11 cover story. Image by Aiden Bartos.



the King James Bible and an opponent of the Iraq war, condemned Christian support of the war as opposition to Islam.

Deeming Bush's war "an unholy alliance between the evangelical Christians and the military," and "spiritual adultery," he criticized conservative Christians who "are in bed with the conservative wing of the Republican Party."

Political journalist and analyst Ed Kilgore, meanwhile, offered similar observations, describing "the Christian soldier enthusiasm of the George W. Bush administration" embodied in "evangelical commanders" sending "tanks adorned with crosses and insults to Islam into battle in Iraq."

Yet when Iraqi Muslims responded with sectarian violence against their Christian neighbors, American forces did nothing to protect Iraqi Christians.

Lee Quinby, professor of American Studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, in 2003 offered his thoughts on Bush's invasion of Iraq.

"What I hear is a holy trinity of militarism, masculinism and messianic zeal," he said. "It does follow the logic of apocalyptic thought, which has a religious base."

Bush, he observed, "plays up the vulnerability we feel because of terrorism or Saddam Hussein and then accentuates the military as the assurance that our helplessness will be transformed." Quinby deemed this mindset "dangerous because it prepares a nation for war without thinking about the impact on civilians and on the U.S. soldiers."

But was Bush's Christianized warmongering isolated from domestic policy? Abbot Gleason, a historian of totalitarianism, described Bush's "imperial foreign policy" as necessitating massive federal financing in the wake of the president's tax cuts for the rich. Collectively the policies served to thwart liberalism and were "aimed at starving the welfare state."

Ideology undergirded Bush's presidency, observed Klaus Milich, a scholar of modernism and post-modernism in the Western world. The Bush administration took the form of "religious resistance against the secularization process in America" represented in pluralism, human rights and scientific knowledge.

Essentially "fundamentalist conservatism," Bush's Christian nationalism "resents any rational explanation of history and the universe at large," said Milich. "The only

explanation they accept is that of the Bible, which to them foretells in detail the course of human history and the universe at large."

Like Islamic extremists, Christian nationalists were waging an existential, and often violent, war against the "other." Islamic religious nationalists attacked a perceived ungodly America on 9/11, and Christian religious nationalists in Bush's Iraq war led the charge against perceived satanic Islam.

From the same worldview both groups of religious nationalists, each ideologically rooted in a construct of an authoritarian deity, self-perceived themselves as God's agents in an eschatological endgame for dominion over the world.

For Christian nationalists, ultimate victory would be predicated upon America's protection of God's kingdom in the Middle East (the Holy Land of Israel) from Muslims and banishment of secularism in the United States.

For Islamic nationalists, the defeat of western secularism would precede the earth's forced "total surrender to the will of God" (the meaning of the word "Islam"). Neither extremist ideology represented the majority of either religious group who believed in voluntary faith.

But amid the ascendancy of extremist religion and in a military prison in Iraq far removed from the public eye, America's crusading Christian soldiers in a self-perceived holy battle against satanic Islam soon went too far, obviously, for most Americans.

Not content to merely defeat the enemy on the battlefield, U.S. military personnel early in the war engaged in war crimes, according to the findings of a 2004 military inquiry, The Taguba Report, officially titled *US Army 15-6 Report of Abuse of Prisoners in Iraq*.

Americans first got wind of the unsavory situation when CBS News published photographs of the abuses in April of that year. The Bush administration dismissed the incidents as isolated and not reflective of U.S. policy. But gradually through the detective work of organizations such as the U.S. Human Rights Network, the truth of the American military's systematic torture of Iraqi prisoners became apparent.

Bush, it turns out, in the aftermath of 9/11 had signed off on special interrogation methods for acquiring intelligence information from suspected Islamic terrorists, a practice carried over into the Iraq War. And by 2008, with "waterboarding" in particular — a type of simulated drowning, one of many torture techniques deployed by the U.S. military — revealed to the public, Bush was on the defensive.

"There is no longer any doubt as to whether the current [Bush] administration has committed war crimes. The only question that remains to be answered is whether those who ordered the use of torture will be held to account," declared Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba in June 2008 during Bush's final year in office, effectively securing the legacy of God's chosen president as that of a war criminal condemned by the United Nations.

Again came calls for Bush's removal from office, the U.S. House by a wide margin referring articles of impeachment to the Judiciary Committee, where the charges languished. For his part, Bush — following his presidency — remained defiant.

Saddam Hussein, after all, had been

executed in 2006 by a then newly-installed, American-allied Iraqi government. When asked in 2010 if he was right to deploy enhanced interrogation techniques deemed war crimes by the Geneva Convention and resulting in congressional articles of impeachment, the former president replied succinctly and without reservation: "Damn right."

DOMINIONISM

A president and a man with absolute moral certainty even in the face of a lack of evidence, Bush often reflected Christian nationalists' warmongering ideology sharply honed in response to 9/11. But there was much more to the movement, as Michelle Goldberg, at the time a senior writer for Salon, documented in her 2006, Bush-era volume, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*.

Diving deeply into Christian Nationalism, Goldberg's popular book publicly exposed a movement devoted to forcing this God upon America. Actors within the ideologically driven movement included far-right pastors, political action committees, homeschool groups and judges.

Secularism was the enemy, and theocracy the goal. The strategy ultimately consisted of subduing all expressions of secularism — science, public schools, entertainment, business, government, culture, reality — and reforming the American landscape into a conservative religious enclave similar to that of some Islamic theocracies in the Middle East, including the death penalty for LGBTQ persons and adulterers.

In formal (and insider) terms, this authoritarian theology and worldview was known as "Christian Dominionism."

Emerging from 1970s-birthing "Christian Reconstructionism" — a worldview that God is ruler over the world and human reason is the existential enemy of God — Dominionism or "kingdom now" theology posited that Christians must take over the world in preparation for the return of Christ.

In order to defeat satanic humanism, inclusive democracy in America must be abolished and theocracy implemented. In

Goldberg's words, in Dominionist theology Christians "have a God-given right to rule," an "entire alternative reality" that was "present under Bush."

Jeff Sharlet, another journalist covering Christian extremism, observed that "What a secular left critic might describe as some kind of imperialism, a Christian nationalist might describe as God's will."

With his personal faith void of nuance and doubt, Bush freely deployed political deception to advance God's will in the form of extremist Christian Dominionism. Even as he publicly messaged interfaith religious harmony post 9/11, Bush behind the scenes and allied with Christian nationalists prepared for a religious war against Muslims in the Middle East to defeat Satan and gain control of oil fields.

In Bush's telling, he was called of God to fulfill "a divine plan that supersedes all human plans," the very world construct of Dominionism.

"Some worry that Bush is confusing genuine faith with nationalist ideology," a *Christianity Today* article noted in the early days of the Iraq war.

By the end of his presidency, Bush's collective wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, both continuing quagmires for America, left him highly unpopular except for Christian nationalists. Bush's God, it turned out, was much less powerful than the president had believed.

His dreams of global military dominion unrealized, Bush left Washington D.C. in a state of disarray internationally and at home, the latter in the form of the Great Recession — the greatest economic collapse since the Great Depression. But Bush's Dominionist religious legacy remained in the increasingly radicalized Republican Party.

Under Bush and for the first time in history, a theocratic mindset had obtained insider power within the inner sanction of the federal government. By the time of his departure, the tentacles of Christian theocracy were intertwined afar in the nation's Middle East foreign policy, and inwardly at home chipping away at the U.S. Constitution. [NFJ](#)

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BAD FAITH

A conversation with
Randall Balmer
about the origins
and ongoing of the
Religious Right

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Historian Randall Balmer teaches religion at Dartmouth College and is the author of numerous books including *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America* and *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, which was made into an award-winning series for PBS.

An Episcopal priest, Balmer was raised in the Evangelical Free Church of America as the son of a pastor. Following his education in evangelical institutions, Balmer earned a doctorate in religion from Princeton University.

For 27 years he taught religious history at Columbia University and was visiting professor for four years at Yale Divinity School.

Currently, Balmer is writing a biography of the late Republican politician Mark O. Hatfield, a Baptist and strong advocate for religious liberty, who for 30 years represented Oregon in the U.S. Senate. The first chapter of the book-in-writing, said Balmer, is titled: “We Need More Baptists.”

The conversation that follows — about Balmer’s recent book, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (2021, Eerdmans) — has been edited for clarity and length.

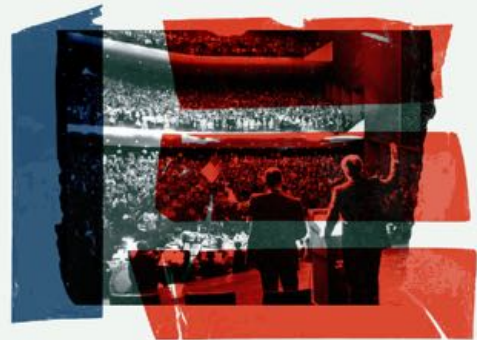
NFJ: Let’s start with your revealing that abortion was not the central issue — or an issue at all — in the formation of the Religious Right. I guess the big question for many people is why does that make a difference?

RB: Well, I think it makes a difference because the origins of any movement are important. The analogy I use in *Bad Faith* is that you can build this beautiful building with all sorts of filigree or appointments to whatever you think is beautiful. But if it’s resting on a rotten foundation, on rotten timbers, the integrity of the entire structure is compromised.

With the Religious Right, I’ve concluded over the years that unacknowledged and unrepented racism tends to fester rather than to go away. And I think it’s important to acknowledge the origins of this movement — which you know had nothing to do with *Roe v. Wade* or the abortion issue, but instead with the defense of racial segregation in institutions.

NFJ: You give a very needed historical understanding of how American evangelicals’ emphasis on premillennial dispensational-

RANDALL BALMER



BAD FAITH

RACE AND THE RISE OF THE
RELIGIOUS RIGHT

ism is rather recent — traced back to John Darby in the 19th century. When I first saw that in your book, I thought: “Why is he going there?” But you describe this perspective as “a theology of despair.” How has this despair shaped, and is shaping, American evangelicalism or the Christian Right or whatever we want to call it?

RB: I think dispensational premillennialism helps to explain the posture of the majority of evangelicals throughout the 20th century, at least in the middle decades of the 20th century. That is to say, they were apolitical.

I remember this very clearly from growing up in the Midwest. My father was a minister for over four decades in the Evangelical Free Church. And a lot of people in my circle didn’t bother to vote.

They certainly were not organized as a political movement, and I think a lot of that

has to do with a sense that's derived from premillennialism: Jesus is coming back at any time.

The world is getting worse and worse rather than any better. So why waste your time in political activism? And a lot of people in my circle weren't even registered to vote during those years.

I do call it a theology of despair because it says there's nothing we can do to make this world a better place. This was first adopted by evangelicals — at least on a large-scale basis — late in the 19th century, when they felt overwhelmed by immigration, urbanization, and industrialization, and felt that the culture was getting away from them.

And that sense I think deepened early in the 20th century, particularly at least symbolically with the Scopes trial in 1925. At that point, evangelicals [went] underground essentially and [constructed] what I call the evangelical subculture. Which as you know is a vast and interlocking network of congregations, denominations, publishing houses, Bible camps, Christian colleges, seminaries, missionary societies, and so forth.

So, it was possible in the middle decades of the 20th century, and I can attest

to this personally, to grow up within that subculture and have very little commerce with anyone outside of that world.

NFJ: Jerry Falwell actually made that transition himself, didn't he — from completely considering politics something you're not interested in, or should not be involved in as a Christian, to something that should consume you?

RB: Absolutely. And Falwell's most famous sermon, called "Ministers and Marches," was preached (and most people don't recognize the date) on Sunday morning, March 21, 1965. That was the time of the ultimately successful [voting rights] march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

So it was two weeks after Bloody Sunday [March 7]. And in that sermon, he eschews all political engagement. Of course, the issue of civil rights, he was happy to stay out of that arena.

Then he has this sort of political awakening in the 1970s in response to a number of things. The Securities and Exchange Commission started going after him for some questionable practices.

But the real catalyst was the defense of

racial segregation at segregation academies. Of course, he had his own in Lynchburg, Virginia, and then there was [the case against] Bob Jones University [that led to the loss of tax-exempt status due to racial discrimination].

NFJ: I heard Falwell in the early '80s refer to the '60s and the '70s as "the Dark Ages of the 20th century." *Roe v. Wade* and the absence of government-sponsored prayer in school were the landmark ruins. Yet he made no mention of civil rights, Vietnam or Watergate. He was very selective in his historical recollection.

RB: I was just on a dissertation defense with a doctoral student from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. She did a very good dissertation about Falwell. What really became clear in reading this dissertation is that anything that Falwell didn't like, he identified as communist. So, of course [Martin Luther] King and the civil rights movement were all communists and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa was communist and so forth.

That was part of the atmosphere, the *zeitgeist* at the time, of being very concerned about communists. Simply making a blanket statement that anything I don't like is communist is pretty much what happened.

NFJ: This is a little broader question, but something I think follows the theme of your book: How has the idea of being evangelical evolved?

RB: To locate a moment here, I think when the Religious Right abandoned Jimmy Carter in favor of Ronald Reagan in 1980 was definitely a turning point. I've written a biography of Carter, so I understand that era pretty well.

Carter was having trouble as president, and a lot of people were dissatisfied with him. But evangelicals abandoned one of their own — a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher, a born-again Christian — in favor of a divorced and remarried Hollywood actor who rarely attended church and who signed into law the most liberal



Randall Balmer. Photo courtesy of William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

abortion bill in the country back in 1967. I think that is a major turning point.

Evangelicals at that point, particularly evangelical leaders — and we're talking about Falwell and [Pat] Robertson and other people — began to hanker after political influence. And they led the Religious Right and evangelicals in general, I think, into a period that we're in now. And we arguably haven't even seen the worst of it — of abandoning your faith.

I struggle to see anything in the agenda of the Religious Right that would comport with the teachings of Jesus, much less the activism of evangelicals from the 19th and early 20th centuries. I simply don't see it.

One of the reasons I really despise the term "Christian Right" is because I don't find anything Christian about it. That turning point began in 1980, and what we've seen since then is a steady decline in faithfulness.

I draw on my understanding of American religious history to say that, in my judgment, the most effective religious movements in American life have always worked from the margins of society. Whereas in the councils of power — or once you begin to lust after political power or cultural influence — I think you lose your prophetic voice.

That, tragically, I think is what has happened with the Religious Right. I'm not sure the Religious Right ever had a prophetic voice, but to the extent that the Religious Right affects evangelicalism, evangelicals have lost their prophetic voice.

NFJ: In *Bad Faith*, you wrote that your earlier defense of evangelicals against the charges of racism had ceased. Why?

RB: The 2016 election was a wakeup call for me, as well as for many Americans. You had 81 percent of white evangelicals — and the modifier "white" is important here — support Donald Trump. And this is a movement that for four decades has been protesting that it was concerned about family values.

Well I'm sorry, but you can't make that argument and vote for Donald Trump. There's no amount of rationalization that

"One of the reasons I really despise the term 'Christian Right' is because I don't find anything Christian about it."

will get you to that point in my view. So I began to look at it again.

As I said in the book, I have for decades defended evangelicals against the charge of racism and it is true that a lot of these megachurches are more racially inclusive than traditional mainline congregations. That said, I think we have to acknowledge that something happened in 2016 and that Trump was able to tap into something that's more than simply economic or cultural discontent.

I have to believe there was some sort of vestigial appeal in his racism, and I don't think we need to debate about whether or not Trump is racist. I think it's fairly clear from his rhetoric.

I began to juxtapose that with the origins of the Religious Right, which began in defense of racial segregation. Then, the whole picture began to make a bit more sense to me — particularly as I began to look a little bit deeper into the political career of Reagan who, again, is a pivotal figure in this whole narrative.

When you consider that Reagan got into politics to oppose the Rumford Fair Housing Act in California that sought to guarantee equal access to housing for rental as well as purchase... He was an outspoken opponent of both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Throughout his political campaigns, he frequently invoked the racially charged phrase "law and order," and he had this vile caricature he propagated of so-called "welfare queens" — women of color who were supposedly living off the public dole in lives of luxury. He was never able to produce one of these welfare queens by the way, but he was sure they existed and talked about

them endlessly.

The clincher, aside from his decimation of the Civil Rights Commission when he was president, was August 3, 1980, when Reagan opened his general election campaign in, of all places, Philadelphia, Mississippi at the Neshoba County Fair.

This was where, 16 summers earlier, members of the Ku Klux Klan, in collusion with the local sheriff's office, abducted, tortured and murdered three civil rights workers. And Reagan, of course, was the master of symbolism. And lest anyone missed his intent on that occasion at the Neshoba County Fair, he declared the old segregationist battle cry, "I believe in states' rights."

For me, Reagan is really the missing link between the origins of the Religious Right in the 1970s in defense of racial segregation, and the 81 percent of evangelicals who supported Donald Trump in 2016.

NFJ: On page 84 of your book you wrote: "Single-issue voting on abortion makes white evangelicals complicit on a whole range of policies that would be anathema to 19th-century evangelical reformers." What else can you say about that?

RB: Well, I think if you vote simply on a single issue, you risk getting in bed with some rather shady people and a number of questionable policies. So, we have people who are anti-abortion politicians, [but] many of them also support capital punishment and [are] not worried about consistency on that issue.

But [there are] also immigration policies that don't, it seems to me, in any way comport with the words of scripture

— where we are told both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to welcome a stranger, to treat a foreigner as one of your own.

You have economic policies that overwhelmingly support those on the upper end of society against those who are less privileged. So, not even mentioning issues of racial politics, if you go strictly on a single issue, I think that very often puts you in league with some rather unsavory characters and some rather unsavory policies.

NFJ: Commentators and others often say, “Follow the money.” In reading your book, however, I was thinking that to understand the unfolding history of the Religious Right, it might be better to say “follow the racial politics.” Is that a fair assessment?

RB: I think it is a fair assessment, and again I came to this reluctantly. But after 2016 I simply can’t explain it any other way. There is something about the rhetoric of Donald Trump that appealed to white evangelical voters. And I doubt very much it was his economic policies — which were not terribly well developed. It had to be something else that attracted them to these very un-family values.

NFJ: I have sympathy for pastors who don’t have the freedom you and I have to talk openly about this sort of thing.

RB: Yeah, absolutely.

“The 2016 election was a **wakeup call** for me, as well as for many Americans.”

NFJ: They have a congregation telling them, “Don’t be political.” However, it’s OK to be political as long as the congregation agrees with the politics. But if they say something unpopular — or even hint toward that — then pastors get charged with “being political.” Do you have any advice for them?

RB: We are told in the Bible to preach the gospel. I say this as an ordained minister myself. We’re not told to worry about the consequences or worry about the effects of our preaching. We leave that to God, and I think that would be the right posture.

Now I say that in full sympathy with what you were just describing and how difficult it is. We see this in the overall number of pastors who are abandoning their vocation because of all the political backlash these days. And I’m deeply sympathetic to their situation.

But I keep coming back again and again to the words of Jesus. He’s pretty clear about what we should be doing in this world and our responsibility to others. And I think preaching the gospel is very powerful — and that’s where we make our prophetic witness.

NFJ: Randall, in your book you call for repentance — which is a mighty Christian concept we’ve heard all of our lives. But it’s not one that’s easily embraced by those who rely on the concept of repentance only as a part of their own eternal salvation. So how hopeful are you that there can be, within Americanized Christianity, real repentance?

RB: At the moment, I don’t think there’s a whole lot of reason to hope. But, on the other hand, the gospel is all about hope. Jesus is all about hope.

The analogy I use in the book is when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead — even though Lazarus’ body had begun to decay. If Jesus can do that, he can certainly reclaim his people in this time and place.

That said, am I optimistic this is going to happen any time soon? I have to say I’m not, because I don’t see any repentance so far from the leaders of the movement — and I think that’s where it has to come from.

But maybe I’m wrong about that; maybe it has to come from the bottom up.



Maybe that’s the better way to be hopeful.

If that’s the case, I think there are some glimmers of hope in the younger generation who is refusing, as I understand it, to follow in this pathway of disregard for the tenants of the faith.

NFJ: Well, we want it to be realistic hope, don’t we? We don’t want it to be “pie in the sky” stuff.

RB: We do, we do. And, again, I fault the leadership. I lay much of this on people like Franklin Graham and Tony Perkins.

It would be one thing if they were just remaining silent; I would be happy about it. But they’re actually out there sharing this to the minds of the faith in my judgment. And that I think is unconscionable. **NFJ**

PIGGY-BACKING

Congregations meet affordable housing needs as well as their own

**STORY & PHOTOS
BY CLIFF VAUGHN**

Suite A of 1210 North Highland Street in Arlington, Virginia, is the address of the Church at Clarendon. Suite B is the address of VPoint Apartments.

The simple difference actually stands — like the striking nature of the edifice at the address — as a witness to deep currents in American life. Among them: the crisis of affordable housing, the future of church real estate, and the evergreen issue of church-state relationships.

Standing where North Hartford meets North Highland — and looking into the V-shaped area formed by their departures — the brain may register some momentary confusion over the architecture in the space.

What exactly is this 10-story structure? In childhood vocabulary: It's a church giving apartments a piggy-back ride.

HISTORY

The First Baptist Church of Clarendon, as it was then known, was founded in 1909 with 30 members. Teddy Roosevelt was leaving and William Taft entering the White House, less than five miles away, just across the Potomac River.

The church erected its building at the current spot in 1913 and added hundreds of members in the coming decades. Construction of the Pentagon, less than three miles

away, began in 1941.

A post-war boom followed, including at the church, which built a new sanctuary in 1950. The church's resident membership hit nearly 1,500 in 1960.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, or Metro, began building rail systems in 1969. A decade later, Metro's Clarendon station opened just a block from the church.

Writer Kevin Craft, in his 2013 article "When Metro Came to Town" for *Arlington Magazine*, reported that the arrival of Metro's Orange Line coincided with a double-digit bump in home assessment values across Arlington County.

Craft also noted that in 1980, the county's median household income was about \$31,000. In 2011, it was nearly \$100,000. Similarly, median home values went from less than \$100,000 to well over half a million.

Those numbers were in converse relationship with the church's membership. By 1980, the Baptist association's annual reported 871 resident members. In 2003, that number had decreased to 358. And those who remained were worshipping in a building then a half-century old and needing attention.

RESPONSE

What happened next — an episode that unfolded over a decade — gets us to Suite A, Suite B and that piggy-back ride. Headlines such as these set the stage:

- "How land-rich, cash-poor faith groups are creating affordable housing."
- "Virginia church reinvents itself as affordable housing developer."
- "Arlington affordable housing dispute morphs into test of church-state separation."

David Perdue, the church's associate pastor in 2002, told *Nurturing Faith Journal* how the church — and the county — saw an opportunity.

"The redevelopment project was presented to us as a way to get new facilities that would be virtually paid for by the project itself," Perdue said.

He added that the church never saw future apartment-dwellers as ripe targets for evangelism or church membership. Rather, the deal was a way to preserve the church institutionally and extend its general mission into the community while simultaneously offering housing solutions in the area.

Essentially, the church "sold the air" above itself. The process would develop apartments above the church while renovating the latter. Sixty percent of the apartments would be dedicated to affordable housing.

The church opted for this process over an outright property sale and relocation. But a process it was — and one that involved multiple legal challenges.

**"We're here in the community.
They know we care about them, and we're all connected."**

— Pastor Danielle Bridgforth



The Church of Clarendon in Arlington, Virginia.

DEVELOPMENT

Defenders of the redevelopment deal, whether church members or community advocates for more affordable housing, saw a win-win: It was the church's property, after all. The housing crisis in the area was real. The church could help alleviate a community problem and keep its doors open in that location.

Detractors framed the deal as the government giving the church a lifeline, of sorts. They saw church-state entanglement and questioned the constitutionality of the arrangement, which involved rezoning and government subsidies for the apartments above the church.

When detractors made constitutional arguments, others said such was really a smokescreen for the classic NIMBY concern: "not in my backyard." In other words, some people imagined that residents in increasingly affluent Arlington didn't really want to see more affordable housing units in their neighborhood.

Detractors shot back, saying the church showed no real interest in affordable housing until such concern benefited the church.

Peter Glassman, an Arlington County taxpayer, was one who brought suit on First Amendment grounds. The case reached the Fourth Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals.

"Anyone who thinks this was a NIMBY issue or opposition to the affordable housing project has it wrong," Glassman told American University Radio (WAMU) in 2015, five years after the appeals court ruled against him. "We were clear then, and we are clear now, that was never the issue. It was the way the county went about the project."

Glassman alleged "that (1) the nature of the relationship between and among the First Baptist Church, the developer, and the county in the development of this project; (2) the nature of the funding; and (3) the planned structure of the completed project support his claim that Arlington County has violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and its counterpart in

the Virginia Constitution," according to a summary of Glassman's complaint included in the 2010 Court of Appeals published opinion.

The court found that both the church and the county did indeed partner to develop affordable housing "for the mutual benefit" of both parties, but that there was no evidence of the county advancing the church's faith or becoming entangled in its business.

"Rather," the court wrote, "the county's only interest was to accomplish the secular end of having affordable housing constructed in a highly urban area of Arlington County."

SUITES A & B

These legal and moral threads unspooled for more than a decade, from 2002 to 2012, when the church returned to its newly renovated space: two floors of church use topped by eight floors offering 116 apartments.

Forty-six apartments were leased at

the market rate, and the other 70 were designated affordable housing units for individuals and families making \$35,000–\$50,000 annually.

Twenty floorplans were offered, ranging from 665 to 1,063 square feet. The apartment building also earned Class-A, LEED Gold certification for its sustainable building and use.

The church, meanwhile, consisted of a more modern sanctuary seating 340, a welcome hall, offices and classrooms, in addition to a Child Development Center and the John Leland Center for Theological Studies. The old steeple and church facade were preserved.

Now, almost a decade after the renovation, do VPoint residents hop on the elevator for the shortest church commute possible? Generally, no. And that wasn't the expectation.

“Since I've been here, there's been at least three families I know have lived in the building who have been members,” said Pastor Danielle Bridgeforth who came to the Church at Clarendon in 2017. Maybe double that number have attended but not joined.

There is a different sort of relationship between Suite A and Suite B.

“I'm a community pastor,” said Bridgeforth. “We're here in the community. They know we care about them, and we're all connected.”

“So people are often stopping and asking questions,” she continued. “And if they need prayers, if they're having a tough time — I get those kinds of calls pretty regularly.”

Everyone is friendly, said Bridgeforth, adding, “We want people to feel they can approach us because we represent God, and we want people to feel like they can approach God.”

Bridgeforth said, “Preserving the facade and steeple was a way of giving a nod to those families, those communities, those leaders, those members who helped us to be still relevant and in this community now.”

One thing Bridgeforth has done is to add signage to the building that clarifies the edifice includes an active church.

Referring to the steeple, she said:



Pastor Danielle Bridgeforth, who has served the Church at Clarendon since 2017, will be featured in the third installment of a Good Faith Media (goodfaithmedia.org) short-film series, co-produced with Baptist Women in Ministry, about women who serve as Baptist pastors.

“Some of those images that used to be very recognizable 30, 40, 50 years ago are not as much so now. This is not just a nice building that has this neat little thing on it, but we actually are a church.”

OTHER CHURCHES

Each church's story is unique, but the affordable-housing thread can be found elsewhere in Arlington. Arlington Presbyterian Church, about two miles from the Church at Clarendon, sold its land in 2016 to the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing.

The result: Gilliam Place, a 173-unit affordable housing apartment building on the site of the old church. The Presbyterian church retained the address at 918 South Lincoln Street. It's Suite 1.

In 2021, Central United Methodist Church in Arlington temporarily vacated its premises for a three-year construction project that will result in an eight-story structure with space for the church along with 144 apartment units, all designated affordable housing.

Pastor Sarah Harrison-McQueen, who arrived at Central UMC in 2014 with the

mandate to refine the vision for an affordable-housing project and then execute it, told this journal: “I have said frequently, ‘They don't cover this in seminary.’”

The process lacked constitutional challenges because Clarendon's earlier journey had effectively set the course. However, Central UMC had its own challenges since it sits atop a Metro tunnel, which complicated the project. That did not deter the congregation, however.

“The number one asset that churches have, of course, are the people in it. And then the second asset behind that is the property,” said Harrison-McQueen. “For many congregations, the focus has only been on cultivating the people. They've ignored the property asset and how it could better be utilized to serve the community.”

“The answer is not always churches having an affordable housing project,” she added. “That might not be the need. But I do believe that over the next 50 years, churches will need to be creative in finding ways to utilize their property as an asset for the entire community.” **NFJ**

– *Cliff Vaughn is media producer for Good Faith Media.*

Scattered, smothered and faithful

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

A convicting question arose while watching an otherwise warm-hearted news story about four young men making an unselfish choice at a time when choosing selfishness over the common good seems to be in style.

While Braves fans were celebrating their World Series championship on the night of Nov. 2, 2021, this youthful quartet of Waffle House “regulars” stopped by their favorite one among many in the Atlanta suburbs. They were seeking a late-night meal, but what they found was chaos.

The all-night restaurant was overwhelmed with customers. Yet only two of the five employees scheduled for that shift had shown up to work.

Dirty dishes were stacked high. Workers were scattered, smothered and covered with demands for eggs, bacon, waffles and hash browns.

Taking note of the situation, these four guys — as one told a CBS46 reporter — “just went back there and started helping.”

That was not their only option. And the haunting question is what I would have done in a similar situation.

Would I have scrubbed or grumbled? Would I have helped out or lashed out?

Would I have taken out the trash or trashed the company on social media?

Would I have pitched in or pitched a fit? Would I have fed others or frustratingly fled?

Would I have offered a cup of cool water to someone — as Jesus suggests in Matthew 10:42 — or, better yet, refilled an empty white cup with black coffee?

It’s worth noting that none of the young men said to the frazzled, apron-donned workers: “Let us know if you need anything.” Rather, they just saw the immediate needs and acted promptly.

While recognition (from the company and others) for their efforts has now come — after some photos taken that night were

posted online — that was not the reason these guys pitched in.

They simply observed where a helping hand was needed and responded generously. They had no obligation other than what shared humanity requires.

But what if such behavior was simply routine and expected rather than rare and newsworthy?

What if this kind of gracious, helpful response was the natural reflex of all who claim to follow the one who “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matt. 20:28)?

I’m reminded of a conversation from years ago with the late Millard Fuller, co-founder of Habitat for Humanity International and the Fuller Center for Housing. We were at Koinonia Farm and talking about the influence Clarence Jordan had on his life.

Millard recalled when he and his wife, Linda, were at the farm to refocus their lives and priorities of moving from wealth to generosity. Millard said he told Clarence they were seeking God’s will for their lives.

Clarence, the insightful New Testament scholar and Jesus-attuned disciple, said the idea of “God’s will” had been made too complicated. He showed Millard a decaying shack near the entrance to the farm and asked the entrepreneur how he’d made money lately. The answer was home construction.

Millard said Clarence told him that God’s will was fulfilled by simply matching what needs to be done with what we’re able to do with what God said we should be doing.

Whether building homes with persons in need, repairing frayed relationships due to racism, or washing dishes at an overrun Waffle House — it really is a simple concept. It just depends on the choices we make at the moment of need—and how seriously we take the notion of following Jesus. [NFJ](#)

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



Being Amish

These strict Anabaptists embrace a hard, but chosen life

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY TONY CARTLEDGE

It's not easy being Amish. Yet their population nearly doubles every 20 years.

So why do thousands upon thousands of people — choosing to live in relatively isolated settlements — continue to cling to the old, strict ways? First, let's consider some background.

LONG, WINDING ROAD

The Amish church emerged from the Swiss Anabaptist movement — itself an outgrowth of the Protestant Reformation in Europe during the early 1500s.

Early Anabaptists, most of whom had been baptized as infants, came to believe that baptism should be reserved for adults who can make a conscious decision to seek it. So they chose to be baptized again, hence the name: the Greek preposition *ana* can mean “again.”

Anabaptists clung tightly to this belief despite relentless persecution. Leaders of state churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, considered the movement's independent thinking to be a threat.

Anabaptist leaders were arrested and tortured. Many refused to renounce their beliefs, and were executed by burning, beheading or drowning.

One who found the movement compelling was Menno Simons, a Roman Catholic priest in the Low Countries. In 1536 he renounced Catholicism and joined the Anabaptists.

He established an Anabaptist church in the Netherlands and — by skillfully



Scooters, but not bicycles or motorized vehicles, are permitted by the Amish — since not getting in a hurry or going far from home are valued. Inset: The Amish read from Bibles with a German translation by Martin Luther and the English King James Version on facing pages.

synthesizing, defending and promoting the movement's beliefs — became its most prominent leader. In time, most European Anabaptists became known as “Mennonites.”

In the early 17th century, a small group of English dissenters attracted by Anabaptist beliefs migrated to Holland, where they established the first Baptist church in 1609 under the leadership of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. A few years later Helwys led a group of these first Baptists back to England while Smyth's group joined the Mennonites.

All was not harmonious among the

Mennonites, however. In the late 17th century, a Swiss tailor-turned-Anabaptist minister named Jakob Ammann contended that the movement was not strict enough in its discipline.

He and others of like mind led a splinter group to break from the Mennonites and adopt practices such as shunning those who left the church or who failed to follow church regulations. Amman's followers became known as “Amish Mennonites” or simply “the Amish.”

Both the Mennonites and Amish were known as hard-working and valuable citizens. But their primary allegiance to

God as understood through their teachings made political leaders uneasy. Persecution continued, and they were sometimes forced to leave certain areas.

With living conditions so difficult in Europe, many Mennonites and Amish sought more peaceful opportunities in America, and William Penn welcomed such settlers to join Quakers in the settlement of Pennsylvania.

Many did, and during the early 18th century a sizeable group of Mennonite and Amish settlers pushed west of Philadelphia and settled among the fertile hills of what is now Lancaster County.

EXPANSION, DISTINCTIONS

Further waves of immigration led to even larger settlements in Ohio and Indiana, where more farmland was available. Through the years, new settlements were formed and Amish numbers grew steadily.

By 2021, according to the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Pennsylvania's Elizabethtown College, the Amish number grew to more than 361,000 in 608 settlements and more than 2,700 church districts scattered across 31 states, four Canadian provinces, and two South American countries.

Most of the Amish — more than 355,000 — live in America. The largest single concentration is in and around Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, which more than 40,000 call home. Holmes County, Ohio boasts nearly as many, while large settlements also exist in Indiana and several other Midwestern states.

Thinking of “the Amish” as a single entity is misleading, for there are multiple branches or “tribes.” The largest groups are the Old Order Amish, New Order Amish, Beachy Amish and Amish Mennonites.

In general terms, they vary from less accepting to more tolerant of certain technologies. While Old and New Order Amish reject automobiles and in-home telephones, Beachy Amish and Amish Mennonites are more open to both.

In general, most Amish groups focus on plain living that is not connected or beholden to the surrounding world. They dress in simple, characteristic clothing

and avoid technology that threatens their distinctiveness.

Electricity, for example, is acceptable if powered by batteries, generators or solar cells, but can't be dependent on the public grid. Telephones are necessary for doing business, but must be kept in the barn or a shed with an answering machine rather than in the home, lest they encourage idle chatter or gossip.

Cell phones and computers are eschewed as sources of temptation from the outside world.

Travel is by horse-drawn buggies and carriages, to discourage people from going too far from home. Foot-powered scooters are acceptable, but not bicycles. Riding in cars and using trucks in business are permitted, but only if the vehicle is owned and driven by a non-Amish person, typically referred to as “the English.”

If an Amish-owned business — such as roofing, bricklaying, or installing solar cells — requires the use of a truck, the Amish may purchase the truck, but they hire an English driver and put the title in his name.

Horses and mules are used to pull the wagons and farm equipment. However, draft animals have their limitations.

Raising hay isn't profitable except when rolled into large round bales or packed into big square ones. And animals can't power the hay baler.

But a team of six horses or mules can pull a flat-top wagon with the driver and a large diesel generator that runs the attached baler. The giant bales can't be handled by hand, so a forklift or skid-steer machine is permitted for lifting them onto the wagon or into the barn.

What is accepted may differ between regions, tribes or even neighboring districts. Each district, led by an authoritative bishop, determines what is acceptable for them.

Lancaster County is a bastion for the Old Order Amish, and much of this account is drawn from several days of visits and interviews with members of that community. While the Amish may talk openly, they don't pose for photographs, which are considered graven images or appeals to vanity,

They value privacy. Hence, this story

does not use actual names or include posed photography.

MALLEABLE TRADITION

Amish life is a challenging mix of old and new. Yet tradition is strong.

Men wear dark pants with solid-colored shirts and suspenders, because belt buckles would be too flashy. Pants usually lack pockets, especially in the back, lest men be tempted to secretly carry small items that could promote pride or individuality over community.

Men wear wide-brimmed straw hats during the week and often to church meetings during the summer, though black felt hats are typical for cooler weather. Sunday attire includes plain white shirts and a distinctive long coat with no collar or buttons, which could be ostentatious.

Velcro and zippers are banned. Both men and boys typically sport simple bowl-type haircuts beneath their hats.

Unmarried males are barefaced, but once married, men let their beards grow long but shave their upper lips. Moustaches were once common in the military, and the Amish renounce violence.

Women wear plain dresses of mid-calf or lower length, commonly covered by a pinafore tied in the back or fastened tightly with straight pins. Long or three-quarter sleeves are standard, though they can be rolled up while working.

Women let their hair grow long, but keep it in a tight bun. As a sign of modesty or prayer, they wear head coverings that can be as simple as a bandana while working, but more commonly consist of a cap that can be sheer or solid, pleated or not, depending on local custom.

In Lancaster County, the typical *kapp* is white and made of stiff, sheer material formed into a heart shape and pinned to the back of the head, with long ties on either side.

Gender roles are generally clear: men work on the farm or at other jobs, while women bear and raise children, look after the house, and commonly take responsibility for maintaining the lawn and kitchen garden. On farms, they pitch in with other chores as necessary.

FAMILY LIFE

Jacob and Verna — a young couple with two boys, so far — are typical. With help from parents and loans from within the community, they recently purchased a large dairy farm from a non-Amish family.

Jacob devotes more than 40 acres to raising corn for a herd of around 50 Holsteins, and he grows several acres of broadleaf tobacco as a cash crop. The Amish do not condone drinking alcohol, and few smoke cigarettes.

Some bishops frown at the growing and selling of tobacco, but broadleaf — a variety of burley tobacco that is air-cured and used for cigar wrappers — grows well in the area and can help make the farms economically feasible. Along with soybeans, it is a common cash crop.

The farm is dotted with barns and sheds, a large silo, and two enormous tubes of white plastic, packed tightly with silage and sealed to prevent decomposition. An underground tank collects manure and urine washed from slotted channels in the dairy barn during milking.

A hired hand in his mid-teens drove a six-mule team pulling a manure spreader around a pasture. When the tank needed

refilling, he rolled up to a feeder pipe and pulled a string that started a tractor to power the pump. Jacob owns a tractor to power the manure pump and do similar chores, but he can't use it to pull a plow or a harvester.

When it was taking too long for Verna to mow their three-and-a-half-acre lawn with a push mower, Jacob bought a 20-horsepower twin-blade mower and attached it to a low horse-drawn sulky. That allowed her to finish mowing more quickly, freeing up time for the children or helping with extra farm chores.

Verna joins Jacob for two-hour milking and calf-feeding sessions at 5 a.m. and 5 p.m. daily. The children sleep through the morning milking and play around their feet in the evening.

Verna and Jacob carry heavy milking machines from one cow to another and plug them into a vacuum line before disinfecting the bulging udders and attaching a suction cup to each teat.

When full, the portable milking machines are emptied into a rolling container with a hose that pulls the milk into a 1,600-gallon holding tank. A large roaring diesel generator outside powers the vacuum lines.

POWER SOURCES

It's dark in the barn, so they roll battery-powered lights down the aisle as they work. The tank room has "switch lights" required by the company that buys the milk.

Both the house and the dairy barn are connected to the electrical grid, because the farm was bought from an "Englishman." The district bishop, Jacob said, is allowing them a grace period of 18 months or so to disconnect and convert to gas or battery-powered lights.

Though gas lamps were once common, most homes now use LED lights attached to the same large battery packs used for power tools. Power drills with a beater attached are used in the kitchen.

The batteries are charged by solar power, and in some church districts, families power many of their home needs directly from solar cells.

Rebecca, a congenial woman who

takes tourists on buggy rides in the town of Bird in Hand, happily reported that she had a full complement of appliances running on solar power.

"I have an electric refrigerator and freezer," she said, "and I love them both."

She admitted that the district bishop had yet to approve such an expansive use of power, but said it had become so widespread that he would have a hard time reining it in.

The kitchen in Jacob and Verna's house still has electricity, and the table had so many leaves added that it stretched from one corner of the room to the other, enough for 11 guests, the host family and the hired hand.

Verna served bread, a layered salad, green beans cooked in homemade barbecue sauce, buttered potatoes, and applesauce. Jacob had grilled boneless chicken thighs outside, chatting with the men while Verna washed up the milking equipment. Chocolate cake squares completed the meal. Everyone drank water.

Both Jacob and Verna come from large families, with many siblings. Church rules don't allow for artificial birth control, which helps to explain the rapid population growth among the Amish.

When reaching adulthood, an estimated 85 percent or more of the children choose to remain in the tradition, taking strict baptismal vows that commit them to following the church's *Ordnung*, or rules of faith and practice.

Jacob was slow to marry. He's five years older than Verna, whom he met when she shifted from one youth group to another so she could meet new people.

When asked how many children they wanted, Verna responded softly, "Whatever comes." Jacob added: "Two is plenty for now."

NEIGHBORLY FAITH

Amish settlements are divided into districts of 20 to 40 families living in proximity to each other. About half of Amish settlements are so small they have only one district, but concentrated settlements such as Lancaster County have many.

Amish families don't choose a church, but are assigned to their district congrega-



tion, which has no buildings or offices. A craftsman-minister named Emmanuel explained that “church hopping” is not allowed,

“Everyone must learn to get along with other church members,” he said, “because they are also their neighbors.”

Emmanuel has stark black hair peeping out from below his straw hat, but his long beard is solid white. “It’s because I talk more than I think,” he joked.

Emmanuel explained that church services are held every other week, rotating among district family homes so that each family hosts the service about once a year. Services may be held in the house or the barn, wherever the host family has the most space.

Community-owned tables and benches are stored in a large church wagon that is pulled by horses or mules to the designated home and set up for the service. On alternate Sundays, families may visit other district churches, but their membership remains in their home district.

Essential chores such as milking can be done on Sundays, but no other work. Services can last most of the day and include a fellowship meal. Emmanuel and another minister named Levi described a typical service in Lancaster County.

Once the people have gathered and the horses are settled, services typically begin with a full hour or so of singing from the *Ausbund*, a hymnbook dating back to the early Anabaptists. It contains no musical notation; chant-like tunes are passed down from one generation to the next.

Songs can have many verses and are sung *a capella*. No musical instruments are allowed in worship, and at other times only simple instruments such as a harmonica are permitted.

The initial singing is followed by a sermon of about 30 minutes delivered by one preacher, followed by a scripture reading and another bout of singing. Another minister then preaches for an hour. Specific texts are assigned, all from the New Testament, and the cycle repeats every year. Preachers have some freedom to use other texts, including from the Old Testament.

The Amish speak English as a second

language: their primary tongue is a dialect of German inaccurately called “Pennsylvania Dutch.” The German language is called *Deutsch*, pronounced “Doitch” or locally, “Deitch.” English speakers mistook “*Deutsch*” as meaning “Dutch.”

Hymns from the *Ausbund* as well as the sermons are in “High German,” a predecessor to standard German and comparable to the difference between modern and medieval English. Many Amish don’t fully understand the High German and thus struggle to comprehend what is said in worship.

All scripture readings are taken from *Die Bibel*, a Bible translation made by Martin Luther and first published in 1534. Many homes have Bibles with Luther’s text and the King James English translation on facing pages.

Ministers are expected to preach in High German and without any notes, either memorizing their sermons or trusting God to speak through them.

CHURCH ROLES

Each church has two or three ministers, one deacon, and a bishop appointed from families in their district. Some bishops may serve two districts. Only men can serve in those roles, and they do not seek the position, but are chosen by lot from among other men in their district.

When a vacancy occurs due to death, incapacity, or the division of an oversized district into two, the church gathers on a communion Sunday (held twice each year) to select a new minister. Emmanuel and another minister named Levi explained that, as part of their baptismal vows, all men must agree to serve if they are chosen, though most assume it will never apply to them, and many hope that it won’t.

On the appointed Sunday, each member of the church whispers to the bishop the name of one man they think could serve well. The bishop tallies the nominations and calls all men named three or more times to sit before the congregation.

On a table before them he places one copy of the *Ausbund* for each of the nominees. Into one of the books, he has

secretly placed a slip of paper containing the text of Proverbs 16:33, handwritten in High German.

Emmanuel recited and then translated it: “The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord’s alone.”

The oldest candidate chooses an *Ausbund*. If the inserted scripture is not in it, he steps aside — often with a huge sigh of relief — and the next oldest chooses. The process continues until someone selects the *Ausbund* containing the scripture.

That person is considered to have been chosen by God, in keeping with the example of Acts 1:23-26. When the original disciples needed to replace Judas, they narrowed the field to Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas, then cast lots between them, asking God to “show us which one of these two you have chosen.”

Ministers get little additional training beyond the standard eighth grade education. For the first six months after being chosen, they are visited by other ministers who offer tips or explain certain practices.

Whether farmers or merchants or craftsmen, they are also expected to study on their own to gain Bible knowledge and to improve their ability to read and speak in High German, which they may not know well.

Rebecca, the buggy driver, complained that many people don’t understand much of what is being said during worship services because some ministers could not speak High German very well, nor could some church members understand it.

Emmanuel acknowledged that some younger people have been drawn away by evangelical churches that feature worship in English, livelier music, shorter sermons and fewer obligations required to remain in fellowship.

Amish ministers keep their regular jobs and receive no compensation for their service, though they are generally respected. “We are not paid,” Emmanuel said. “No, let me retract that statement. We’re not paid here,” he said, patting his leg where a pocket would be, “but there are other rewards.”

He then cited Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay on “Compensation,” which argues that reward is balanced by suffering, and

suffering by reward.

Ministers are charged mainly to preach and occasionally to visit and offer counsel. The deacon and the bishop are primarily responsible for visiting members who wander too far from the rules. Ministers have less call for typical pastoral care than in other traditions, because all Amish families are expected to look after each other.

Some observers think of the Amish faith as being rule-bound, overly centered on adult baptismal vows, and thereafter requiring works to remain in good standing with the church. Emmanuel insisted that salvation does not come through works or baptism, however, but only “through the blood of Christ.”

Standing beneath an LED light hanging from an old propane lamp, he told the story of a young man who was preparing for baptism but was killed in a farm accident before it took place. “We figured that if he was ready to be baptized, he must be okay.”

HARD CHOICES

While baptism marks one’s official entry to the Amish church and consequent commitment to the lifestyle, it comes after an intentional process of evaluation. When Amish youth reach the age of 16, they enter a period called *Rumspringa*, a German term that means “hopping around” or “running around.”

Youth who have not been baptized are not bound by the *Ordnung*. At 16, they join one of several organized youth groups, through which they are allowed to expand their boundaries and experience the wider world if they wish, though most stay close to home.

Larger communities such as Lancaster County have a number of established youth groups with names like the Eagles, Seagulls or Meadowlarks, as well as geographic names like West and East. One group for older young adults who haven’t married is called the Glaciers.

Youth groups vary in their adherence to a “plain” or more adventurous life. Some groups are strictly conservative, while others have a reputation for looser behavior. Their members may acquire cell phones,

seek further education, buy and drive cars, or even experiment with alcohol and drugs — though such activities are still frowned on.

The primary purpose of the youth groups is to provide a social outlet for courtship and marriage as young people weigh their options and determine whether they want to be baptized, marry within the community, and raise their own children in the Amish way.

At 16, boys are given a horse and buggy to use in traveling to weekly Sunday evening social gatherings, and perhaps in giving a ride to a favored girl. Joseph and Moses, two brothers who have yet to marry, explained that the gatherings are held in homes belonging to youth group members, but always chaperoned by adults.

Gatherings often begin with volleyball games and a meal, but the main feature for most is an hour or more of singing. The singing begins with traditional hymns, including some in English, but it may also include older secular songs.

Refreshments and conversation also feature into the evenings, in addition to long buggy rides to and from that offer an opportunity for more serious courting.

Unlike district churches, youth are free to join any youth group, though parents often steer them toward one they prefer. If marital prospects run dry in one group, or if youth are unsatisfied with a particular group’s rules, they can switch to another group to broaden their horizons.

At some point, young adults are expected to choose whether they will seek baptism, and commit to the Amish church and the lifestyle that comes with it. If so, they go through a months-long period of instruction on church Sundays.

As the rest of the congregation sings, the bishop meets with candidates in another room and leads them through the 18 articles of the Dordrecht Confession of Faith, first adopted by Dutch Mennonites in 1632. Each session typically covers two articles, and youth are encouraged to study both the articles and the scriptures cited in support of each one.

The articles include doctrinal beliefs relative to the scriptures, salvation and faith,



along with specific beliefs about things such as baptism, foot washing, non-violence, and excommunication for those who violate accepted behaviors or choose to leave the church.

BAPTISM & BELIEFS

Prior to baptism, the church votes on whether to receive the candidates, and the candidates are given a final chance to change their minds. On baptism Sunday, generally held just once a year, the candidates kneel before the congregation and respond to a series of questions professing their faith in Christ and their commitment to the practices of the Amish church.

Following a positive response, the bishop cups his hands over each candidate and the deacon pours water into his hands three times so that it dribbles over the candidate’s head as the bishop recites a baptismal formula.

Baptism is seen as a lifetime commitment to attend and support the Amish church while living in accordance with the *Ordnung*. Those who fail to do so are visited and encouraged to return. If they refuse, they are subject to excommunication and shunning.

The extent of shunning varies within tribes, districts and families. Though often portrayed as a complete cutting of ties, it

is generally less severe. Those who have left the church are not to eat or ride together with other Amish, for example, but they can still communicate.

We visited an older Amish woman, Elizabeth, who lives in a small home between her son's house and place of business. Elizabeth's daughter Naomi was present, helping to cook and serve a meal of homemade bread, pickled beets, baked chicken, meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green peas, corn, cake, apple crumble and ice cream.

Naomi and her husband left the Amish church after their marriage, and are now Old Order Mennonites. Because of that, she is officially "shunned," but maintains a close relationship with her mother. "We respect each other," she said.

Nevertheless, though the Amish are free to ride in cars with non-Amish people and regularly hire taxi services, Elizabeth is not allowed to ride with Naomi.

Young people who choose not to join the Amish church are not shunned, and their families are free to eat or ride with them.

The practice of shunning may seem extreme to those outside the faith, but the Amish see it as a persistent nudge back toward the faith. Levi described shunning as "a reminder that they are always welcome to come back."

GRACE DELIVERED

While shunning may come across as overly judgmental, the Amish are equally known for showing grace and forgiveness to others, even under the most difficult of circumstances.

In October 2006, Charles Roberts IV, a non-Amish man who drove a milk tanker that served several Amish farms, backed his pickup truck to the door of the one-room West Nickel Mines schoolhouse. He forced the boys to unload assorted items from his truck and into the classroom.

He then ordered all the boys and adults to leave, told the girls to line up before the blackboard, and began shooting them. He killed five of the girls, aged 7 to 13, and injured others before turning a gun on himself.

Roberts had a wife and three children. He had left rambling suicide notes for each of them.

The Amish community grieved deeply over the horrific assault, but also compassionately. Some of the women, including mothers of the slain children, reached out to Roberts' wife and his parents, knowing they must be suffering greatly.

The community held a prayer service and expressed forgiveness toward the shooter and care for his family. No one claims that was easy.

Sarah, who had three children at the school that day, stressed that forgiveness took time. "Don't think it was just a one-time thing," she said. "It has been a journey."

Sarah's daughter was injured in the shooting, but she survived. Sons Joseph and Moses were also present, but were sent outside with the other boys.

Sarah described how mothers of the victims formed a bond with the shooter's widow and his mother. Terri Roberts, his mother, later wrote a book about the experience and often spoke publicly of how meaningful it was to experience grace from the very people to whom her son had brought so much grief.

The children don't say much about their memories from that day, though they take some comfort in believing that Roberts was mentally ill.

To ease the memories, the community tore down the school shortly after the shooting. They replaced it with a new one-room school, designed to be as different as possible from the scene of the tragedy, and renamed it New Hope School.

SCHOOL DAYS

Schoolteachers are generally young women who have not yet married. They receive no formal training beyond their own 8th grade education, though they learn from a network of other teachers and from their own continuing study.

At a different one-room school, the current teacher described a typical day. Mary has 29 students who come from six families. They all walk to school, and there is at least one child in each of

the eight grades.

As in any school, some children are better behaved than others, or more eager to learn. Some may have special needs.

"Children are children," said Mary. The older students are sometimes assigned to help the younger ones.

The curriculum focuses on basic reading and writing in English, which some students don't hear much at home, as well as in German. Penmanship is stressed, including learning to read and write the delicate Gothic script used in the *Ausbund* and the Luther Bible.

Students learn basic arithmetic and some history, but little in the way of science. The minimal curriculum is considered sufficient for life in the Amish community.

Windows in the school are covered with heavy wire mesh — not for security, Mary said, but to keep baseballs from breaking them. Baseball and volleyball are popular sports, played at recess and other times, but in the same clothes used for everyday life and work.

Once children finish the eighth grade, they are expected to find work as hired hands or in other jobs in addition to their responsibilities at home.

With their devotion to God and appreciation for plain dress, peaceful living and hard work, the Amish are easy to admire.

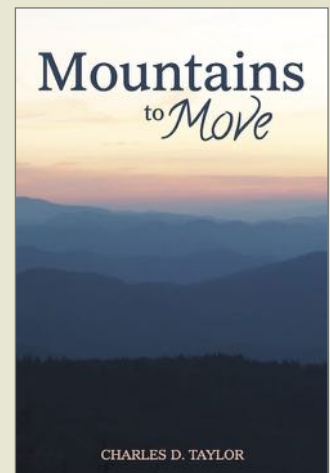
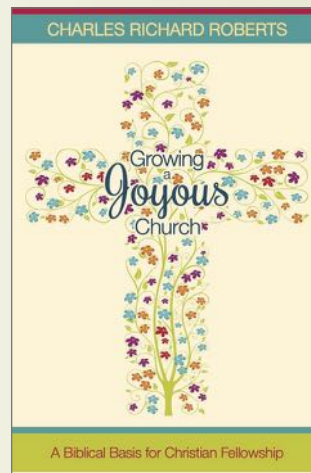
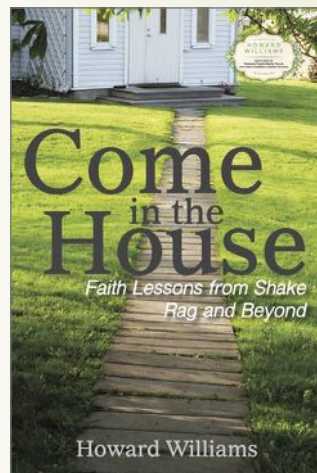
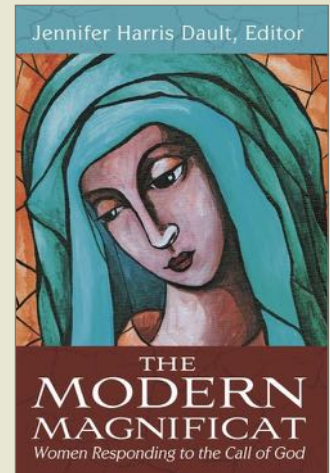
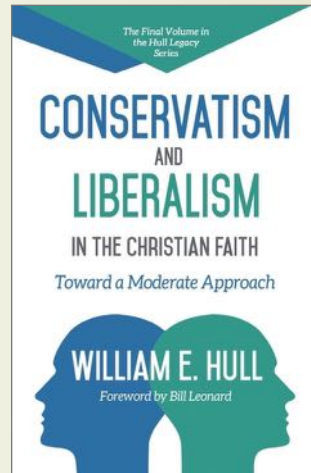
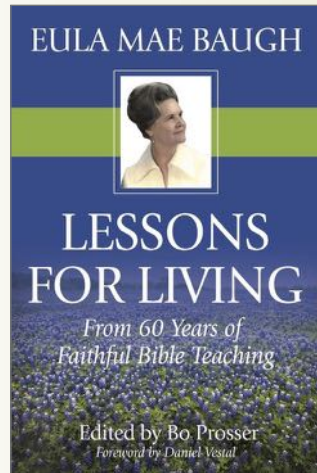
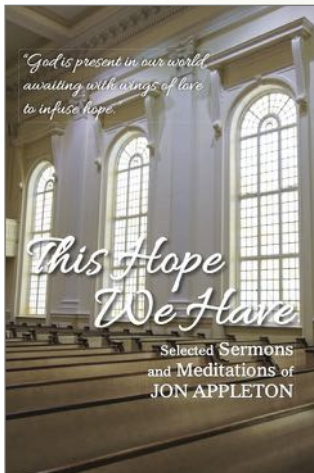
On the other hand, the strict rules of their faith and practice admittedly limit opportunities for young adults, who must choose to leave the Amish faith if they want to pursue higher education or integration into the outside world.

It's not easy being Amish, but more than four out of five young adults choose to stay close and adopt the beliefs and rigor of the community in which they were raised. The allure of the world and its modern wonders may be tempting, but the appeal of the plain life is stronger still. **NFJ**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Good Faith Experiences will begin offering trips to visit the Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, later this year. **Visit goodfaithmedia.org/group-experiences for details as they become available**

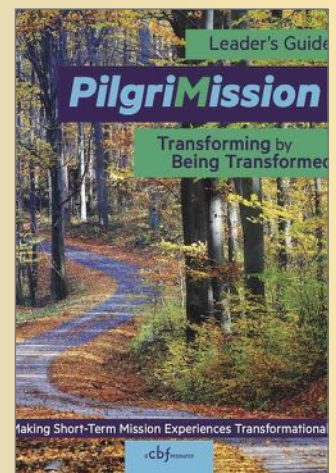
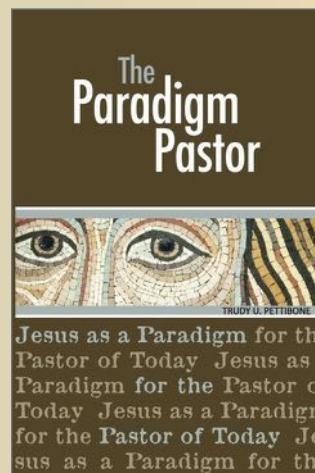
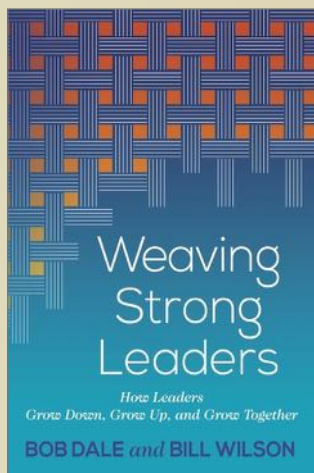
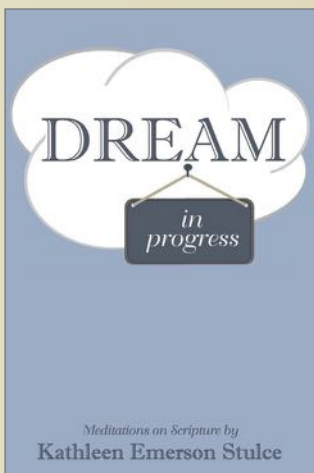
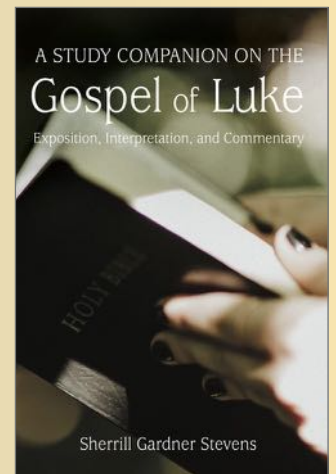
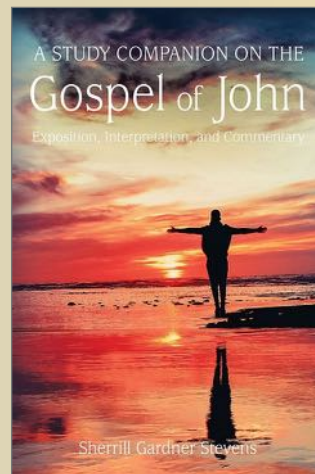
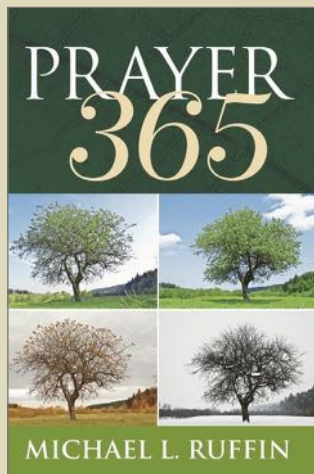
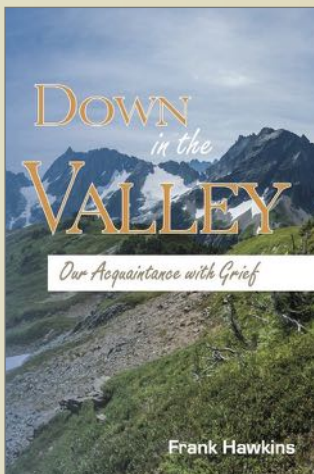
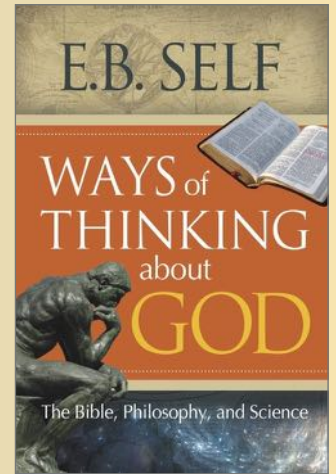
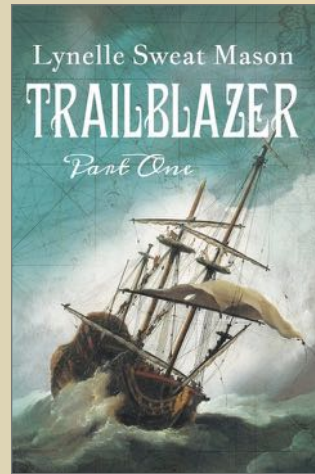
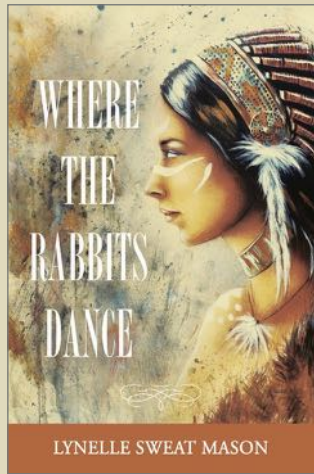
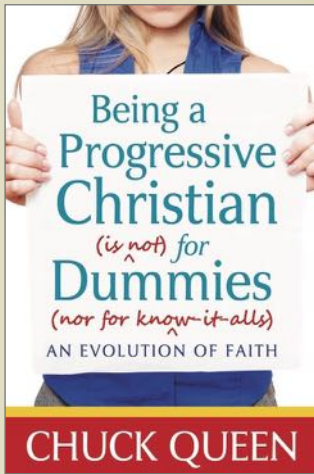
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Questions Christians ask scientists

If your congregation comes into your classroom, what topic will you cover?

BY PAUL WALLACE

My most memorable teaching experience took place some years ago in Dharamsala, India, where I served on the faculty of the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative, a partnership between Emory University and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

The goal of the program was to incorporate science into the curriculum for Tibetan Buddhist monastics. For several summers I traveled with a group of professors to the seat of the exiled Tibetan government to teach science to the monks.

During the second summer I was assigned to teach Einstein's theory of relativity. I presented the subject to my cohort of monks using little to no mathematics. I told them about the theory, outlined its basic results, and described experiments that have verified it.

Eyebrows were raised, and questions were asked. After class two students approached me from the front row. One of them smiled and said, in a respectful and direct manner, "The theory is not correct."

I asked him to explain. He replied with great seriousness, "This is not how time works, and this is not how space works. The theory contradicts what is real."

It remains to this day both the most emphatic and the most polite rejection of a scientific theory I have ever seen.

I was surprised (and amused) at the courtesy and matter-of-factness with which the monk rejected relativity, but I was not surprised that he found it strange. Relativity, our standard theory of space, time and gravity, is difficult to wrap your head around.



But it can be taught without a lot of mathematics, and, once understood, its predictions — which have been confirmed to as many decimal places as we can measure — consistently evoke disbelief from those who encounter them for the first time. The monk from the front row was just one of many who have found relativity hard to believe.

Einstein's famous theory rejects some of the most fundamental assumptions about the world — assumptions so basic that you almost certainly don't even know you have them. For example, you probably assume that time rolls forward at a nice even pace for everyone in the universe, that everyone ages at the same rate, and that every clock ticks once per second for everyone.

But this is not correct. Time is flexible, and its rate of flow depends on how fast you're moving and on the strength of your local gravity field, among other things. Space also depends on these factors.

You probably assume that the straight-line distance between two points — say,

your house and the closest grocery store — is the same for everyone in the universe. This is also incorrect. Space is stretchy. Neither time nor space is absolute. Each is, instead, relative.

One of the most mind-bending consequences is that two twins may find themselves with different ages. Suppose that, on your 30th birthday, your twin climbs aboard a rocket and flies off to a planet orbiting a nearby star at 99 percent light speed. She makes it to the planet, takes care of business, and returns to Earth at the same speed.

Relativity says that, upon her return, she will be younger than you. How much younger depends on how far away the other planet is and therefore how long the trip lasted, but she could easily be many years younger.

She will look at you and wonder why you look so old, and you will look at her and wonder how she managed to age so little. This age-warping effect is not science fiction. The only thing that stands in the way of us

“How are we to think about a Creator who creates such a cosmos, with surprises lurking one after another beyond our vision?”

actually experiencing something such as this is the yet-to-be-developed technology to get a rocket moving so fast.

My students often ask, “But how can it be this way?” My answer is that, if we routinely moved much faster than we do, or if the speed of light were much less than it is, we would all be aware of the flexibility of time and space and we would all see that it’s just the way things are.

In other words, relativity is just the way the universe operates and the only reason it seems strange to us is that it lies outside of our experience.

Importantly, this relativity of space and time is necessary for the laws of physics to be not relative. What led Einstein down the path toward relativity was his insistence that the laws of physics — not time and space — be the same for all people everywhere, that is, absolute.

But for these laws to be absolute, space and time had to be relative in exactly the way they turned out to be. So, in a nice ironic turn, it was his faith in the absolute that led Einstein to relativity.

You may wonder why — when I have so many lessons I could teach — I would choose to teach relativity to my congregation. Why not evolution, with all its theological implications?

First, I have taught physics at the college level for more than 20 years, and relativity is the subject I most love to teach.

It’s easy and pleasurable to teach when you are enamored with the subject.

You may have memories of subjects in which you had little to no interest upon entering the class, but the enthusiasm of the teacher brought the subject alive for you.

Relativity makes us question our fundamental ideas about the universe. In this way it is like the Copernican theory, which, 500 years ago, forced a similar renegotiation. It is hard to imagine how disorienting it must have been for people who had assumed all their lives that the Earth was fixed and immovable.

Scientists were the first to deal with a sun-centered universe, but eventually everyone else had to also. It may be that in some distant future, everyone will know relativity. But I choose it not for this reason, but because I love big ideas that force us to question our everyday assumptions.

In his address at the dedication of the Ryerson Physical Laboratory at the University of Chicago in 1895, American physicist Albert A. Michelson made a bold and terrifically wrong prediction:

“While it is never safe to affirm that the future of physical science has no marvels in store even more astonishing than those of the past, it seems probable that most of the grand underlying principles have been firmly established and that further advances are to be sought chiefly in the rigorous application of these principles to all the

phenomena which come under our notice.”

In other words, Michelson believed that physics was largely settled and that only a long series of applications and ever-precise measurements lay in its future. Alas, within a few years physicists began to uncover the secrets of the quantum world, and within a decade Einstein would be on the cusp of announcing his special theory of relativity.

The moral of relativity, as of so much of science, is this: We think we know the world, but we do not. Our experience and knowledge are limited; we do not know our neighborhood as well as we suppose.

“Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery,” writes Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

“Nothing is rich but the inexhaustible wealth of nature,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in one of his many letters. “She shows us only surfaces, but she is a million fathoms deep.”

If these things are true, and relativity is just one sign that they are, then what are we Christians to do? How are we to think about a Creator who creates such a cosmos, with surprises lurking one after another beyond our vision?

And how can we presume to know so much when our perception is so limited? How can we place confidence in our theology when science, which is in many ways simpler than theology, is so often revealed to be incomplete?

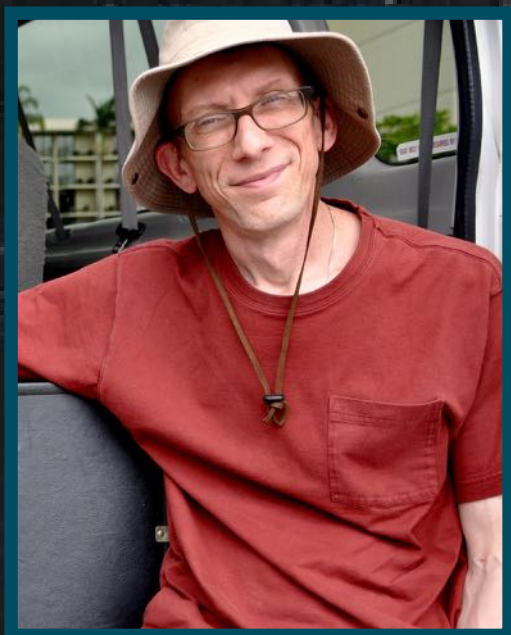
My hope is that such questions, when taken seriously, will not so much cause us to lose faith as they will engender humility.

It is right and proper and good to believe, and to take belief seriously; but it is at some point necessary to hold beliefs lightly, with a sense of humor, wonder and trust in the goodness of God.

We see through a glass darkly, wrote Paul, and relativity, a seminal breakthrough in human vision, stands, ironically, as one reminder of this our finite frame. **NFJ**

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to john@goodfaithmedia.org.

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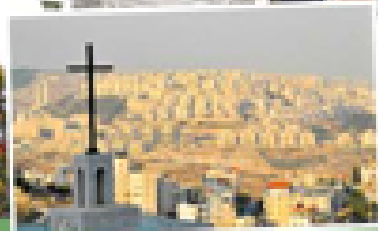
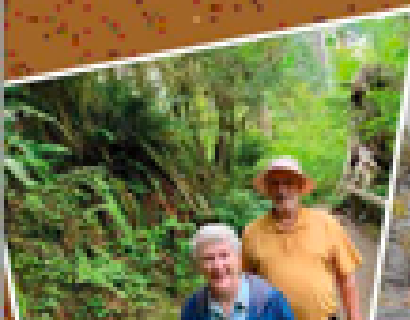
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