

JULY-AUGUST 2022

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**Journal** & Bible Studies

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uses same gifts  
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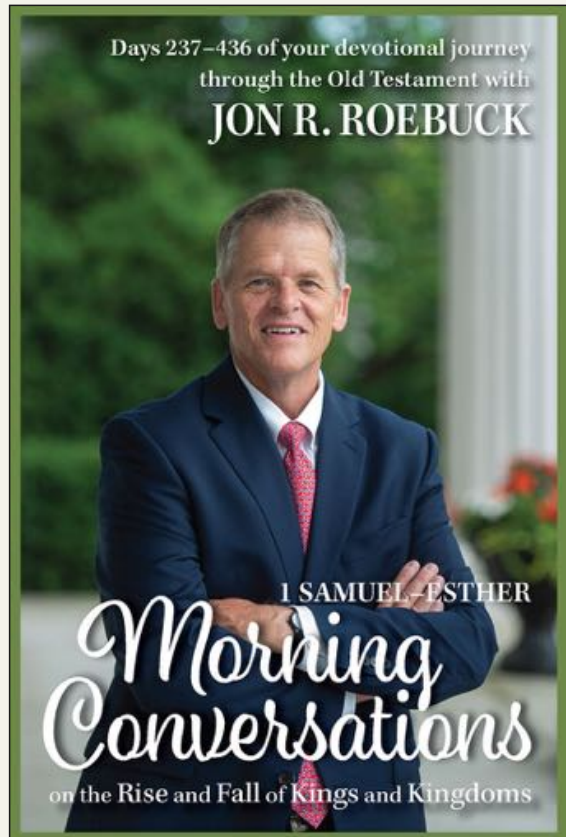
## ARE WE FORMING FOLLOWERS OF JESUS?

- › The last ministers of education
- › Faith formation's changing face
- › Young adults on the move

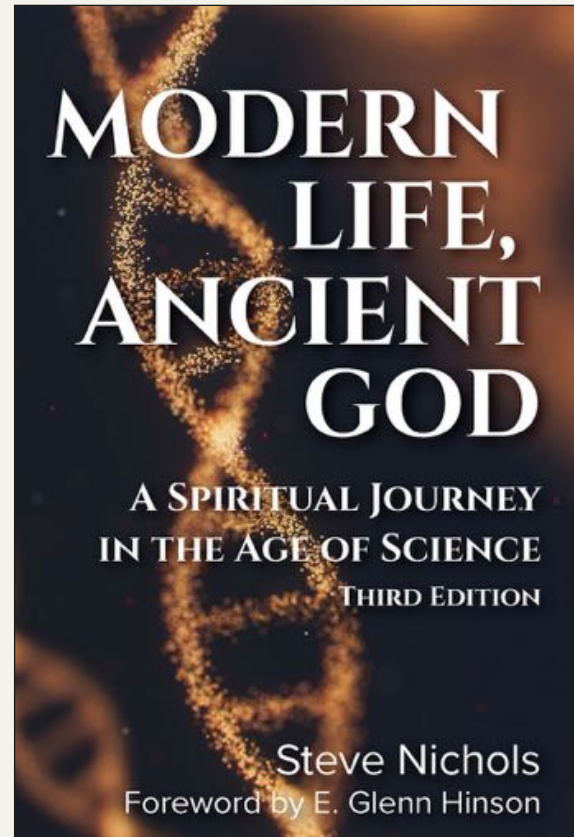
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# Editor's Letter

Some people don't do much questioning, having found all the answers needed to satisfy their lives. I'm not one of them.

Lately, I've been paying closer attention to those questions that keep occupying my mind. Some are born of curiosity, while others are part of an ongoing search for better understanding and squeezing the most out of the limits of life.

Many of the most pressing questions that cling to my mind relate to values, priorities and realities. They teeter on the inconsistencies between what is loudly proclaimed and what is actually prioritized. Asking questions is not rudeness nor unfaithfulness. Just read through the Gospels and take note of how Jesus was a great asker of questions.

Rather than offering pat answers to

posed questions, he liked to respond to questions with questions. Often, he would tell a story — that sometimes concluded with a question — in which truth could be extracted by those willing to think.

This issue of the journal gives significant attention to the question, "Are we forming followers of Jesus?"

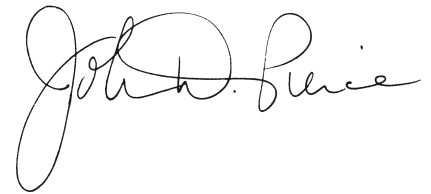
This questioning is based more on confession than judgment. It is an invitation to seriously consider *if*— and, if so, *how*— those engaged in faith-based communities and practices are helping to shape followers of Jesus.

This introspection is paired with the hope that we will do so more consistently and effectively. You will find most of this related content in the second half of the journal — just after our own contributions to spiritual formation: Nurturing Faith

Bible Studies.

Questions are good. They are often the necessary fuel for digging deep enough to discover the kinds of changes that are needed to make a difference.

One note: Bruce Gourley, whose history of Sunday School appears on page 40, returns with the continuation of his "Religion and the American Presidents" series in the next issue of the journal.



Executive Editor  
[john@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:john@goodfaithmedia.org)

## Great Bible Study IS IN YOUR HANDS!



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

See page 21 for more information.

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*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](http://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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## 'THE LAST EDUCATION MINISTERS'

Spiritual formation taking on new aims, forms and vocabulary  
By John D. Pierce

**58**

# INSIDE

VOL. 40, ISSUE 4  
JULY / AUGUST 2022



## IMPERFECT ATTENDANCE

**40**

A historical look at the rising and reshaping of Sunday School  
By Bruce Gourley

## THOUGHTS

**7** Admitting what hasn't worked gives hope to doing what does work  
By John D. Pierce

**8** Fanny Crosby was my first theology teacher  
By J. Daniel Day

**12** Churches, ministers and others must adapt to dramatic shifts  
By Larry Hovis

**14** Christian discipleship calls for transformed minds  
By Mitch Randall

**16** Sundays are no longer the exclusive domain of the church  
By Bill Wilson

**18** The word of God calls for our participation  
By John R. Franke

**19** Identifying with Jesus challenges all other identities  
By Starlette Thomas

## FEATURES

**4** 'MINISTER & MAYOR'  
Aidsand Wright-Riggins uses the same gifts in distinct roles  
By John D. Pierce

**46** EXCAVATING THE SOUL  
Fostering growth takes courage, modeling, probing, vulnerability  
By John D. Pierce

**48** TRENDS & INNOVATION  
Educators discuss the changing face of faith formation  
By John D. Pierce

**56** MOVING, BREATHING, CONNECTING  
Young adults seek more than biblical knowledge and classroom doctrine  
By John D. Pierce

**62** QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK SCIENTISTS  
If you could add one scientific idea into the language of the church, what would it be?  
By Paul Wallace

## MEDIA

**61** A long labor, a full circle and a source of great wisdom  
By Larry C. Williams

## THE LIGHTER SIDE:

**"Getting ready for our funeral"**

By Brett Younger



**20**

Cover photo by John D. Pierce. A cross rises in arid Wadi Qelt, just off the road between Jericho and Jerusalem.

# MINISTER & MAYOR

Aidsand Wright-Riggins uses the same gifts in distinct roles

**STORY AND PHOTO  
BY JOHN D. PIERCE**

COLLEGEVILLE, Penn. — When Aidsand Wright-Riggins moved from his home in California to work with American Baptists in Valley Forge, Penn., his family settled in the nearby Philadelphia suburb of Collegeville. It was his home base, however, more than his home community.

“I had no real roots in the community,” said Aidsand, explaining that his work leading the American Baptist Home Mission Societies involved extensive travel.

So, after retiring from his denominational position in 2015, he decided to do something about that.

## GO LOCAL

Aidsand and his wife Betty, also a minister, had adopted a granddaughter whom they wanted to feel both the warmth of home and community. So, he “retired to go local.”

“I wanted her to feel about her community like I feel about Compton,” he said of the California town where he was raised.

Aidsand joined the local Rotary Club to get better acquainted with community leaders beyond familiar church circles.

“It struck me that I had lived about half of my life here and knew nothing about where I lived,” he confessed. So, he set out to change that — never imagining where such curiosity and commitment would lead.

“Pennsylvania is a whole series of municipalities,” he said, with some bumping their lines of demarcation against another. However, he added, Collegeville had some uniqueness.

“Ursinus College is basically the center of Collegeville,” he said of the school that opened in 1869, founded by members of the German Reform Church. Other colleges existed in what was earlier

known as Providence and then Freeland.

The academic-themed name was applied when a rail station was established in what is now the Borough of Collegeville, incorporated in 1896.

## CONCERNS

While many good aspects of life in the borough were noted, Aidsand had concerns as well.

The town-and-gown leadership, he said, lacked a healthy connection. And he noted other divides that he thought could be bridged with the right leadership.

However, he was surprised when some within the community suggested he run for public office — perhaps city council or a school board position. But those responsibilities, he felt, didn’t really fit his gifts.

But what about mayor? Having never held an elected position, such a role didn’t seem like the place to start.

The mayorship, however, is the borough’s only administrative position and includes oversight of the police, fire and other emergency services. The job description fit well, but Aidsand couldn’t imagine being what voters wanted.

He was even told by those who encouraged him to run for office in 2017: “You won’t win, but it will get your name out there.” And there was a motivating sense of civic and personal responsibility he felt.

“I wanted to define for my granddaughter that there is a different way of winning by exercising your voice,” he said. So, he entered what seemed to be an ill-fated race otherwise.

“I ran largely because of all the vitriol in the national election in 2016,” he said, noting that the hostilities appeared at the community level both within and without the political structures. “I didn’t have any hopes of winning.”

An African-American Baptist minis-

ter with a long career rooted in social justice didn’t fit the supposed profile for leading a municipality that was about 90 percent white. The previously rural area had shifted into a home for pharmaceutical companies and other businesses.

The education level of citizens in Collegeville was quite high. But politics reflected the conservatism of the past.

## POLITICS

Aidsand said his political opponents portrayed him as an outsider who would bring in gangs, playing to racist stereotypes and racial fear.

Supporters rented out a local diner and invited the public to a breakfast at which Aidsand shared his vision of bringing citizens together across dividing lines — including newcomer and longtime residents, college officials and government leaders, and isolated immigrants and families with deep roots in Collegeville.

To his surprise, Aidsand got 60 percent of the vote and was sworn in as mayor in January 2018. His recent reelection was much closer, but a win that affirmed his leadership.

“I thought it was really important to put the college back in Collegeville,” said the mayor. “It’s a much healthier relationship now.”

That priority is noticeable in the way the college — with a new street-side building — appears along Main Street now, just down from the municipal offices. City and college officials meet regularly, he said.

Collegeville needed a “cultural shift,” said Aidsand. So, he engaged new business leaders in addition to those who “want things to be the way they were 30 years ago.”

The work has a familiar feel, he said. “I don’t find it a whole lot different than being pastor of the last congregation I served, working with different classes and tribes.”

## CLEAR ROLES

A strong advocate of religious liberty and its corollary separation of church and state, Aidsand said some early work was needed to define his distinct roles as minister and mayor.

Most suspicious were some Unitarian Universalists who made assumptions, he said, about “what it would be like to have a Black Baptist preacher as mayor.” Those concerns were put quickly to rest, he said, and those who worried about the blurring of lines are now allies.

In some circles Aidsand is deemed “Rev.” or “Rev. Dr.” and in others “Mayor.” But he insists that the ministerial designation and the municipal title never merge.

While his pastoral gifts and commitments to justice and equality, along with his administrative skills, play in both arenas, he knows where the lines are drawn.

“My community service is based upon the faith commitments I have,” he said. “But I don’t exercise those faith commitments in office.”

His community leadership has also led to recently becoming president-elect of the local Rotary organization where his deeper dive into the community began. Though small, he said the diverse membership includes a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jehovah Witness, Jews, and those of various Christian traditions.

“I just try to be sensitive,” said Aidsand of living and working among diverse people.

He led Rotary to end its tradition of starting each meeting with a specifically Christian prayer. And as mayor, he shows similar respect to those who may hold differing cultural and religious perspectives.

“I give the opportunity for swearing in on whatever document someone chooses — the [U.S.] Constitution, a family Bible, the Quran...”

And, distinctively, he performs weddings as either a minister or a mayor.

## LEADERSHIP

Aidsand retains a ministerial leadership role as co-executive director of the New



TOWN & GOWN: Collegeville Mayor Aidsand Wright-Riggins with Jill Leauber Marstelle, interim president of Ursinus College

Baptist Covenant, which seeks to bridge Baptists across racial and denominational lines.

The effort was initiated by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, a Baptist layman, that resulted in a massive gathering in Atlanta in 2008 and subsequent initiatives.

The organization’s mission aligns with Aidsand’s pastoral leadership in California and with his service among American Baptists from 1991 to 2015.

Leaving California for the leadership role with American Baptists didn’t come easy for him. The word “mission” within American Baptist Home Mission Societies evoked the colonialism that mission enterprises often created for non-white persons.

In reading the history of the society, however, Aidsand discovered that an earlier and highly influential leader was Henry Morehouse — for whom the historic Black college in Atlanta is named. It is the alma mater of Martin Luther King Jr. and many other shapers of American civil rights.

Aidsand would have been among them. But his father, stricken with cancer, asked that he attend college closer to home on the West Coast.

## INFLUENCES

“I was a boy preacher,” said Aidsand, who was licensed to ministry as a 9-year-old on Juneteenth (June 19) in 1960. His family has been part of the Black migration to

California from the U.S. South.

“They were called ‘race people,’” he said. “They were very concerned about uplifting the community.”

Aidsand recalled his parents telling him about the Montgomery Bus Boycott and other early aspects of the civil rights movement. And, as a boy, he met Martin Luther King Jr. and attended a Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles.

“My two models for ministry were Martin Luther King and Billy Graham,” he said. “These were my heroes.”

Aidsand said his parents raised him to see no distinction between personal faith and public service.

“I was raised with a theology of Billy Graham and with a sociology — that was in fact a theology — of Martin Luther King.”

## PIVOTAL POINT

Following seminary and during his pastoral ministry, Aidsand had what he described as “a crisis of ministry and marriage.” He submitted to a variety of tests at the Center for Ministry in Oakland.

“It’s really evident you have a call to ministry and are good at it,” he was told. “But probably the pastorate is not best for you.”

He was advised to do something that was more administrative and aimed toward justice — perhaps even something political.

“It blew me away,” he said. “[Being a pastor] is all I’d ever known.”

Yet upon further reflection, Aidsand realized that he “liked the pastorate but didn’t love it.”

So, he opened himself up to a broader calling — one that would better match his gifts. And that calling led to his longtime work among and beyond American Baptists.

“I really found something I loved and was called to do,” he said. “It had a strong social justice component and required organizational skills.”

“And nothing is more political than a denomination,” he added — even being mayor of a growing and changing borough outside Philadelphia. [NFJ](#)

# Worth Repeating

*“If you love wastefully,  
you are living fully.”*

— BodhiChristo teacher Heiwa no Bushi (RNS)

“When integrity leaves the public square... the moral and spiritual compass of a community goes missing, and the path forward is not a promising one.”

Colin Harris, professor emeritus of religious studies at Mercer University (GFM)

“The current obsession with God’s masculinity has little to do with protecting or defending the nature of God and more to do with protecting one’s status as more God-like than others.”

Pentecostal theologian Cheryl Bridges-Johns (Twitter)

“It is unhealthy to think that productivity and ministry are the same thing.”

Aussie theologian Michael Bird (Word from the Bird)

“The notion that each of us is inherently sacred has guided my understanding of how I should see myself and others....”

Rabbi Rachel Ain of New York City, referencing Gen. 1:27 (GFM)

“There aren’t two sides to a lie.”

Former *Time* magazine editor Richard Stengel (Twitter)

“It is not too early to begin scouting out the emerging landscape for post-pandemic ministry, but perhaps we shouldn’t seed the greens and cut the holes until the lava cools.”

Pastor Barry Howard of Atlanta’s Church at Wieuca, using the imagery of a lush-on-lava golf course in Hawaii (GFM)

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# Admitting what hasn't worked gives hope to doing what does work

By John D. Pierce

*Why are so many people — who've been saturated in every aspect of our churches throughout their lives — among the most eager to embrace attitudes so clearly at odds with the life and teachings of Jesus?*

**W**restling with this reality and seeking answers to the resulting perplexity are good starting points for possibly rectifying what keeps going wrong.

We can deny, downplay or excuse what we are clearly witnessing. But facing it gives better understanding of why the faith we hold dear is seen by others as uncompassionate, undesirable and even abusive.

It is no wonder so many raised in and now resistant to versions of Americanized Christianity in which this reality has been laid bare are doing some serious deconstruction and hopefully positive reconstruction of their personal faith.

To be defensive about what has emerged within evangelical Christianity and to push back against needed reconsiderations is to slam the door on honesty and reflection.

In much of Americanized Christianity — including the most culturally visible parts — Jesus is largely left out of what it means to be Christian. He is replaced by a narrow, self-serving, religious and political commitment reliant upon ill-defined code words (ex: pro-life, religious freedom) with accompanying hostility toward equality, justice and compassion.

Churchgoers are the primary forces behind the legislative efforts of politicians trying to out-hate and out-discriminate one another during an election cycle. All this is driven by self-identified Christians who credit their faith for their actions.

Did they not learn the words of Jesus

in their churches? Was the message muffled to avoid offense? Had Jesus as “the way” presented, but only as an option?

The troubling but necessary question of whether the church is forming followers of Jesus

has a long history. Questions about the past reveal the church to be slow learners.

How could slaveholders worship the God in whose image all persons are made, hear sermons and read the Bible (including the Gospels, one might assume) and then treat other humans as mere property?

We know the answer! Economics, power and personal comfort trump anything that comes with a personal cost no matter how others are treated as a result. Also, justifications got voiced across pulpits from those whose salaries depended on the offerings reaped from forced labor.

Cheap grace, not faithfulness, is what gets handed out when institutional preservation — often masked as “keeping the peace” — is valued more than hearing and heeding what Jesus called his followers to be and do. So, the questions keep coming.

How can those who repeatedly sang “Jesus loves the little children,” memorized and regurgitated Bible verses such as “Be ye kind one to another,” and sent mission gifts to the ends of the earth be the staunchest supporters of efforts to demean, exclude and abuse people based on race and ethnicity?

Opportunity after opportunity passes in which American churchgoers can step up and do the right, basic, Jesus-valued thing. Yet, they fail to do so. Why?

Why does this big chunk of the church always have to be dragged along by the larger, more secular culture to do what aligns with the way Jesus taught his followers to live in relationship with others?

Only a revised and safe Jesus is accept-



able. It's OK to call him savior and friend — and the sweetest name we know. He saves us, walks beside us, promises heaven, and helps us through hard times. We've done about everything in the world with Jesus except follow him.

Since that's the one thing he asked us to do, we must wrestle more with the questions of why we so consistently fail to do so. Only then might we start to create congregational cultures — with public expressions — in which following Jesus is the highest priority.

At the least, shouldn't churches and church organizations be the places where an expectation of following Jesus is repeatedly raised? What might that look like? Here are some ideas:

- Recognize the absence of Jesus' calling in what many Christians and congregations actually teach, believe and do.
- Reimagine the church's priorities and purpose to better align with Jesus' life and teaching.
- Refuse to limit Jesus to a mere transactional version of salvation.
- React intentionally and constructively to the public misrepresentations of Christianity by those who use it for personal power and political gain.
- Refocus on faithfulness rather than success.

Jesus didn't soft-sell his message to draw bigger crowds of less-serious disciples. Some followed; some did not. Some started; some finished. All stumbled a bit.

Yet rejection didn't cause him to reduce his demands for loving God more fully and putting the welfare of others ahead of one's own interests and desires. So why do we make it easier to identify with Jesus than what he said was required? **NFJ**

# Fanny Crosby was my first theology teacher

By J. Daniel Day

*“All the way my Savior leads me” was a phrase that came to mind during a personal crisis in the fall of 2021.*

I’d known that line since childhood; I’d sung it hundreds of times in worship. Now it became a rescuing, reassuring thought.

So was the probing question that followed it: “Can I doubt his tender mercy who through life has been my guide?”

Suddenly, my curiosity was as piqued as my spirit had been stirred by this old song. Had its author really faced many crises, ever had occasions when doubting God’s mercy made as much sense as trusting it? Who wrote these sensitive, enduring words of assurance?

A quick look in a hymnal — in this instance, a Methodist hymnal — informed me that Fanny Crosby (1820–1915) wrote these words. She is the author of 21 hymns printed in the songbook of my childhood, the 1940 *Broadman Hymnal*.

*The Baptist Hymnal* of 1956 also published 21 of Crosby’s texts, and the 1975 and 1991 editions include 13 and 16 respectively. (In fairness, the durability of any hymn is affected by the tune to which it is set, and most of Crosby’s best texts were blessed by being set to appropriate tunes.)

Unquestionably, this blind, 4’9”

woman — who never weighed more than 100 pounds — looms larger than life in the theological heritage of American evangelicalism.

Generations before doctrinal dog-fights broke out over women in the pulpit, Fanny Crosby had probably been in our pulpits at least once a month for a century, musically teaching us our theology.

And she’s still doing it! In the 2010 *Celebrating Grace* hymnal, the list of Fanny Crosby hymns remains lengthy. In addition to “All the Way My Savior Leads Me,” you will find these:

“To God Be the Glory”  
“Praise Him! Praise Him!”  
“Tell Me the Story of Jesus”  
“Rescue the Perishing”  
“I Am Thine, O Lord”  
“Lord, Here Am I”  
“Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It”  
“He Hideth My Soul”  
“Blessed Assurance”  
“Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross”

Consider Crosby’s remarkable life-story. She was born sighted to a simple farm family in New York state. A traveling “doctor,” treating a childhood eye infection with heated poultices that scorched her corneas, left her able only to discern light from darkness.

Soon thereafter her father abandoned her mother. Thus, Fanny was raised by a single mother — and a

grandmother who was convinced this intelligent child could learn.

This grandmother began assigning passages of scripture for Fanny to memorize, and she excelled at it. By age 15 she had memorized much of the Bible.

Moreover, she demonstrated amazing rhyming ability, even composing a witty satirical poem about a local politician who caught the eye of a local newspaper editor, P.T. Barnum. He would gladly have included the tiny, blind, poetry-writing, scripture-reciter among his assembly of atypical human “specimens.”

As puberty dawned, the buoyancy of Fanny’s childhood gave way to depression as she tried to accept the limited world that was to be her fate. When she learned of the newly established New York Institute for the Blind in Manhattan, she became ecstatic.

She enrolled immediately, at age 15, and blossomed so impressively that she became the residential institute’s favorite “artist,” always featured in its endless stream of programs to showcase the learning capabilities of the blind.

She would sing, play the piano or harp, and always recite a poem freshly composed for the occasion. She soon was employed as a teacher at the institute and became a regular visitor in the churches of Manhattan.

Many Sundays she would catch the ferry to Brooklyn to listen to the sermons

of Henry Ward Beecher. But it was in the simple missions and preaching stations for the poor, especially among the holiness Methodists, that she eventually found salvation and a church tradition.

At last, her poetic gifts had a subject large enough to engage her wholly!

In 1858 she married a student at the institute who was 11 years her junior (she was then 38) and resigned her teaching responsibilities to join him in his duties as a church organist. A child was soon born to them, but tragically died in infancy.

Fanny's grief was so deep that she never later talked of it; we don't even know if the baby was a boy or a girl. This tragedy may also have affected her marriage, for soon thereafter the two began living separately and though they never divorced they seldom saw one another.

When her husband died decades later, she did not attend his funeral. One undated poem she left may shed light on their relationship; in it she wrote of a lover whose grief is great because she is the one who caused their disunion. But this possibility is only conjecture.

What is certain is that her skills as an author of what were then called Sunday School songs were great and drew multiple composers to her door.

Sadly, she was often paid only a dollar for texts that others made into fortunes. Nonetheless, Fanny Crosby continued to live modestly as a single lady, visiting and witnessing in rescue missions and slums as easily as addressing posh Christian assemblies.

She became something of a celebrity, the friend of presidents and of the rich and famous along with the poverty-stricken. Only at age 80, when her health required it, did she move to Connecticut to live with relatives until her death 15 years later.

My admiration for this teacher is obvious. As a child of the South, I can even grin with the irony that though she was a born-and-bred Yankee and supporter of the Union during the Civil War — proudly pinning a small U.S. flag to her blouse and once even feistily

attempting to thrash a Southern woman in a restaurant who ridiculed her practice — she is probably more deeply loved today below the Mason-Dixon line than above it.

It is her remarkable life, informing everything she wrote, that gives credence to the theology she dropped into our memory and placed on our lips. Most of her words still feel as right and true as the Gettysburg Address that comes from the same era and ethos.

Yet it is essential to recognize that her forté was what I term “experiential theology.” Her texts are primarily expressions of personal testimony and devotional experience.

“Blessed Assurance” was indeed her story and her song. She was “Redeemed” and loved to proclaim it.

Moreover, she “knew” that “whate’er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well,” and that she was secure in life and in eternity because “He hideth my soul.”

Because “I am thine, O Lord” was her profession, her yearning was for Jesus to “keep me near the cross” and to help her “rescue the perishing.” For the vibrancy and cruciality of her experiential theology I can only say “To God be the glory!”

Fanny Crosby was my first, but not my only theology teacher. Though she rightly keeps me tethered to experiential roots, she taught me little about the trinity, the church, creation, stewardship, justice, race, etc.

Like the rest of us, she was limited in multiple ways. But the century since her death calls for a theology and a hymnody that speaks of a larger world than the inner one that she illumined so well.

Two world wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Rwanda, Ferguson, Sandy Hook, global warming, six million dead from a pandemic, Ukraine — these are the violent realities Crosby's faith must now confront. A staggering 21st-century world cries out to be theologized in song.

Her texts, thankfully, never spoke of a hellfire-and-brimstone God, but one must ask how often in today's

Sunday songs her gracious, saving God is redemptively interacting with the groaning of our present world.

No one ever considered Crosby a poet of immortal stature or lauded her as a theological genius. She was a layperson who wrote unknown thousands of rhyming verses at the request of Christian tunesmiths. In her facile mind she wrote lyrics in bunches, later dictating them in a gush to a secretary.

She wrote for her livelihood, to fulfill a niche in the market for Christian songs. But above all, she wrote as one called to give witness to the glory of Christian faith as she had experienced it. She gave skillful voice to what her age wanted and needed to say; others then gave that voice melody and sent it around the world. My conviction is that God is already sculpting new Fanny Crosbys as sensitive to this age as she was to hers.

Some current hymn-writers whose culturally sensitive texts are notable include Mary Louise Bringle (Presbyterian), David Bjorling (Covenant Evangelical), Carolyn Gillette (Presbyterian), Andrew Pratt (Methodist) and Adam Tice (Mennonite).

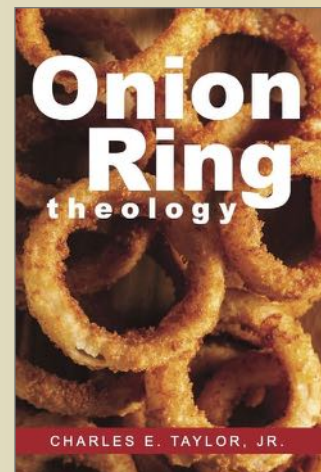
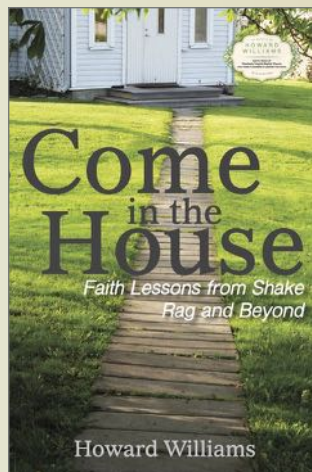
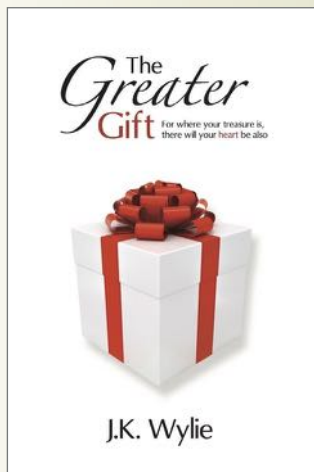
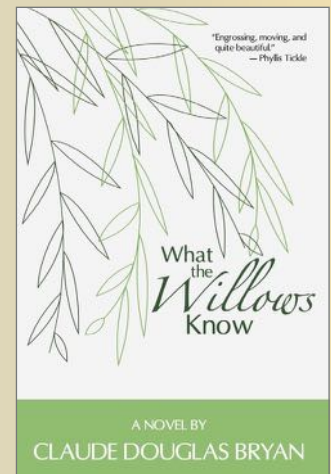
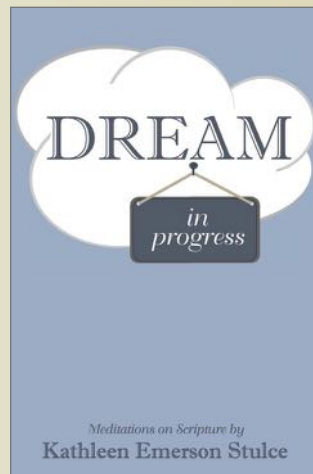
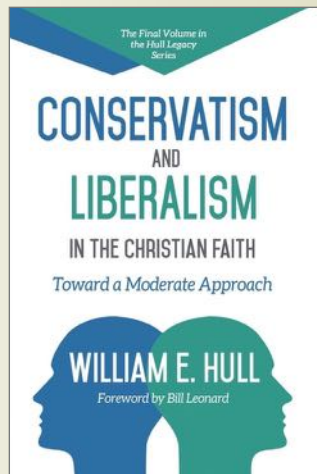
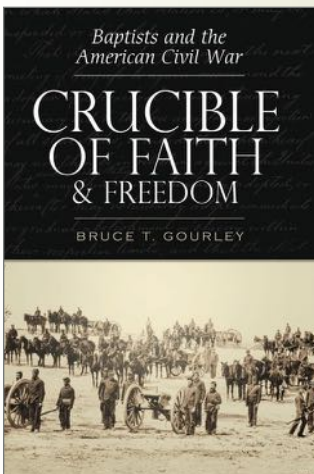
Also, The Hymn Society has three collections downloadable at no cost: *Hymns in Times of Crisis*, *Singing Welcome*, and *Songs for the Holy Other*.

My task is to pray them into maturity and then to sing their new texts, hoping that a bewildered 21st century might hear in them a fresh, expanding theology and a joyful means to continue singing of God's salvation. **NFJ**

—J. Daniel Day is pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church of Raleigh, N.C., and a former divinity school professor. He is author of three Nurturing Faith books: *Seeking the Face of God: Evangelical Worship Reconceived* (2013), *Finding the Gospel: A Pastor's Disappointment and Discovery* (2020), and *Lively Hope: A Taste of God's Tomorrow* (2021). Principal sources for this article were Edith Blumhofer, *Her Heart Can See: The Life and Hymns of Fanny Crosby* (2005) and Bernard Ruffin, *Fanny Crosby* (1976).

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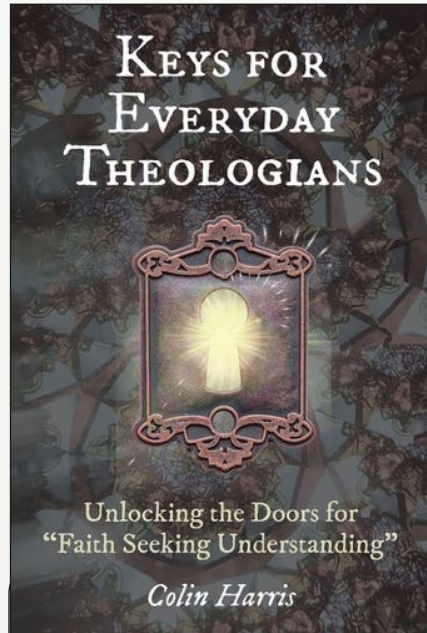
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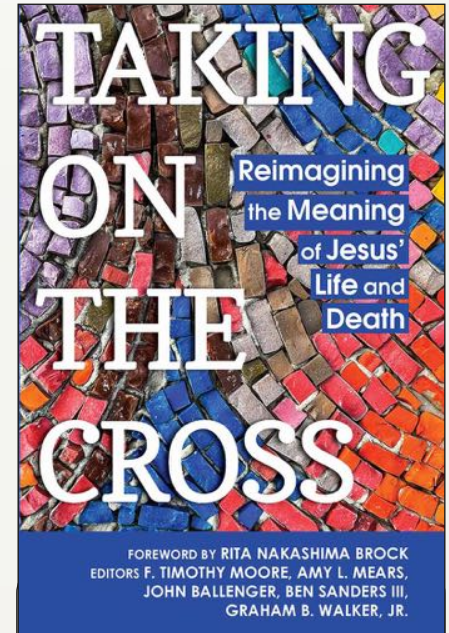
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# Churches, ministers and others must adapt to dramatic shifts

By Larry Hovis

**M**y call to vocational ministry came as a college student in the early 1980s, followed immediately by seminary amid tumultuous denominational conflict. Yet there was no dispute about the basic model for ministerial formation and vocation.

Often called “full-time Christian service,” this prevailing model was for pastors, church staff ministers, chaplains or missionaries to be fully involved in employment by a church or institution.

Seminary attendance usually required a move, sometimes hundreds of miles, to study for three or more years. A student who might serve a church part-time during seminary, would upon graduation likely move elsewhere to serve in a full-time ministry capacity.

I have been in post-seminary vocational ministry for 35 years, the first half as a pastor and the second as a denominational executive. Over the last 10 years, there have been radical shifts in ministerial vocation and formation.

One role our fellowship has long filled is helping churches search for ministers and ministers search for churches.

For many decades, we assumed that most congregational ministers would serve in full-time ministry positions after seminary — then “move up” periodically to larger churches as they gained experience. Our role was to share résumés of ministerial candidates with churches, who would then interview prospective ministers and extend a call to the one they believed was right for their congregation.

Today, the supply of ministers is dwindling; many churches can no longer afford a full-time minister; and ministers are often not as mobile as in previous generations. These trends affect all churches, especially small, rural ones.

The “ministerial supply shortage” is more acute for churches searching

for ministers of children, youth or music — even when offering a generous compensation package.

A partial explanation is that fewer students are preparing for vocational ministry. And many theology schools report less than half of their students feel called to congregational ministry. Reasons for the reduction in theological students defy simplistic analysis, but here are some possibilities.

First, churches are getting smaller and older. There are fewer young adults involved in any sort of faith community today; therefore, fewer are being called.

Second, young adults are less likely to see vocational ministry as an attractive career path. Even young adults who want to change the world as an expression of their faith are seeking pathways outside of Christian institutions.

Third, those called to vocational ministry are often less mobile due to a spouse’s job, children’s needs or other responsibilities.

While there are no simple solutions to these challenges, at least three shifts can help churches to adapt.

(1) Many ministers will be involved in multiple careers, only one of which might be service to a single church. Some pastors may be semi-retired, some may also serve in other ministry settings such as chaplaincy, and some may also have careers in another field.

Churches will become less dependent on clergy. Programming and administrative processes will be leaner and less cumbersome. Being better stewards of everyone’s limited time — clergy and busy lay leaders — will be necessary.

The church will need to work “smarter, not harder.” A bonus could be a recovery of the cherished doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

(2) To address the clergy shortage,

especially in rural areas, churches will need to call and equip local believers to serve as congregational ministers, rather than relying on someone to move to their community. This requires recognition and respect for ministry gifts within fellow church members — and learning to cultivate a call to ministry from within.

Where there are trained and experienced ministers in other churches in the community, they will need to take on the role of mentors. This departs from the way many churches have operated for decades.

However, there is a historical precedent for this approach that was followed in many regions during previous eras. It may be an important part of a faithful and fruitful future.

(3) While residential theological education will still provide a valuable resource for many, new platforms for delivery are necessary. Some schools have already developed programs that are delivered online or in a hybrid format, but more remote learning opportunities are needed.

While the Master of Divinity degree will remain the “gold standard,” new degrees and certificate programs need to be more accessible to resource those responding to the call who are older, local and serving in part-time roles.

Adaptation to these shifts will require a massive transformation in attitude and practice on the part of churches, theological schools, denominational organizations and ministers themselves. It will take courage, faith and innovation on the part of everyone involved. *NFJ*

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

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# Christian discipleship calls for transformed minds

By Mitch Randall

Stepping onto the campus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, I arrived as a good little fundamentalist.

**G**rowing up in staunch Southern Baptist churches in Oklahoma, I was indoctrinated in biblical literalism, patriarchy and nationalism.

Little did I know that my life was about to be upended by an Old Testament professor who dared to challenge my preconceived notions. Boo Heflin was a short man, needing a stepstool to secure his position behind the lectern. His voice was quiet, but his words were powerful.

He delivered the convocation address at the beginning of my first semester, speaking on “An egalitarian interpretation of scripture, elevating women to their proper roles.”

Growing up I had never heard of the world “egalitarian,” so his title intrigued me. I just assumed he would reaffirm what I’d heard from every pastor and youth minister — that, “according to scripture,” women were to submit to male authorities in home and church.

He started out citing those passages used to enshrine male authority. Then, one-third of the way through his presentation, he changed course. When he did, my life changed course as well.

Professor Heflin began placing those passages within their proper context. Then he cited other texts that revealed mutual submission between men and women. He then read texts where women held positions of leadership and authority over men.

My fundamentalist mind was blown. I had never heard some of these texts or been taught the historical context by which other passages should be understood.

For the first time in my faith journey,



I was being given tools to further my understanding of faith instead of being told what to believe. It was eye-opening.

This convocation address and my encounters with other professors throughout my seminary education started me down a path of spiritual formation for which I will be forever grateful.

This moment of learning pushed me to realize that the objective of faith is not to have the “right” beliefs about God, but to have a relationship with God in ways that continually reveals more about the divine through human inquisitiveness and discovery.

Now, more than four decades later, I realize that the more I learn about God the more questions I will have. While we will truly never know everything about the divine, the journey is filled with wonder, mystery and joy.

When asked about the most important commandment, Jesus responded, “Love the Lord God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). The Greek word here for “mind” is *dianoia*, which means to search for a balanced meaning using critical thinking.

Jesus is challenging us to think critically about God in order to learn and experience more of the divine. He called for his disciples to grow in their understanding of God and the world.

Claimed certainty can easily usher in subjectiveness that leads to human arrogance and control over others. Jesus liberates his followers to think from the perspectives of others, especially those who are marginalized and oppressed.

The Apostle Paul understood Jesus when he wrote: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Cor. 13:11).

For the Christian movement to be relevant in the present and future, we must embrace the spirit of learning and formation. We have witnessed moments when the church dared to think differently about God and further the faith through deeper understanding.

The Reformation ushered in the importance of individual conscience and soul liberty. The Abolitionist Movement challenged white supremacy, leading to the end of slavery. The suffrage movement denounced male superiority, arguing instead for an egalitarian way of life.

The Civil Rights Movement decried the treatment of blacks, especially in the South, demanding equality based upon scriptural teachings. LGBTQ rights were secured through legal means, but with a small yet brave segment of the faithful that emphasized love over exclusion.

If we take the teachings of Jesus seriously, then we will use our minds to ask more and better questions, not fewer ones.

People of good faith must rise to the occasion and engage in disciplines and practices that challenge our minds and inspire our souls. Let us continue to learn more about God so that our minds are transformed more into the likeness of Jesus. [NFJ](#)

—Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.



# Summer journalism interns join Good Faith Media

BY ZACH DAWES JR.

**L**ibby Carroll and Kira Dewey are serving as Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Interns for Good Faith Media during the summer of 2022. They form the sixth internship group since the program was launched in the fall semester of 2020.

Libby is a sophomore at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where she is pursuing a University Scholars Bachelor of Arts degree, focusing on professional writing and rhetoric, art history and liberal arts. After graduation, she plans to attend law school and pursue a career in human rights advocacy.

“I am excited and grateful for the opportunity to expand my skills as a writer and continue my education on issues of justice through the Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Internship,” she said.

Kira is a student at Palm Beach Atlantic University in West Palm Beach, Fla. She is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in

English, with a creative writing minor, and anticipates graduating in May 2025.

“Through this internship opportunity, I hope to improve my writing skills, connect with fellow authors and gain experience in the publishing industry,” she said.

The internship program was established with an initial 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.

“The Ernest Hynds internship program has been an incredible success, with high quality interns gaining valuable experience and contributing in substantive ways to Good Faith Media’s resources,” said GFM CEO Mitch Randall.

Gifts to support this ongoing



engagement with the next generation of communicators may be made by contacting Mitch Randall ([mitch@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:mitch@goodfaithmedia.org)) or Autumn Lockett ([autumn@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:autumn@goodfaithmedia.org)) by email or by phone at 615-627-7763. Prospective interns may inquire about upcoming internships by contacting GFM at [internships@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:internships@goodfaithmedia.org). **NFJ**

—Zach Dawes Jr. is Good Faith Media’s managing editor for news and opinion.

## Director Emerita Ann Roebuck remembered



Ann Roebuck of Rome, Ga., died May 9 at age 91. A Kentucky native, she lived much of her adult life in the northwest Georgia town where her husband of 68 years, Floyd Roebuck, was longtime pastor of Rome’s First Baptist Church. In addition to her husband, she is survived by sons Dan and Jon and their families. Ann served as the chair of the board of this journal during the editorship of Jack Harwell and has long encouraged and supported its ministry. In 2015, the publication’s board named her Director Emerita. Joined by her husband Floyd (right), the recognition was made by Editor John Pierce.



### Nannette Avery named Director Emerita

During its April meeting in Nashville, directors of Good Faith Media bestowed the title of Director Emerita on Nannette Avery of Signal Mountain, Tenn. She is a longtime supporter, director and former officer of one of GFM’s predecessor organization, Nurturing Faith. She is an active member of the First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tenn., where she has taught generations of children in Sunday School. She has also served in leadership roles at the state and national level with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

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

## *Sundays are no longer the exclusive domain of the church*

By Bill Wilson

It was a haunting statement by a pastor about how her church has rebounded from the impact of Covid-19 on worship attendance. Like most, she reported that about 65 percent of pre-pandemic attendees had returned to in-person worship.



Covid-19, many attendees became comfortable enough with technology to be satisfied with their virtual worship and forego in-person worship.

Others simply fell out of the habit, didn't miss it, or just took up swimming. Something fundamental has changed for the American church, and worship habits are only part of the visible manifestation of

that change.

I am not sure how to describe it, but have no doubt we will be dealing with a new way of thinking about and doing church for many years to come. Now we must make a strong case for engaging in authentic community and worship based on something other than habit, guilt or obligation.

Those who only attended "when there wasn't anything better to do" are probably not coming back. Convenience attendees are telling us that swimming on Sundays is more meaningful than attending church.

That's not simply an indictment of their self-absorption; it is also a revealing indictment of what we have been doing in worship. Now is the time to ask some hard questions about worship, technology, and how we are going to gather as the body of Christ. Here are some for starters:

- What is genuinely meaningful about our worship?

- What is not meaningful about our worship?
- How do we evaluate what we do in worship?
- Is a hybrid model of worship (both in-person and virtual) here to stay?
- How might we use technology to engage those who are not physically able to attend on Sunday mornings?
- What does it mean if more people watch the worship service "on demand" during the week than live on Sunday morning?
- What does meaningful engagement look like for our constituents?

Blessings on those who navigate this next season of congregational life. It's going to stretch us in ways we have not known before. It is going to be a season of listening for understanding — and engaging our imaginations, innovative ideas and creativity.

I hope we will hear the 85 percent of Americans who are not in a church of any kind on a given Sunday — as they swim, eat, shop, work and go about their busy lives. We must find a way to bring the Good News to them, if they choose not to come to us. *NFJ*

*-Bill Wilson is founding director of the Center for Healthy Churches.*

Many of the other one-third, she had assumed, were now virtual worshippers who found that format more convenient. However, she told of a conversation with someone who had been a regular attendee prior to the pandemic.

When the pastor asked about her worship engagement, the member responded simply: "Oh, I swim now on Sunday mornings."

The starkness of that statement, and what it reveals, continues to haunt me. For many, attending worship has become a commodity to be weighed against other opportunities.

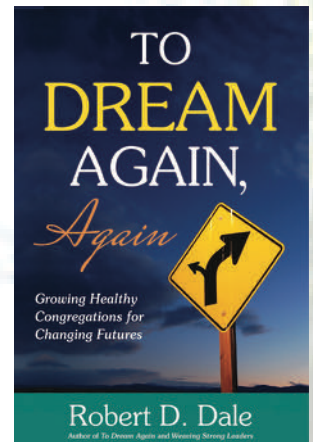
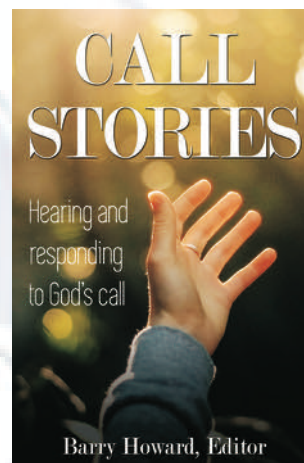
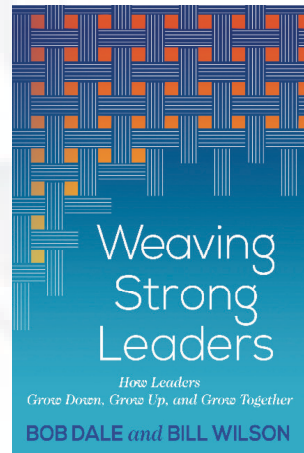
Granted, many people's lives are busier and more complex than they have ever been on Sundays. *The Washington Post* reported that one in three in the American workforce now work on weekends

Sundays are no longer the exclusive domain of the church and are often the only day that families can spend quality time together. As we pivoted to providing online opportunities to worship during



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# 'The word of God' calls for our participation

By John R. Franke

If my experience is anything close to normal, when most Christians hear the phrase "the word of God," they immediately think of the Bible and oftentimes only the Bible.



This is perhaps understandable given the number of times they hear preachers and teachers refer to the Bible as the word of God. This can lead to the impression that the giving of the word of God is a past action that is now contained in the Bible.

As such, it can be viewed as an object that has been pinned down for study, dissection and scrutiny. In fact, it has often been treated in just this way. But based on the witness of the Bible itself, the reality is more complex.

For instance, think of the words in Heb. 4:12: "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

This suggests that the word of God is an ongoing, vibrant reality that cannot be corralled, contained and controlled. It is truly "living and active."

To capture this dynamic understanding, many theologians have suggested that the word of God is best understood as an action of God, or as an ongoing event, in which God has spoken, speaks, and will speak. It is always past, present and future.

As humans, we encounter and engage this divine act or event through the Spirit-inspired and Spirit-guided means of scripture and its proclamation in the life of the church. What is particularly significant about this understanding of the word of God is that since it is God's word and not ours, it is never available to us in a direct, straightforward

way. It cannot therefore be conceived as a deposit of divine truth from which the church and human beings can draw stable conclusions about God and the world, or a set of propositional statements that can be consulted for timeless information about the divine.

From this perspective, the word of God has three forms: the act of revelation itself, the Spirit-inspired attestation and witness to revelation in the words of the prophets and the apostles contained in scripture, and the Spirit-guided proclamation of that witness in the life of the Christian community.

In this conception, it is important to remember that we are speaking of three different forms of the one word of God and not three different words of God.

In seeking to explain this event, we might imagine three concentric circles that represent three movements in the communication and reception of the word of God. The innermost circle of the three is the word of God as revelation or self-revelation.

This is the divine speech and action authored and spoken by God for the purpose of establishing relationship with us and making God's ways and intentions known.

However, since finite human beings cannot comprehend the truth as it is known to the infinite God, God graciously accommodates this divine speech to our creaturely limitations and understanding. It is represented to us and made expressible and approachable

through the human speech and actions found in scripture and the proclamation of the church.

These form two additional circles in the event of the word of God. The human words of scripture and proclamation are intended by God to be the bearers and witnesses of God's divine self-revelation to human beings in diverse historical and cultural situations. Hence, the word of God may be described as the word revealed, the word written, and the word proclaimed.

Another way to picture this event is to imagine a stone cast into the water with rippling effects that go on and on throughout time and into eternity.

God speaks and acts (revelation), humans receive God's speech-acts and bear witness to them in the written word (scripture) and continue to interpret and tell of them in the spoken word (proclamation).

As the word of God is encountered by human beings throughout history in revelation, scripture and proclamation, the expansive goodness of God's love and grace is ever more fully known in the human experience, as are the challenges of faithful participation in God's mission and purposes for creation.

One of the important elements of this conception of the word of God is its human dimension. We cannot conceive of the word of God in this threefold form apart from our participation in it.

The nature and implications of this participation must be acknowledged and accounted for in our understanding of the word of God and its significance for our witness in the world. Exploring this divine-human interaction will be the subject of my upcoming columns. *NFJ*

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

# Identifying with Jesus challenges all other identities

By Starlette Thomas

The “ABCs of salvation” — to “accept, believe and confess” Jesus — are missing something.



**W**hile a neat summary, discipleship is a lengthy and messy process.

Christian spiritual formation begins in the water. Baptism, whether treated as an ordinance or a sacrament, is part of this apprenticeship.

Jesus told Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3). Twice born, or born again, it is more than a fresh start.

Titus calls baptism “the water of rebirth” (3:5). We are re-created.

Jesus gets in line to take more than a dip in the Jordan River. While John the Baptist protests, it is not up to him (Matt. 3:13-17). Baptism is not unlike the Jewish ritual cleansings known as *tilva*; it, too, is an act of immersion.

After our baptism, we don’t merely identify with Christ; we are “baptized into Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:3). “Every Christian is to be a little Christ,” said C.S. Lewis.

Going down with the captain of the ship, baptism is a reenactment of his death, burial and resurrection. But it is not performative; it is to be the Christian’s lived reality.

“Therefore, we have been buried with [Jesus] by baptism into death,” Paul told the Roman Christians. “So that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (6:4).

In baptism, we imitate Jesus’ death while demonstrating our own. Self-mortification or dying to self has external and internal ramifications. We acknowledge our needs for self-discipline and self-denial.

A clean-slate baptism is less about

washing and more about drowning. The competing voices from before we met Jesus are drowned out.

Paul put it this way: “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:16-17)

Today, those who lead the churches of North America would do well to say something more about baptism — as was done in earlier Christian history.

The *Didache* (“The Teachings of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations”) required the baptizer, the baptizand and others, if able, to fast before the administration of baptism.

According to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the baptizer prayed over the water. Before the baptismal ceremony, there was often instruction and a determination for readiness to receive Christian teachings.

In the case of St. Augustine’s baptizands, they were expected to listen to his sermons and teachings on the subject and to participate in a catechism before baptism.

Before the baptizands could put a toe in the water to follow Jesus’ example, they were tested — because all other identities are subjected to and submerged in the water.

Walter Brueggemann writes in *A Way Other Than Our Own*: “For I believe the crisis in the U.S. church has almost nothing to do with being liberal

or conservative; it has everything to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism and settling for a common, generic U.S. identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence and part affluence.”

In baptism, we identify with and through Christ’s body only. Yet, still, churches remain divided over issues of race, class and gender. Consequently, there is need for a return to a more rigorous and intentional baptismal pedagogy.

Paul told the Galatians, as something of a birth announcement: “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” (3:27-28, NRSV).

Paul reminds us that these parallels are false binaries and offer a confession of identity. Considering this affirmation to be the church’s first and forgotten creed, Stephen J. Patterson writes in *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity’s Original Struggle Against Bigotry, Slavery & Sexism*:

“In the long history of Christian theology, spanning centuries and continents, this creed has played virtually no role. How could it? The church became a citadel of patriarchy and enforced this regime wherever it spread. It also endorsed and encouraged the taking of slaves from the peoples it colonized. And within a hundred years of its writing, ‘no Jew or Greek’ became simply ‘no Jews,’ as the church first separated from and then rebelled against its Jewish patrimony, eventually attempting patricide.”

In baptism, we deny ourselves the power that culture, class and gender tell us we have over each other. This is how we identify with Christ, and what we should take from the water. **NFJ**

—Starlette Thomas directs Good Faith Media’s Raceless Gospel Initiative.

# Getting Ready for Our Funeral

By Brett Younger

**D**o you remember Mark Twain's story in which Tom Sawyer, Joe Harper and Huck Finn decide to be pirates? They take a raft to Jackson's Island, build a fire, eat all their provisions, swim a little, smoke a pipe and fall asleep. The next morning, now out of food, they plan to go home, but then see a glorious sight.

A crowd on a ferryboat is dragging the river, looking for three drowned boys—the same three boys who are watching this magnificent spectacle. People miss them. Hearts are breaking. Tears are being shed. Tom comes up with the brilliant idea of staying another day and then attending their funeral.

The church is full when the three pirates sneak into the balcony. The preacher tells stories about the goodness of the boys. Everyone feels guilty because they had only seen faults in the poor, lost boys. The minister relates touching incidents that clearly illustrate the sweet, generous natures of the departed.

The people now easily see how beautiful these episodes are, and are embarrassed that at the time they occurred the boys had seemed like trouble. The congregation becomes more and more moved as the pathetic tale goes on, till at last the whole congregation breaks down in a chorus of anguished sobs, the preacher himself weeping in the pulpit.

At that moment the three dead boys come marching down the aisle. Aunt Polly and the Harpers hug them and smother them with kisses. Suddenly the minister shouts: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow — Sing it! — and put your hearts in it!" Tom Sawyer knows that this is the proudest moment of his life.

When we imagine our own funeral, we picture a big one. Friends and family will come from miles around. Hearts will

break. Mascara will run. Everyone we know will be there to join the weeping chorus. People will talk about how wonderful we were, and how they wish we could be there to see how much we were loved. Best of all, the few people who did not recognize how wonderful we were will see how terribly wrong they were about us, and feel awful about it. The headline will read *Saint Passes on to Glory*.

Most funerals are not big. Attendance is down. Most of the chairs are empty. Yogi Berra said, "If you don't go to other people's funerals, they won't go to yours." A grandson calls: "I'm sorry. It's so far. I can't get off work." His mother is disappointed, but she does not say anything. The widow worries that there will not be enough pallbearers. The minister does not have enough touching stories to tell. At some deaths, the reading of the will takes longer than the eulogy, and draws more attention.

Obituaries tend to include information that makes the lives of the deceased seem inconsequential. They tell when they were born, when they died and where they were when they died. They list their occupation, their relatives and the arrangements for burial. Some obituaries make the dead sound like they hardly lived. When a family member writes the obituary, they often emphasize the cleverness of the one writing the obituary. The writers have trouble explaining how the deceased lived, what mattered to them and what difference they made.

Trappist monks used to greet one another by saying, "Remember that you will die." They believed that remembering their mortality would remind them to give themselves to that which is immortal.



We only get so many days. If we knew we were going to die soon, wouldn't that lead us to cherish the time we have left?

When people make bucket lists of things they hope to accomplish before they die, they often focus on the inconsequential: Be in a parade float. Sit in the audience for *Saturday Night Live*. Ride horses on the beach. Go bungee jumping. Take a hot air balloon ride. Attend the Olympics. Ride a mechanical bull. Those who make these lists forget that Jane Austen failed to bungee jump. Albert Einstein did not get a ticket to *Saturday Night Live*. Abraham Lincoln never rode a mechanical bull.

We can make a bucket list that matters: Love our family. Be a good friend. Help Christ's church look more like Christ. Take risks. Look for joy. Be courageous. Say what we mean. Whine less over the routine ups and downs. Be patient with ourselves and others. Show grace to those who show no signs of knowing grace. Spend more time on what's important and less time on what's insignificant. Speak to strangers. Share with the poor. Pray fervently. Live every day in God's eternal hope. **NFJ**

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



**The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by Tony Cartledge** in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures. A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without “dumbing down” the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.

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



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

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

### IN THIS ISSUE

#### Season After Pentecost *Songs for the Soul*

July 3, 2022  
Psalm 30

#### Learn to Dance

July 10, 2022  
Psalm 82

#### Practice Justice

July 17, 2022  
Psalm 52

#### Choose Wisely

July 24, 2022  
Psalm 85

#### Celebrate Salvation

July 31, 2022  
Psalm 49

#### Vanquish Fear

#### *Crotchety Old Preachers*

Aug. 7, 2022  
Isaiah 1:1-20  
**Ritual Wrongs**

Aug. 14, 2022  
Isaiah 5:1-10  
**Rotton Fruit**

Aug. 21, 2022  
Isaiah 58:1-14  
**Phony Faith**

Aug. 28, 2022  
Jeremiah 2:1-15  
**Lost Love**

### IN THE NEXT ISSUE

#### Season After Pentecost *Learning from Jesus*

Sept. 4, 2022  
Luke 14:25-33

#### Counting the Cost

Sept. 11, 2022  
Luke 15:1-10

#### Counting Sheep

Sept. 18, 2022  
Luke 16:1-13

#### Counting Coins

Sept. 25, 2022  
Luke 16:19-31

#### Counting Options

Oct. 2, 2022  
Luke 17:5-10  
**Forgiveness and Faith**

Oct. 9, 2022  
Luke 17:11-19  
**Gratitude and Grace**

Oct. 16, 2022  
Luke 18:1-8  
**Persistence and Prayer**

Oct. 23, 2022  
Luke 18:9-14  
**Pomp and Penitence**

Oct. 30, 2022  
Luke 19:1-10  
**Repentance and Refunds**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 3, 2022

Psalm 30

## Learn to Dance

**H**ave you ever felt troubled, whether due to illness or depression? How about really down, so far down that death was often on your mind?

That's not a good feeling, but imagine the rejoicing if you did feel close to death but later made a full recovery, or if you emerged from the time of depression to feel full of life again.

That's the situation reflected in today's text: the psalmist had feared that the jaws of death were snapping at his heels, but he had cried to God for help and fully believed that God had lifted him back into the land of the living. He also believed he'd learned an important lesson in the process.

### I will praise God... (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 30, like Psalms 40, 92, 116, and 138, is an individual song of thanksgiving to God. Like many other psalms, it begins with a superscription that provides a supposed setting for the psalm's origin, though the superscriptions were added by later editors, and any historical accuracy is suspect. 📖

The writer had known both ups and downs in life, and he clearly wrote this psalm during an "up" period, celebrating what he believed to be divine

*You have turned my mourning into dancing. (Ps. 30:11a)*

deliverance. He begins with a clever wordplay in the first line, promising to lift up the God who had lifted him up.

The word translated as "extol" (NRSV) or "exalt" in most other versions literally means "I will make you high."

And why does the psalmist want to elevate God? Because he believes that Yahweh has elevated him, has "lifted me out of the depths" (NRSV). The word behind "lifted me out" is elsewhere used for drawing water from a well (Exod. 2:16, 19; Prov. 20:5).

As God had drawn him up from the doorway to death, the psalmist wanted to lift God up with words of praise.

The life situation he recalls seems to involve an illness or injury, for he declares in v. 2 that he had called to Yahweh for help, and "you healed me." His grave condition had led to the brink of death, but not beyond.

"You brought me up from the grave" (NRSV) translates "you brought my life up from Sheol" (v. 3a). The ancient Hebrews had no notion of heaven or hell as many modern believers do: they believed that everyone who died went to a mysterious underground place called Sheol, where the dead carried on a sort of shadowy existence. Although the dead did not suffer, neither did they act, remember, nor rejoice: it was not a fate that people desired.

In typical Hebrew poetic form, the second line of the verse repeats the thought of the first, but in different words. A more literal version would be

"you kept me alive among those going down the Pit" (v. 3b). "The Pit" was a common euphemism for the grave or for Sheol. 📖

Because of Yahweh's healing, the psalmist was saved not only from death, but also from the ridicule of his enemies, he said. Had he been wounded by people who tried to kill him? Were there political or economic rivals who wanted his position or his money? Or did he have in mind a situation as that of Job, whose friends turned against him because they assumed that one's suffering is due to sin and therefore deserved?

### You should praise God... (vv. 4-5)

Having summarized his experience, the psalmist calls on others to join him in praising God, utilizing the key words "sing praises" and "give thanks" (v. 4), words that will be repeated in v. 12.

Note the parallelism typical of Hebrew poetry: singing praises to the LORD and giving thanks to God's holy name are two ways of saying the same thing, slightly nuanced. The word translated as "name" (*zeker*) means "remembrance," evoking the sense of "reputation." 📖 The psalmist had spoken of enemies waiting to rejoice in his death in v. 1: now he calls upon the faithful to join him in remembering God's deliverance. 📖

In v. 5 we find a beloved phrase that may reflect a less-than-accurate rendering of the author's meaning. "For his anger is but for a moment, but his favor is for a lifetime" (NRSV) is an appealing thought, but the word translated as "moment" could also mean "repose"

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and in some circumstances may carry the thought of death (Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 16 [Doubleday, 1995], 182).

Thus, the intended sense may be “For in his anger is death, but in his favor is life.” This is in keeping with the basic theology of the psalmist, as in much of the Old Testament: the belief that rebellion against God would lead to cursing and death, while faithful obedience would bring blessing and life (see Deut. 30:15-20).

When interpreted as the result of God’s anger, suffering could lead one to repentance and renewed health. Thus, while the weeping associated with suffering might last through the night, joy might yet be known in the morning.

In this sense, night and day should be understood metaphorically: the dark of night represents divine anger that leads to suffering, while repentance leads to salvation or deliverance, seen as the dawn of a new day.

### ... and this is why (vv. 6-12)

Having declared his purpose of praising God for saving him from death and having called on the faithful to join him in praise, the psalmist gives a more detailed testimony of his experience in vv. 6-12.

Now we learn that the author believed his sickness had been God’s way of teaching him a lesson. He had known success in life, and believed he had become too self-assured: “As for me, I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved’” (v. 6). The word for “prosperity” could also mean “ease” or “self-confidence” (NET).

The writer recognized that Yahweh had blessed him, making him like a strong mountain (v. 7a). **U** But the psalmist had become overconfident, assuming the good times would

continue. He arrogantly declared: “I shall not be moved!”

And then everything moved.

Illness struck, and his situation changed radically. We know that life can be like that. Things change. The psalmist believed that his smug self-assurance had offended God, who withdrew divine favor: “You hid your face, I was dismayed.”

The metaphor of God’s face bestowing favor is a common biblical expression, as in the famous Aaronic blessing, which includes a wish that “the Lord make his face to shine upon you ...” **U** But the psalmist believed divine favor had been withdrawn, leading to disaster. The psalmist offered no details of his illness, but it was enough to leave him distressed and convinced that death was near. Fortunately, however, the psalmist believed the situation could be reversed. If God’s favor could be withdrawn, it could be restored.

So, he cried out and “made supplication” to God (v. 8, compare Ps. 28:1-2, 142:1), hoping for healing.

At first the writer tried bargaining with God, appealing to God’s desire for praise by offering the logical argument that the dead do not praise God. What good would it do for God to consign him to the grave? Could he praise God or testify to God’s faithfulness if he’d been reduced to dust? (v. 9). **U**

Ultimately, though, the psalmist knew that logic was not enough: he must entreat God’s mercy alone, pleading for Yahweh to “be gracious” and to “be my helper” (v. 10), or as we might say, “Lord have mercy: help me!”

The psalmist’s plea implies that he had confessed his prior sins of pride and self-congratulation. He dared to seek God’s grace because he had repented and sought to begin anew.

God’s positive response led to the poet’s memorable words: “You have

turned my mourning into dancing” (v. 11a). The penitent’s clothing of sackcloth was exchanged for robes of joy, with the result that “my soul may praise you and not be silent” (v. 12a).

**U** The psalm closes with words that echo earlier verses. The verbs “praise” and “give thanks” (v. 12) hark back to v. 4, where both are also used, providing a nice frame to the main body of the psalm that includes a call to praise and a testimony of thanksgiving.

Of greater interest, perhaps, is the repetition of the word “forever.” The psalmist had confessed earlier that in his overweening pride he had once said “I shall never be moved – forever” (a literal translation of v. 6b). Having learned his lesson through sickness and deliverance, he now promises to praise God – forever.

Modern readers, with the added light of the New Testament, no longer need to think that every illness or misfortune is a sign of God’s anger sent to punish us or guide us back to the straight and narrow. We don’t have to interpret trouble as the hard hand of an angry God.

That does not mean we cannot benefit from the psalm, however. Whatever the cause of sickness or other trials, they may serve the important purpose of helping us to refocus our lives and put our trust in God.

When life is good and we find ourselves prosperous and healthy, it’s easy to forget the One who has blessed us and to take full credit for our own success. When adversity comes, however – especially when we sense that the future is no longer in our hands – are we not more likely to turn our hearts toward God?

And if we find healing or renewed prosperity, as the psalmist did, will we remember to praise God for the blessings we have received? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 10, 2022

Psalm 82

## Practice Justice

Today's text is like a very useful gift that comes bound with a combination lock. The central message of the psalm is a straightforward and important call to justice for all people, especially those who are marginalized and often the victims of oppression and partiality.

The frame of the psalm, however, can be a bit mind-warping, and requires careful untangling with an eye toward ancient realities if we are to open its hidden treasures. ↓

### God among the gods (vv. 1-2)

The psalm falls within the “Elohistic psalter” (Psalms 42–83), in which the divine name *'elohîm* (commonly translated as “God”) is used in place of *yahweh* (LORD), the divine epithet revealed in Exodus 3. This makes for some confusion, because *'elohîm* is a plural form of the word *'el*, which is both the name of the high god in Canaanite religion, and also a generic term for “god.” The plural form can also appear as *'elîm*.

The form *'elohîm* is most often used as a “plural of majesty” referring to the God of Israel, but it could also refer to multiple gods. In Psalm 82, it is used in both ways, which can be confusing.

*Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and destitute. (Ps. 82:3)*

As we approach the psalm, we must put away the common misconception that Israelite religion was always monotheistic: it went through stages on its way to the conclusion that only one true god exists. ↓

This is compounded by the Hebrew Bible's description of angels who served in God's heavenly court as “sons of God” (*benê 'elohîm* or *benê 'elîm*). While Israel's Canaanite neighbors thought of the high god like *'El* sitting in council with lower gods like *Ba'al* and *Môt*, the Hebrews imagined *Yahweh* presiding over an assembly of angels who were created by God with supernatural powers and given various responsibilities.

Understanding the ancient religious-cultural perspective of the text is important background for interpreting its meaning, but we should not assume that it accurately describes the supernatural order.

The prophet behind Psalm 82 used the popular image of God working through “gods” as a vehicle for communicating his central message: that injustice ran rampant, and heavenly authorities were doing nothing to stop it.

Now to the psalm: we note first that this is a rare psalm in which God does most of the talking. Most psalms are written as prayers *to* God: this one is a message *from* God. Verse 1 sets the stage and v. 8 closes with an appeal, but the rest is a prophetic oracle, written as if God were speaking. ↓

The psalm opens by setting the scene in the divine council or assem-

bly: “God (*'elohîm*) has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods (*'elohîm*) he holds judgment” (v. 1). ↓ This locates the next part not only in the divine assembly, but also with the atmosphere of a courtroom: God has come to render judgment.

A Hebrew reader or hearer would notice that one aspect of the scene is unexpected. In the Old Testament world, judges typically sat while the defendants stood. Here, however, the phrase “God has taken his place” uses a verb that commonly means “to stand.”

Admittedly, all of this is metaphorical language, using human imagination to assign a human form to God and divine responsibilities to heavenly beings. It is not a literal picture, but one that helps us to grasp the idea. The image of God arriving at the meeting and standing rather than sitting suggests impatience or frustration as God prepares to pass judgment – not on the people of the earth, but on the “gods” who had been assigned to defend the powerless and ensure justice.

God asked, “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” (v. 2). The divine subordinates were to have been working for justice, but they had failed miserably. Similar to human authorities who take bribes and favor the wealthy, they had shown partiality to the wicked – presumably those who had gained wealth or power by oppressing others who had no one to defend them.

### Justice for the people (vv. 3-5)

Here we have the meat of the message, which should not be lost in the puzzle of its packaging: God's desire for the “gods” being addressed – an expect-

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tation for all people who are given authority over others. The charge is to “give justice to the weak and the orphan, maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (vv. 3-4).

The world is filled with people who exist on the margins – and often by a very thin margin – while those who have power and privilege either ignore their plight or actively take advantage of them.

The weak and needy people the prophet has in mind are not just homeless folk scattered around, though they are certainly included. They are single mothers or immigrant parents working two or three minimum wage jobs just to put food on the table and keep a roof over their children’s heads.

They are young adults who don’t have the needed connections or the sterling education or the combination of drive and talent needed to get high-paying jobs. They struggle to pay rent on overpriced apartments while the prospect of owning a home is little more than a dream.

They are victims of a mass incarceration movement that imprisons a staggering percentage of Black men, often on trivial charges, taking their earning power away from their families, leaving them destitute and dependent on family or government assistance, no matter how hard they work.

They are poor people who can’t afford to pay traffic tickets, leading to the imposition of even larger penalties and fees, which they cannot pay. As a result, their drivers licenses are revoked and without public transportation, they are left with no way to get to work or with little choice but to take the chance of driving without a license.

They are immigrants who leave

hopeless or dangerous situations in their home countries and come to our borders, only to be turned away or forcibly separated from their children.

Injustice takes many forms, but the root cause is the inevitable trend for people of power and privilege to seek their own gain while turning a blind eye toward the needs of the poor. People who are powerless need more than resources: they need advocates. They need members of Congress who will stand up to the profit-driven goals of corporate lobbyists (more than 35,000 in Washington, D.C. at last count), and look out for those whose voices cannot compete with the closing bell on Wall Street.

Verse 5 may be part of God’s speech, or it may be an editorial observation by the author of the psalm. The NRSV takes it as the latter, not enclosing it in quotation marks. It is also not clear whether it refers to the failed overseers, or to the poor.

Is it the underperforming “gods” who lack understanding and walk around in darkness, or is it the poor and needy who are kept ignorant and in the shadows? One can argue for either position, but the result is the same: when injustice rules, “the foundations of the earth are shaken.” Things are not as they should be.

### Judgment for the judges (v. 6)

As Amos and Isaiah and Micah spoke for God in announcing judgment on Israel or other nations because of their sin, this prophet pronounces judgment on the “gods” who have failed in their charge to maintain justice on the earth.

Despite their creation as “gods” (*’elohîm*), as “children of the Most High” (*’elyôn*), they would lose their privileged position: “you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.”

The verse recalls Isaiah 14:12-20, often misinterpreted as the downfall of “Lucifer.” The prophecy addresses a Babylonian king who thought of himself as so powerful that he could “sit on the mount of assembly” among the deities. His grandiose aspirations would come to naught, Isaiah said: the unjust king would die like everyone else and join the beggars in Sheol.

Again, the point is not for us to assume this is a literal description of how God has ordered the world by assigning various gods or angels to have charge of different nations: it is one prophet’s creative way of using a popular image to proclaim an unmistakable condemnation of partiality and injustice.

It is not just heavenly authorities who are in trouble for being blind to the needs of the powerless: it is anyone who has the power to help, but who turns a blind eye. We need only recall Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, with judgment being based on whether people cared for poor and sick and imprisoned people, or just passed by on the other side of the road.

### One judge for all (v. 7)

The final verse shifts speakers and sounds more like a typical psalm. With God having dismissed the unfaithful subordinates, the poet’s own voice appears: “Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!”

Whether or not the psalmist believed other “gods” existed or had any power over various peoples, he was convinced that the God of Israel ruled over all.

Were you able to work through this psalm’s puzzling package and get the message unwrapped? Is there any question as to how God would have us respond to injustice in our world? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 17, 2022

Psalm 52

## Choose Wisely

People of a certain age may remember a popular television show called *Maude*, starring Bea Arthur. Bill Macy played Walter, Maude's fourth husband, the owner of "Findley's Friendly Appliances." Walter struggled to stay on Maude's good side, and whenever he made a wisecrack at her expense, she was prone to say "God will get you for that, Walter." 📌

Have you ever wished that God would "get" people who have offended you? Have you ever prayed for hateful or harmful people to get their divine comeuppance, and soon?

Such sentiments are a holdover from ancient Israel's belief that their covenant with God guaranteed prosperity to the faithful and troubles for the wicked.

We find a clear example of that in this week's text, Psalm 52.

The superscription of this psalm is one of the longest among the psalms. Unlike English Bibles, which place the superscriptions at the top and often in italics, the Hebrew Bible typically numbers the superscription as the first verse. This superscription is so long that it requires two verses in Hebrew.

Psalm 52, like many others, is associated with David. Unlike most of them, however, it is imaginatively

*I will thank you forever, because of what you have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good. (Ps. 52:9)*

connected to a particular time in David's life. In this case, it is an ugly episode described in 1 Samuel 21–22 (see "The Hardest Question" online for more). 📌

### An oppressive man (vv. 1-4)

David is unlikely to have been the author of Psalm 52, if for no other reason than the author claims in v. 8 to be "like a green olive tree in the house of God," though the temple had not been built in David's lifetime. Nor do the accusations against the psalmist's nemesis match up with the adversaries of 1 Samuel 21–22.

The author, however, had known prideful men in places of power, and he dared to stand up to them. He addresses the first four verses to one of them: "Why do you boast, O Mighty one, of mischief done against the godly?" (v. 1).

The translation here is uncertain. There is no word in the Hebrew for "against," and the Masoretic text includes "all the day" in the same sentence. An alternate translation is "the steadfast love of God (is with me) all day long." NET takes this route with "God's loyal love protects me all day long," and the familiar KJV has "the goodness of God endureth continually."

The NRSV's approach connects "All day long" with the destructive

plots and practices of the wicked one, who is called a *gibbôr*, a word used to describe a man of wealth, prestige, or power. Saul's father Kish was called a *gibbôr hayil* (1 Sam. 9:1), as was David (1 Sam. 16:17).

The person who had afflicted the psalmist, then, was not necessarily a king, but a person with sufficient power to threaten others. He was not accused of murder, but of deceit: "Your tongue is like a sharp razor, you worker of treachery. You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth" (vv. 2-3).

In conclusion, "You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue" (v. 4).

The psalmist's adversary, it appears, was not guilty of violent destruction, but of causing harm – probably to the psalmist – through lying and deceit. The man's priorities were warped: he loved evil more than good, an indication that he always put his own interests first, even if he had to lie to advance his cause.

Any of us who pay attention have known people like that, whether up close and personal or on the national stage. The combination of economic or political power and selfish ends is bound to have a bad outcome: their gain inevitably comes at the expense of people lower on the totem pole – and at the expense of the truth.

### A mighty fall (vv. 5-7)


The psalmist was convinced that those who exploit others, particularly through treachery and lies, deserved severe punishment. And, in keeping with the covenant theology, he trusted

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that God would see to it: “But God will break you down forever; he will snatch you and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living” (v. 5).

The mighty man, surprisingly, is described as living in a tent rather than a strong house, a dwelling that would provide little defense if God should snatch him out to break him down and end his life.

That is what the psalmist hoped, clearly thinking himself to be among the “righteous” who “will see, and fear, and will laugh at the evildoer, saying ‘See the one who would not take refuge in God, but trusted in abundant riches, and sought refuge in wealth!’” (vv. 6-7). 

The impression here is that the righteous will “mock and laugh” at the oppressor’s fate (“evildoer” is not in the text, but understood). As the psalmist exults over his adversary’s downfall, his accusations of lies and deceit have faded away: now the wicked one’s failure is portrayed in terms of having trusted in riches rather than God.

No amount of money could save the “mighty man” when God came in judgment. So said the psalmist.

### **A happy survivor (vv. 8-9)**

In contrast to the wicked man, who would be dragged from his tent and uprooted from the land of the living, the poet declared “But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever” (v. 8). The imagery is reminiscent of Psalm 1, which portrayed those who keep the law as trees planted by water, and the foolish as dry and windblown chaff.

A similar poem in Jeremiah 17 is even more apropos, as the issue of trust comes to the fore: it pronounces a curse on “those who trust in mere mortals and

make mere flesh their strength.” They would “be like a shrub in the desert,” while “those who trust in the LORD” would “be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit” (Jer. 17:5-7).

No tree was more valuable to the ancient Hebrews than the olive, which provided oil for cooking, lighting, and trading for hard goods. Consecrated olive oil fueled the lampstands inside the temple. The word translated as “green” does not describe the color, but means “luxuriant” or “fresh.” While those who trust in riches will be uprooted, the righteous are not only planted, but also healthy, growing, and bearing fruit.

At first glance, the closing verse seems to imply that the psalmist had been delivered from the power of his oppressor, but it is more likely that he offered gratitude in advance for what he believed God would do: “I will thank you forever because of what you have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good” (v. 9).

The NRSV’s translation fails to capture something important: in the last clause, the operative verb is “wait,” not “proclaim.” A literal translation would be “I await your name, for it is good, before your faithful ones.” In this sentence, “your name” is a circumlocution for God: to “await your name” is “to await you (God).” The psalmist is still waiting for and hoping for deliverance. In the presence of other faithful ones, he prays to the God who is good, trusting that the wicked will fall and he will be vindicated.

The psalm should not be read as a blanket condemnation of either power or wealth. Both can be used for good purposes. All too often, they are distorted and used for personal gain

with little concern for others.

We may at times feel oppressed, held down, or taken advantage of by an individual, a group, or a business. Those who have the benefit of white privilege and sufficient resources may feel this only in ways that are petty, but others have it much harder.

Banks and other businesses have long discriminated against Black customers, who struggle to get loans or credit, and typically pay higher interest rates. Businesses often pay Black employees less than white workers, and women less than men, even when their jobs and experience levels are equivalent. Landlords may be less likely to rent apartments to people of color and less inclined to keep the buildings and appliances in repair, but more eager to evict them if they get behind on rent.

Immigrants often face similar obstacles of not being wanted in certain jobs or certain neighborhoods. Young adults have little trouble finding work, but many have major difficulty finding employment that pays a salary adequate for getting ahead, buying a home, or supporting a family.

When we read this psalm, it’s important that we look beyond the blithe inclination to identify with the righteous victim. We should ask whether we are the guilty ones – the ones who have focused on our own gain, who may have lied or cheated if it got us ahead, who have trusted in wealth rather than God.

We should also keep in mind that the psalm was written from the perspective of a people who believed their covenant with God guaranteed blessing for the faithful and cursing for the wicked. We have no assurance that God will break down or uproot the oppressors in favor of the righteous poor – but we do face the challenge of considering on which side of that equation we stand.

NFJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 24, 2022

## Psalm 85

### Celebrate Salvation

**B**randon's parents had given him all the standard lectures about driving carefully and observing the speed limit when he first got his license. Like many parents, they continued to admonish him to drive safely, so when he was running late for school and got a speeding ticket, he was afraid they'd never forgive him.

They were disappointed, but responded with surprising calm. Brandon used some Christmas money he had saved to pay the fine. Though his parents continued to preach safe driving, it felt good to be back in their good graces.

A few weeks later, however, Brandon was texting one of his buddies on the way to school and failed to notice that the minivan in front of him had slowed to a stop. He didn't hit it *that* hard, but it was hard enough to cause some damage and shake up the children inside.

Would his parents ever forgive him *now*, or had his luck run out?

### Forgiveness Granted (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 85 recounts a similar story, though on a larger level. 🇺🇸 The psalm, which is also read during Advent in Year B, reflects the same tension of

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. (Ps. 85:10)*

“already” and “not yet” that we experience while pondering the birth of Jesus and the promise of salvation to the world.

The first three verses proclaim a happy hymn of praise, recalling God's past acts of forgiveness and restoration. “LORD, you were favorable to your land,” sang the psalmist: “you restored the fortunes of Jacob” (v. 1). This is probably not a reference to Israel's deliverance from Egypt, but to the Hebrews' return after the exile. They had lost their land to the Assyrians and Babylonians, but Cyrus the Persian had conquered Babylon and allowed the Hebrews to return.

Verse 2 offers further evidence that the psalmist was thinking of the return from exile. Israel's Egyptian captivity was not traditionally associated with sin or rebellion among the Hebrews, but the exile was: prophets such as Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and Jeremiah drew a straight line between a sinful people and a defeated nation.

The psalmist's expression of gratitude seems to presuppose that a time of punishment or exile had come to an end. Israel's restoration had begun with divine pardon: “You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin” (v. 2), leading God to turn away from anger and wrath (v. 3). 🇺🇸

Unless we were born without a conscience, we all know how it feels to be weighed down by a heavy burden of guilt, knowing that we have done

wrong, have hurt someone, or have failed to live up to our calling. It's not a good feeling. Guilt can be poisonous if we wallow in it, but it can be invaluable if it motivates us to seek forgiveness from God, from others, or even from ourselves.

Have you ever sought such forgiveness, and felt the amazing sense of relief that comes with the knowledge that your sins have been pardoned and set aside?

If you're like most people, it's likely that your sense of freedom did not last long, because we all have a propensity to venture back into the realms of wrongdoing. If so, you have a head start on understanding what the psalmist does next.

### Forgiveness Needed (vv. 4-7)

With the happy praise for forgiveness still in the air, the psalm takes a shocking turn to a fervent lamentation that God has not forgiven the people (vv. 4-7). The psalmist pleads for God to “Restore us, O God our deliverer!” (v. 4, NET: the word “again” in the NRSV is interpretive; not in the text). 🇺🇸

“Will you be angry with us forever?” he asks (v. 5). “Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?” (v. 6).

The disjunctive shift from praise to lament is so sharp that the Revised Common Lectionary omits vv. 4-7 from the liturgical reading as if it's inappropriate, but the interlacing of praise and lament is common in the psalms. Guilty people may praise God for past forgiveness to set the stage for a renewed plea that God will forgive them once again.

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The postexilic period offers a likely context for Psalm 85. Verses 1-3 may recall the heady days of Israel's return from captivity, when the prophets such as Isaiah of the Exile (Isaiah 40-55) declared that the exiles' time of punishment was over, that God had forgiven the sins that had brought them down. No doubt, many rejoiced at the news that they could return to Jerusalem.

When the Hebrews returned to Jerusalem, however, they still lived as subjects of the Persian Empire, occupying one small sub-province of the territory west of the Jordan. They found the beloved city in ruins and the neighbors unwelcoming. As the people scrambled to rebuild their homes and restore their farmlands, the enmity of surrounding peoples and an extended period of drought made life hard, and joy faded.

The prophet Haggai, who returned with the exiles, believed trouble had come because the people had not given priority to rebuilding the temple. "You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little," he proclaimed, "and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labors" (Hag. 1:9-11, see also 1:6 and 2:15-17).

The prophet Zechariah, active about the same time, likewise charged the people with having followed the evil ways of their ancestors, and called for them to repent if they hoped for better days (Zech. 1:1-6).

Perhaps it was in a setting such as this that Psalm 85 originated as a prayer for forgiveness and restoration

as the people heeded the prophets and returned to the task of building the temple, pleading "Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation" (v. 7).

The word translated "steadfast love" is *chesed*, a word so rich that it defies an exact translation. It suggests ideas of persistent compassion, kindness, and mercy that grow from a deep love that won't give up. The psalmist knew that any hope for Israel's deliverance or salvation from its failures and its time of trial had to lie in the belief that God's *chesed* would not let them go.

### Salvation Coming (vv. 8-13)

While vv. 1-7 are addressed to God, in vv. 8-13 the psalmist speaks to his audience – worshipers, hearers, or later readers – concerning his beliefs about God. Perhaps the speaker was recognized as a temple prophet, for he claimed the ability to hear and proclaim a message from God: "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak," he said (v. 8a, NRSV), or perhaps "I will listen to what God the LORD says" (NET). Both are legitimate translations.

But what is it that God will speak? "For he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful." The word translated "peace" is *shalom*. Like *chesed*, the concept of *shalom* cannot be summed up in one word. It conveys the primary idea of wholeness or well-being that produces an inner peace that goes far beyond the absence of conflict. *Shalom* is the outgrowth of God's salvation or deliverance, which the psalmist believed would be soon coming (v. 9). 🇺

In v. 10 we find one of scripture's most charming images: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other." Here the psalmist imagines four of

God's divine attributes as living agents who unite to bring salvation to the land through renewed prosperity. In personified form, "faithfulness will spring up from the ground and righteousness will look down from the sky" (or "heavens," v. 11), a reminder that fertile soil and appropriate rains are both gifts of God, for "The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase" (v. 12).

The psalmist believed that divine forgiveness and earthly fertility were intimately connected: when God's rich attributes of loving faithfulness and righteous peace were unleashed, both land and people would respond with fruitful growth reflecting God's presence among God's people. That, in the psalmist's mind, was of prime importance. When facing famine, the people naturally longed for abundant rain and prolific harvests, but the psalmist understood that their greatest need was for God to be with them: "Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps" (v. 13).

Americans are less closely connected to the land than our ancient counterparts: less than two percent of families in America are actively involved in farming. Even so, we can appreciate the powerful metaphors connecting God's faithful love with redeeming grace that brings peace and wholeness to God's people, even as God's righteous acts call forth right living on our part.

Like the psalmist, we are often in need of hope for both now and the future. Unlike the psalmist, though, we know the ground of a hope that goes beyond abundant harvests. God in Christ came to bring the *shalom* of abundant life, the fullest expression of salvation, and available to all. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

July 31, 2022

## Psalm 49

### Vanquish Fear

**W**ho have been the wise authority figures in your life? The author of Psalm 49 believed he was such a person, one of Israel's sages, a wise man who could confidently instruct others in the ways of life and wisdom. Like Psalm 1 and several others, Psalm 49 is a Wisdom Psalm. It does not address God with praise or an appeal, but instructs humans with wisdom for life – and for the reality of death. 📖

#### A riddle from the wise (vv. 1-4)

The writer insists that his wisdom applies to every person on earth: it is for “all you peoples ... all inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor together” (vv. 1-2). No one is exempt from what the teacher is about to say – and say it he will.

The psalmist speaks with supreme confidence in his own wisdom and his ability to teach it to others (v. 3). “I will incline my ear to a proverb,” he says. “I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp” (v. 4).

Wisdom and music are not commonly combined. That might help to explain why this wisdom teaching is found in the Psalms rather than the book of Proverbs. Perhaps the teacher

*Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it. (Ps. 49:7)*

had set his lesson to music to make it more memorable or engaging.

Riddles were a common teaching strategy in ancient Near Eastern wisdom traditions. 📖 For the sages, riddling questions could serve as a window into the subject at hand. Contemporary pedagogy often uses a similar approach, raising important questions for students to research, ponder, or debate.

#### Everyone will die (vv. 5-9)

While the psalmist's musical intent is uncertain, his riddle is clear: “Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me?” (v. 5).

That's a question some people may not have thought to ask. If troubled by others who use their wealth and power to make life hard, it's natural to worry, to fear, to be concerned for the future. We don't ask why we should fear or fret – we just do.

Many of us have no such concerns. We may envy the rich, but don't fear them. Think, though, of someone who's just received an eviction notice because they got sick and couldn't pay the rent, or someone who borrowed money against their next paycheck at an exorbitant rate and then couldn't make the payments. Imagine the prospect of easy credit leading to debt so high that one can barely pay the interest.

Why should someone on the edge not fear poverty or the pressure

of creditors? The writer appears to be thinking of those who don't just have wealth, but who boast about it and use it to take advantage of others (v. 6).

The psalmist's answer is straightforward: don't sweat over those people, because they will die just like the poor. “Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it” (v. 7). 📖

The sage repeats the same thought in vv. 8-9: no amount of money can buy one's way out of death. Paying for more expensive medical care might keep someone alive a bit longer, but death will inevitably claim everyone.

The sage's “solution” might be cold comfort to someone worried about making ends meet, but that's where he landed: “Don't worry about the rich: we're all going to die.”

The sage was not advising people to forget their debts or fail to be financially responsible; he was simply taking the long view. It's easy to envy those who have the big incomes and the big houses (or two) and the luxury cars.

The psalmist found solace in knowing that death would be the great leveler, common ground for rich and poor alike.

Ancient Hebrews found little comfort in thoughts of the grave unless their life was so miserable that death was preferred. But they believed that everyone, rich or poor, mighty or meek, righteous or wicked, became equal in death. The dead, they thought, went to an underground abode called Sheol, where all were thought to carry on the same shadowy existence but without earthly distinctions.

Job, for example, in wishing for

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death, described Sheol as a place where he would be at rest with kings and counselors whose kingdom building was behind them, and with prisoners and slaves who found freedom in the grave (Job 3:11-19). 📖

### **But is that all? (vv. 10-20)**

As if singing a favorite chorus, the psalmist returns to his “answer” in vv. 10-12 and 16-20. Whether wise or foolish, everyone dies and leaves whatever wealth they have to others (v. 10). Even those who have named great estates after themselves will spend eternity in a very small grave (v. 11, cremation was not a category they ever considered).

Humans may be proud and even pompous, but they will die just as animals do (v. 12).

Similar thoughts are expressed in vv. 16-20. “Do not be afraid when some become rich, when the wealth of their houses increases. For when they die they will carry nothing away; their wealth will not go down after them” (vv. 16-17).

The wealthy may have more joy during their lifetimes, but they will join their ancestors in the grave and “never again see the light” (vv. 18-19). Repeating v. 12, the psalmist closes with the affirmation that human pomp and pride will cease: all people will die just as animals do (v. 20).

But is that the end? Verses 13-15 offer a riddle of their own. Did the psalmist consider himself to be an exception? Death is the fate of “the foolhardy, the end of those who are pleased with their lot,” he says. “Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home” (vv. 13-14). 📖

So far, so good: vv. 13-14 mainly intensify his confidence that the boasting rich will die despite foolish thoughts that they might buy their way out of the grave.

But what does the psalmist mean by v. 15, when he says “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me”?

On the surface, this appears to be a firm assurance that he expects to escape the grave because “God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol.” Does this express a belief in resurrection, as some might think?

How we read the verse depends in part on who is speaking. One option is to see v. 15 as something the rich would say, quoted sarcastically by the psalmist. Having described them as foolish sheep that don’t know where they are going, he imagines them saying “God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,” and he laughs at the thought.

The author of Psalm 30 said something similar, describing his own hubris and later downfall: “As for me, I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved’” (v. 6). But then the fear of death came knocking, and he cried out for deliverance.

A more common option is to read v. 15 as the psalmist’s own words. Reading it this way can go in one of at least three directions. Several of the psalms portray their author as being lost in Sheol, but saved by God (Ps. 16:10; 18:5; 30:3; 86:10; 116:3-4, 8). 📖 These psalmists – still very much alive – wrote as if they had already entered Sheol or gone down to the Pit before God brought them out of the depths. They did not speak as a dead person brought back to life, but as someone who had felt perilously close to death and had been saved from it.

The meaning of v. 15 may be nothing more than this: that the

psalmist had felt near death, but God had returned him to health.

A second option is that the psalmist held out hope that God would make of him an exception and “ransom my soul from the power of Sheol.” The parallel line, “for he will receive me,” may suggest such an aspiration. Literally, it means “for he will take me.”

Did the psalmist hope that God would take him, like Enoch, who reportedly “walked with God” until “he was no more, for God took him” (Gen. 5:22-24), or like Elijah, who was carried aloft in a whirlwind (2 Kgs. 2:1-11)? Or did he expect to die while hoping for a resurrection beyond the grave?

Such thoughts are appealing, but if that had been his intent, we would expect him to tout his righteousness or otherwise explain why he should deserve a future that did not appear open to others. He does not.

A third, and perhaps a better option, looks more closely at a particular expression. The psalmist does not say that God will save him from Sheol itself, but from the power – literally the hand – of Sheol.

He had come to understand that he need not fear death any more than he should fear the rich and the powerful. He knew he would die as all do, but he had put his trust in God, and the prospect of death had no power over him.

The gospel hope of resurrection was yet to be revealed, but we find an echo of the psalmist’s sentiments in Paul’s confident challenge: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55).

We all will die. Yes. But when we trust in God rather than gain, we can live without fear and face the end with hope that the music is not yet finished, and death will not have the last word.

📖 NFJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

August 7, 2022

Isaiah 1:1-20

## Ritual Wrongs

**D**o you like the idea of being taken to court? Can you imagine being sued by your parents, or hauling your own children before a judge? What a heart-churning thought that is ... but it's precisely the picture Isaiah draws in today's text. Acting as God's prophetic bailiff, Isaiah summoned the people of Israel to enter the heavenly courtroom and hear the charges brought against them by their own creator and covenant God. 🇺🇸🇺🇸

Children don't choose their parents, but as adults they can choose whether to continue having an ongoing relationship with them. The Old Testament declares that God, though the creator of all peoples, chose to enter a special covenant relationship with the Hebrew people (see Exod. 19:1-6), speaking of them as children. God promised to be faithful in guiding and providing for the Israelites, and they promised to be faithful as people and witnesses of the Lord's care.

But the people were famous for renegeing on promises. Over and over, the biblical stories portray the Israelites as violating their covenant bond, worshiping other gods and mistreating other people. As he observed the behavior of his fellow Israelites, Isaiah concluded that it had gone on long

*...cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isa. 1:16b-17)*

enough. Speaking on God's behalf, he issued an ultimatum: the people should change their ways or suffer the consequences.

### God's case against Israel (vv. 1-9)

Isaiah was active for much of the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, focused in and around the city of Jerusalem (v. 1). He had a heart for God, and it was burdened.

Many parents know the grief and frustration of faithfully raising a child and then watching him or her turn against every good thing they had been taught, and God could identify with that experience many times over (v. 2).

Isaiah used strong language to express the degree of Israel's desertion and unwillingness to return. A dumb ox knows who its master is, and even a jackass knows how to find its way back home, he said, but Israel didn't know their way back to God (v. 3).

In parts of Honduras, livestock forage freely along the grassy roadsides. When I visited there once, I asked a local person how the owners kept up with their cattle. He laughed as he answered: "The animals know to whom they belong."

An old story illustrates the same idea. Back in 1951, policemen in Haifa, Israel captured a caravan of donkeys loaded with contraband goods. The owner escaped, but one of the officers, remembering the words of Isaiah, penned the donkeys without

food for a few days. When he turned them loose, they went straight to their owner's barn.

Sometimes, though, people don't show the good sense of donkeys. When parents see their children going down the wrong paths, refusing to see the error of their ways, it is a time of grief.

The first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE had been an unusually peaceful and prosperous time for Israel, with long and stable rulers in both the north and the south. The people had been blinded by their own prosperity, however. They had lost their sense of conscience – and they had lost their way home. 🇺🇸


Hear the parental grief of v. 4, as God cried "Ah, sinful nation!" Israel's people had willfully, deliberately turned their back on God, whom Isaiah characteristically called "the Holy One of Israel." They had not been holy. And they had begun to pay a price for their rebellion.

In one way or another, wrongdoing has consequences. We may enjoy the delights of carefree recklessness for a season, but sooner or later, it catches up with us – or it hurts someone else. There is a hangover the next morning. There is an unwanted pregnancy. There is an empty bank account and a stack of bills coming due. There is an accident caused by an impaired driver. There is a preventable disease that won't go away. Isaiah asked why the Israelites would continue to rebel and put themselves in a position to be beaten from head to toe (vv. 5-6).

For Isaiah's listeners, the consequences of their rebellion may have been pouring over their land in the form of Assyrian soldiers. Isaiah's prophecies are not in chronological order, and

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the setting of chapter 1 is often thought to have been around 701 BC, during the eastern campaigns of Sennacherib, when Jerusalem came under siege and was left, Isaiah said, “like a booth in a field” (vv. 8-9). 

### Israel’s empty defense (vv. 10-15)

Despite the impending troubles, Isaiah saw no evidence of repentance. The people considered themselves to be quite religious, keeping temple rituals and bringing the requisite sacrifices and offerings. They may have wondered what more God could want.

What God wanted was not ritual behavior, but right living. Isaiah insisted that their worship was the worthless exercise of people who served themselves through the week and tried to cover their bases on the Sabbath.

Isaiah may well have pronounced these words in the hearing of the gathered people on a day of worship. If Jerusalem was indeed under siege, the altar could have been piled high with sacrifices as the people prayed for God’s deliverance. The air may have been filled with the appealing aroma of roasting meat and the sweet scent of incense, but God found no joy in it.

Speaking to the gathered religious and political leaders of Israel (whom he sarcastically called “rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah”), Isaiah asserted that their worship was worthless, their religion an abomination, and their piety a fraud – activities that brought no joy to God, but only distaste (vv. 10-14). 

As a result, God would not hear their prayers, despite their frequency and their ritual trappings. Isaiah declared: “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of

blood!” (v. 15).

Have we ever tried to praise God while our hymnals were held in callous hands that served mainly ourselves?

### God’s offer of pardon (vv. 16-20)

God refused to hear Israel’s hypocritical praying, and allowed the people to experience the natural consequences of their rebellion, but never gave up on them.

In mercy that never fails, God held out the opportunity for Israel to return, find forgiveness, and begin anew if only they would repent and change their ways.

Isaiah declared this option with a string of imperatives that called for a change of heart and a change of behavior: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (vv. 16-17).

Isaiah called for repentance in deed, not in word only, especially in the areas of social justice and ethical responsibility. When we make personal or political decisions, how often do we take into consideration the needs of others, as opposed to policies that line our own pockets with greater wealth?

Isaiah would have strong opinions about what we should do.

In some of the scripture’s most memorable words, Isaiah speaks for God in saying “Come, and let us reason together ...” (KJV), or “Come now, and let us argue it out ... (NRSV). This does not suggest that we enter a debate with God and look for a mutually acceptable compromise, but that we take notice of the alternatives God lays before us. The NET translates it as “Come, let’s consider your options, says the LORD.”

There are times when a judge will call a first offender to the bench and lay out certain options. The defendant can change his or her ways and avoid future trouble. Or, he or she can break the law again and pay the consequences for a long time to come. A decision is called for.

In laying it out, Isaiah declared that repentance and forgiveness were indeed possible: sins as scarlet could become like snow – evil deeds as bold as a crimson robe could be made like fine wool (v. 18). But such change would require the people to change their ways.

If they chose to stay on their current path, God would allow them to reach the end of the way they had chosen – a road marked with ruin.

God is not vindictive, but compassionate. God does not wish for people to suffer, but allows us freedom to choose how we will live – and what consequences we might face.

Isaiah portrayed the alternatives with a clever wordplay: the obedient would eat from the best of the land, but the rebellious would be eaten by the swords of their foes (vv. 19-20).

We no longer live under the tit-for-tat covenant of punishment and rewards that characterized much of Old Testament theology, but that does not mean we should assume our decisions are without consequence, or that repentance and changed lives are no longer important. Choices we make have the potential to bring either help or harm both to us and to others. Can we recognize areas in which we pay lip service to God while doing what we please, and failing to take into account the needs of others?

Is this an appropriate time for us to come and talk it out with God, to admit our failures, repent of our wrongs, and start over on a new path?

The court remains in session. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

August 14, 2022

Isaiah 5:1-10

## Rotten Fruit

**H**ave you ever visited a commercial vineyard for a wine tasting, watched a documentary about wine making, or listened to a sommelier describe what makes a certain variety of grape grown in a particular place so special?

The flavor of grapes can be strongly influenced by the type of soil in which the vines are planted, the amount of rainfall or dew, the average temperature both night and day, the amount of strong sunlight or morning mist, and any number of other factors.

👇👇 In similar fashion, humans often take on the tastes and characteristics of their environment – and not always for the good.

### High hopes and sour grapes (vv. 1-2)

The prophet Isaiah knew this. As a prophet of God and a master of metaphors, he sought creative ways to convey God's message to the people of Israel. One of the most memorable of those occasions involved an original song.

Let's try to imagine the setting: it probably took place at a harvest festival such as the Feast of Booths. When the grain had been threshed and the grapes had been pressed and the new wine was fermenting in jugs or skin containers, there was little to do until the rains returned. This left many people with time to gather the family and go up to Jerusalem for the appropriately timed harvest festival. The festival was a time

*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting ... (Isa. 5:7a)*

to bring tithes and worship to the temple, thanking God for harvest blessings. But it was also an opportunity for unabashed feasting, drinking, and celebrating – not unlike modern tailgate parties but without the football game. 📌

Rural pilgrims may have gawked at the long climb into the city, the huge walls that surrounded it, and the impressive temple complex where tithes and offerings were brought. Perhaps it was there, amid the noise and bustle of the crowded streets, that a sharp-voiced man in the guise of a traveling minstrel began to sing. As he did, imagine how the people nearby would have stopped their talking, and those passing by would have stopped their walking, and curious eyes would have focused on the wizened man with the booming voice.

Perhaps he finished an innocuous song, and the people nodded their appreciation. Slowly the man spread his hands for quiet, and again he began to sing:

Let me sing of one I love,  
a song about his vineyard.  
The vineyard of my loved one,  
was on a fertile hillside.

And he tilled the soil,  
and he cleared the stones,  
and he planted choicest grapevines

He built in its midst a stone tower,  
and even carved out a wine-vat.

And he waited for grapes to appear,  
but all that it made was rotten.

(my paraphrase of Isa. 5:1-2) 📌

### You be the judge (vv. 3-4)

You can imagine the response. "Ah,"

thought the farmers in the crowd. "I've had that happen to me, too. I've chosen a good spot. I've painfully dug up the ground with a pick, and built a wall from all the stones I had to clear out, and planted slips of those choice eastern grapes. I know what it is like to work hard and hope hard, and still have a rotten harvest."

And that's the response Isaiah was looking for. He emphasized the heavy labor that goes into preparing the soil, clearing the stones, and building a wall to fence out foxes and other pests. He spoke of finding the best vines available and planting them with care, of watching over them to keep out thieves or animals, of laboriously chiseling out a vat from solid stone where grapes could be crushed and fermentation begun before the juice was collected and funneled into fresh goat skins that could stretch while the wine continued fermenting.

It was no easy job.

Raising grapes requires work and patience and decent weather. And after all that effort, sometimes the crop doesn't turn out so well. Isaiah said his beloved waited patiently for his vineyard to produce good grapes, but it only produced sour and inedible fruit. The root of the word often translated as "wild grapes" means "to stink," as in dead fish from the Nile or spoiled manna in the wilderness. Literally, it could be translated as something akin to "stinkers" or "stinkberries."

The short of it is that the grapes weren't fit to eat, and any wine made from them would have been undrinkable. A great deal of effort and expense had gone to waste, which would have been immensely frustrating.

And that, of course, is exactly why Isaiah had composed his song. And that is why he continued to sing in lyrics that called for the gathered people to be the judge between the landowner and his vineyard (v. 3).

“What more could I have done for my vineyard?” he asked. “Why, when I looked for sweet grapes, did it make these stinkberries?” (v. 4, paraphrased).

### A bitter verdict (v. 5-7)

The implicit question the prophet posed is what should be done with a worthless vineyard. The people, no doubt, had ideas about what they might do, but Isaiah didn’t give them time to respond. Instead, he plowed ahead and declared his own solution to the problem:

Now let me tell you  
what I’ll do to my vineyard:  
I’m tearing up its hedge,  
so it will be laid open.  
I’m breaking down its wall,  
so all can walk upon it.  
I’ll cause its days to cease.  
It will not be pruned,  
it will not be hoed,  
there will come up thorns  
and briars.  
Upon the dark clouds,  
I’ll give a command,  
“Don’t let any rain fall on it.”  
(vv. 5-6, my translation/paraphrase)

The vineyard’s days were numbered, Isaiah insisted, and many in the crowd would have agreed with him. He had given the vineyard every chance. Experience told them that the fruit was unlikely to improve in future years. He might as well leave it to the beasts of the field, and see if they could stomach its bitter produce.

Perhaps the people would have laughed a little, or smirked a bit, and

congratulated themselves for their good judgment – until they heard the old man start singing again, drawing them into his rhetorical noose:

For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts  
is the house of Israel.  
And the people of Judah  
are his delightful plantings.  
And he waited for justice to grow,  
but you gave him bloodshed.  
He yearned for righteousness,  
but heard the needy crying.  
(v. 7, my translation/paraphrase)

How do you think the crowd responded to that? There may have been some who cheered, if they had felt the hard hand of injustice. Some may have looked for a way to escape, for they saw themselves in the song, guilty as charged.

Others, though, may have been puzzled, for they kept the temple rituals. They didn’t worship Baal or Asherah, as some did. They thought of themselves as righteous. What could the prophet be complaining about?

The clues were there in Isaiah’s song, made memorable by alliterative wordplay. God had looked for justice (*mishpat*), but they had shown him bloodshed (*mispach*). He had looked for righteousness (*tsedakah*), but heard only a cry (*tse’aqah*). 🗡️

Isaiah went on in the next few verses to explain what was so rotten in the state of Israel. Rich landowners were buying up all the land around them, for one thing (v. 8), often using crooked means to get poor farmers into debt and then seizing the land of their ancestral heritage when they couldn’t pay.

The wealthy but unscrupulous might live in beautiful houses on large estates, but a time was coming when their fields would produce little for them (vv. 9-10). Judgment was imminent, Isaiah predicted, and it was

deserved. The land of Judah, and the houses of its people, and even the great city of Jerusalem would soon reach the end of the road they had chosen, the road named rebellion, the road to destruction.

Clearly, this was not God’s desire: the compassion and the pathos in the prophet’s song rings clearly in our ears. God did not wish to punish the people, but had allowed them freedom to choose their own way, even when it took them straight into trouble.

Fortunately, Isaiah was not without hope, however desperate. He never gave up on the belief that a faithful remnant would always remain no matter how hard-hearted the majority might become. 🗡️ Either Isaiah of Jerusalem or a later prophet expressed such hope in a section of the book often called “the Little Apocalypse” (Isaiah 24–27). Hopeful visions recorded there include another song about grapes, this one about a time when God would sing with delight over a productive vineyard that relished the life-giving water and protection that God would provide.

“In days to come,” he said, “Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit” (Isa. 27:6).

Israel never took up residence in that idyllic vineyard where God is ever-present and the vines are always fruitful. But those who read the Bible from a New Testament perspective believe that Jesus Christ came to do what Israel could not. In fulfillment of Isaiah’s hope, Jesus called men and women to take root in his grace, to find nourishment in his Spirit, and to bear fruits of love that will fill the world.

But we also have options to be fruitful or not. If we imagine our lives as a grapevine, what kind of fruit are we producing? Does that suggest anything about where we need to go from here? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

August 21, 2022

Isaiah 58:1-14

## Phony Faith

**W**hat comes to mind when you hear the word “justice”? Often, we think mainly of the court system and whether justice is being done when cases are decided. Did the accused really do it? If so, is the punishment he or she receives commensurate with the crime?

But justice is a far broader subject than case law and “the justice system.” It is entirely possible for an individual to live within the law, yet practice injustice. It is possible, indeed, for an entire society to be riddled with policies that are inherently unjust. ⤵

What would you identify as justice issues in our society? Christian believers of good will may disagree on specific positions, but we should agree that those who follow God are called to work for justice that respects the dignity and rights of all.

## Futile fasting (vv. 1-5)

Today’s text comes from the closing section of Isaiah, a part of the book that many scholars refer to as “Third Isaiah” (chs. 56–66), because internal evidence locates the setting to be after the return from exile, more than 150 years after the ministry of Isaiah of Jerusalem. ⤵

The latter prophet, however, was well schooled in the teachings of the original Isaiah, and he was in touch with the same God. When he saw

*... if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. (Isa. 58:10)*

similar conditions and behaviors, he responded in similar ways. The location of today’s text is the city of Jerusalem and at some point after the temple had been rebuilt and Jewish religious rituals restored in 515 BCE.

It was also, unfortunately, a time when the families who had returned from Babylon with considerable wealth had been able to consolidate their positions and expand their holdings by taking advantage of their poorer Hebrew neighbors. ⤵

The first five verses constitute a series of charges and questions. Some scholars imagine an elaborate drama playing out with as many as five speakers, but it is also possible to imagine that the prophet is speaking throughout, quoting both the God who called him to prophesy and the people who claimed to believe they were living righteously.

The text begins with what the prophet describes as a divine cry: “Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins” (v. 1).

The declaration of the people’s failure is presented through sharp sarcasm. Yahweh declares that “Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, *as if* they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God ...” (v. 2, emphasis added).

The people act as if they really

want to know God, as if they delight in God’s presence – but they claim that God has ignored them: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” (v. 3a).

Fasting originated as a means of expressing grief in times of sorrow or penitence. On those occasions, people might rip their garments or put on sackcloth, sprinkle ashes on their heads, and go without food for a certain period. Over time, however, fasting became a ritualized religious observance that could display outward piety without inner conviction.

Although circumstances were somewhat different, the attitude of many post-exilic Hebrews in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century was not very different from that of their pre-exilic ancestors, around 200 years before (compare the charges here with those in Isa. 1:11-17, from late in the 8<sup>th</sup> century).

Yahweh’s charge was that the people fasted to serve their own interests rather than to honor God. They were satisfied with an outward show of righteousness that didn’t really cost them anything more than a missed meal or two that could be made up with later feasting.

The problem was that their pious fasting was not accompanied by righteous living. While patting themselves on the back for their ritual performance, some were simultaneously taking economic advantage of the people who worked for them while also quarreling with each other, even to the extent of physical violence (vv. 3b-4a).

That kind of fasting would win them no points with God, who took

no delight in watching people bowing their heads in worship while pressing the faces of the poor into the dirt (v. 5).

Does any of this connect with us? Few of us fast for religious reasons, but do we not have a similar tendency to practice aspects of religion that we like or that flatter our reputation, while ignoring the hard work of seeking justice for the oppressed and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves?

We may choose a worship service that suits our sensibilities and doesn't go on too long, for example, and contribute just enough to be respectable without making a sacrifice. Do we ever take time to examine our true motives in worship? 🇺🇸

### Faithful fasting (vv. 6-7)

The prophet declared in no uncertain terms that God would not endorse empty fasting. Rather, God desired to see justice unleashed and the oppressed go free, to see the hungry fed and the homeless housed, to see the naked clothed and family ties acknowledged (vv. 6-7).

Wealthy Hebrews had ways of putting poor people under financial pressure, loaning them money at high interest, and with the help of corrupt officials, seizing their land or even forcing them into indentured servitude when they could not pay their debts (Neh. 5:4-5).

Under the postexilic governor Nehemiah's administration, the problem reached such proportions that Nehemiah demanded an end to loans at excessive interest and declared an unscheduled Jubilee, ordering that fields and homes should be returned to those who had lost them to unjust dealings (Neh. 5:7-12).

Predatory lending practices remain all too common in our own culture, despite the efforts of many states

to outlaw them. God's desire is that God's people work toward a system in which all people have equal opportunities, in which the deck is not stacked against those who are poor, young, old, or have minority status.

Every yoke that binds people – every practice that restricts or denies persons the dignity and rights that every human should enjoy – every bond should be broken, God declared: that is the fast God desires.

### From fasting to feasting (vv. 8-14)

This is how the world sees God at work in the lives of God's people. The worship God wants is found in a caring humility that leads one to work for the good of others.

If the people would live in accord with that challenge, their witness would be like dawn's light breaking out over the world, spreading healing and hope through the land (v. 8). Then they could call on God and expect a more sympathetic ear: "you shall cry for help, and he will say 'Here I am'" (v. 9a).

Notice the conditional character of vv. 9b-10: if the people would remove the yoke of oppression, stop pointing fingers and speaking evil ... if they would share their food with the hungry and help the afflicted, then their light would shine as a testimony of true righteousness, even amid the darkest of days.

Those are big "ifs."

The prophet believed that showing care for others would open the door to receiving care from God (vv. 11-12). In a land constantly threatened by drought, God's people could become "like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail" (v. 11).

Ancient ruins – probably a reference to parts of Jerusalem that had been destroyed but never rebuilt – would

be reconstructed as a home for many generations of the faithful, and those responsible for such blessed work would be remembered as the "repairer of the breach" and "the restorer of streets to live in" (v. 12).

With vv. 13-14, the prophet returned to the theme of conditions and promises, this time with respect to sabbath keeping. 🇺🇸 The sabbath should be used to honor God and not just for "serving your own interests or pursuing your own affairs" (v. 13), he said. This was an issue in Nehemiah's day as he locked the city gates and sought to enforce a ban on merchants doing business on the sabbath (Neh. 13:15-22).

Isaiah promised that those who practiced sabbath properly would bring delight to Yahweh, who in turn would grant them the blessings of food, clothing, and presence that God had promised to Jacob (Gen. 28:10-21).

Christian readers must be careful in interpreting passages such as this. We no longer live under a conditional covenant in which success or failure is believed to be directly commensurate with obedience to God.

We cannot claim, based on this passage, that if we practice ethical living and proper worship, we will be repaid with material blessings. We can, however, be assured that such behavior will shine as a helpful beacon in a land darkened by greed that is sometimes masked behind self-righteousness.

And we must ask – this passage demands that we ask – what sort of motives we have in worship. Are we seeking only those aspects of religious practice that please us, or "fasting" in the way that pleases God: through ethical living that shows care for the poor, hungry, homeless, and oppressed?

It's a question worthy of our deep and careful thought. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

August 28, 2022

Jeremiah 2:1-15

## Lost Love

It happens all the time: children who appear to adore their parents while young grow up and turn a wary eye toward all they've been taught, rejecting the path their parents had set them on and choosing to follow their own way.

Sometimes that's a good thing: some parents do not provide the kind of example that children should follow. Often, however, children who were brought up to honor God and participate in the church later turn away. They may simply adopt other priorities, but sometimes it is because they have felt hurt by the church, or perceive Christians they know to be hypocritical.

We know that middle-aged and older adults sometimes abandon the church for similar reasons.

### When God remembered (vv. 1-3)

Today's text offers the small comfort of knowing that the pattern is not new. Jeremiah portrayed God as a caring parent whose children had once been devoted to the One who had delivered them from bondage, but who later turned their hearts to gods who could not deliver a fly from the mud.

The Hebrew prophets often spoke in oracles, messages that claimed to be a direct word from God, and that could be directed toward any number of

*...for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer. 2:15)*

subjects. 🇺🇸 Much of Jeremiah 2–24 consists of oracles of judgment against the people of Judah and Jerusalem. 🇺🇸

Jeremiah 2:1-13 includes two prophetic oracles, both typical examples of the prophet's preaching against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

The first three verses are not included in the lectionary text, but provide crucial background for understanding vv. 4-13. Speaking for Yahweh, Jeremiah spoke wistfully of how God remembered the days when Israel's people, freshly delivered from their bondage in Egypt, had been confident of God's presence and devoted to God's way.

The prophets often spoke of Israel's time in the wilderness in idealized fashion, imagining it as a sort of honeymoon period in which God and people enjoyed a time of mutual love and devotion. But the honeymoon, if it ever existed, was over. 🇺🇸 Jeremiah insisted that the people who were once devoted to God had turned their backs and redirected their allegiance to empty idols.

### What Israel forgot (vv. 4-8)

Jeremiah's work covered the last quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the first dozen years of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Israel had been in the Promised Land for 500 years, but the northern tribes (often referred to as "Israel" or

"Ephraim") had been conquered and captured more than a hundred years previously, and now the southern tribes of Judah were in danger, too.

Believing that judgment was both imminent and a direct result of the people's desertion of God, Jeremiah called the people on the carpet for their unfaithful ways.

God's desire to be recognized as the only true God had been made clear in the Ten Commandments, given through Moses on Mt. Sinai: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). The worship of images was specifically condemned (Exod. 20:4-5). Yet, the narrative declares that God's chosen people persistently followed the lead of their neighbors by incorporating Canaanite gods and their images into their worship practices.

Thus, God asked: "What wrong did your ancestors find in me, that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?" (v. 5, NRSV).

Jeremiah's commentary was sharp. The word translated "worthless" is *hebel*, the same word Qoheleth used as a framing mantra in Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2, 12:8). The word derived from the image of smoke that blows from a fire, or the fog that rises in the morning but quickly blows away. The term carries the connotation of something empty, insubstantial, worthless.

Jeremiah's word choice was also clever in that Israel had deserted Yahweh for Baal, and the word *hebel* looks and sounds very much like *haba'al*, the Hebrew way of referring to Baal. They were worshipping *hebel haba'al*, Bulemic Baal, the vapor god.

Additional information at  
[goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)





Looking back, we are tempted to wonder how the people could do such a thing. How they could forget the God who delivered them and turn to the god of their Canaanite neighbors? Jeremiah was even more incredulous, amazed that they would forget the God who delivered them from Egyptian oppression, led them through a desert wilderness filled with danger, and kept them alive in a forsaken land (v. 6).

Perhaps, in the polytheistic environment of the ancient Near East, the Hebrews came to think of Yahweh as a desert god only, as a traveling god or a war god. After getting settled in the Promised Land, what they cared about most was having more children to provide social security for their old age, and having more cattle to provide them with wealth, and growing more crops to feed themselves and the cattle.

Their Canaanite neighbors claimed that their gods, particularly Baal and Asherah, could promote fertility and make it rain so the land would produce crops – and the Canaanite gods were a big hit with the Hebrews.

It didn't hurt that serious Baal worship could involve drinking wine and having sex with temple prostitutes. Some evidence suggests that practices from Baal worship were even introduced at the temple in Jerusalem. People can convince themselves that just about anything is right if they want to do it badly enough: we are experts at rationalizing wrong.

Jeremiah reminded the people that they didn't need a separate or local fertility god to help grow crops in Canaan. "I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruit and its good things," he said, on God's behalf. "But when you entered you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination" (v. 7).

Even those who should have known best failed to be faithful,

Jeremiah insisted: there were failures at every level. The priests did not call on God, the experts in the law had lost touch with the God who gave them the law, the leaders of the people led them away from God, and prophets declared that they spoke for Baal, rather than Yahweh (v. 8).

Is it any wonder that Jeremiah – who had remained faithful to Yahweh – was flabbergasted by their shift in allegiance?

### What difference it makes (vv. 10-15)

To emphasize the seriousness of Israel's rebellion, Jeremiah spoke as if God were bringing a formal lawsuit against Israel, a common pattern of speech among the prophets. 🇺

"Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children" (v. 9).

The word translated as "accuse" can mean "strive" or "contend" in a generic sense, or "bring charges" in a specific legal context. Jeremiah's terminology suggests that Israel's abandonment of Yahweh was not a new problem.

God had charged their ancestors with the same kind of behavior, and expected to indict their grandchildren for the same thing. Still, God spoke with disbelief that Israel, among all the nations, had traded in the "glory" of their God for impotence of idols. 🇺

The word translated as "glory" has its roots in the sense of something being heavy, substantive, or worthy of respect. Israel had exchanged the weighty substance of the true God for the insubstantial smoke and mirrors of the Canaanite prophets.

With v. 13, Jeremiah used a striking metaphor of spiritual thirst to both summarize his charges, and to introduce a more detailed description of the people's sin. They were guilty of

two major evils, he said, forsaking the divine fountain of "living water" in favor of cisterns of their own making, broken tanks that could hold no water (v. 13). (See "The Hardest Question" in the online resources for more.)

It's easy for us to join Jeremiah in condemning Israel, but we should look in the mirror before doing so. It's not uncommon for church members to trade in their devotion to God like a used car. It's possible to think of oneself as a follower of God while for all practical purposes living as a deserter.

We have known people who were raised in church and loved God as a child, but left their allegiance to God when they left home.

Others may have followed God for a long time, but when things didn't work out as they expected or some tragedy came into their lives, they became angry with God. To express their disillusionment, they may have stopped praying or going to church, thinking that if God could not or would not protect them from trouble, there was little point in worship.

We may also know people who have wandered from God, but who learned that fast times or big dollars or alternate religions did not feed their spiritual hunger, and they returned to God. They discovered that God is waiting and willing to forgive, always longing for relationship with us.

It is entirely possible, of course, that we might find ourselves in any one or more of those categories. It is good to know that no matter how far off track we may get, God still loves us and does not give up on us. God is always willing to welcome us home with open arms, where we find the meaning and hope and joy that come with trusting the God we knew as children, the God who is. 🇺 NFJ

# IMPERFECT ATTENDANCE

A historical look at the rising and reshaping of Sunday School

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

**F**or most of Christian history, the Bible did not play a prominent role in the daily lives of ordinary Christians. Few read, studied or even owned a Bible. It was not until the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Bible reading became a common practice among common people.

## RARE BOOKS

Historically, book production was limited and literacy low. From ancient times until around the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, papyrus rolls served as the common medium of written manuscripts.

Slow and tedious if not exorbitantly expensive to produce, papyrus manuscripts during the early Roman Empire existed at a time when literacy rates ranged from almost zero in some locations to perhaps as high as 20 percent in others.

In the Middle Ages — roughly 500 to about 1500 CE — calfskin and split sheepskin (also known as vellum), crafted into parchment, were the most common materials from which books were made. Literacy rates in the Western world are believed to have declined during this time.

While a limited supply of books and few readers assured widespread personal detachment from Bibles even among Christian populations, the Roman Catholic Church also played a role in Bible reading remaining a rarity.

Self-perceived as God's true interpreters and guardians of the Christian faith, the Church went to great lengths to persecute heretics during the Middle Ages, often to the point of death. Maintaining the one true faith required a formally sanctioned interpretation of the Bible. Placing the biblical text into the hands of laity was an open door to heresy.

Church councils in the 13<sup>th</sup> century captured the essence of the “problem” of Bible reading among ordinary people:

Decree of the Council of Toulouse (1229 CE): “We prohibit also that the laity should be permitted to have the books of the Old or New Testament; but we most strictly forbid their having any translation of these books.”

Ruling of the Council of Tarragona (1234 CE): “No one may possess the books of the Old and New Testaments in the Romance language, and if anyone possesses them he must turn them over to the local bishop within eight days after promulgation of this decree, so that they may be burned...”

English theologian John Wycliffe in 1380 introduced the first translation of the New Testament into English, to enable ordinary people to “study the Gospel” in the common language. For this he was roundly condemned by the Roman Catholic Church.

Wycliffe's censure held further English editions of the Bible at bay until William Tyndale translated the entire Bible into English in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In response, the Church strangled and burned Tyndale at the stake, thereafter forbidding the owning or reading of the Bible by laity.

## PRINTING PRESS

Nonetheless, the invention of the printing press about 1440 by Johannes Guttenberg loosened the Catholic Church's control of the Bible and enabled the Protestant Reformation. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many translations of the Bible existed.

Ironically, the dominant Protestant church — the Church of England — also resorted to restricting the Bible. Commissioned in order to marginalize non-approved English Bible translations in a growing marketplace of books, the

1611 King James Bible served as the government-authorized — and soon most popular — edition in the English-speaking world.

Also concerned about proper faith and practice, but from a ground-up perspective of commoners correcting impurities within the Church of England, Puritan communities of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries — of whom half or more of the males were literate — embraced Bible reading more than other groups, at least in theory.

In England as well as in their “Bible Commonwealths” (a theocratic form of governance and economy based on Old Testament laws) in the New World, the Puritans found many uses for the Bible. Few required literacy.

Historian David Cressy, in an article titled “Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England,” examined alternative cultural uses of the Bible, some seemingly more common than actual Bible reading.

Perhaps no usage of holy scripture was more fitting in 17<sup>th</sup>-century theocracies than in the courtroom. In court proceedings a defendant was required to “lay their hands upon a Bible or [New] Testament,” take an oath, and then “kiss” the Bible.

## 'FORTUNE COOKIES'

Apart from legal functions, Bible practices ranged near and far. In Cressy's words, the Bible “was credited with medicinal powers,” to the extent that “some people believed that the holy pages had healing properties.”

A Bible on hand could help a successful childbirth, put a “restless patient” to sleep, be “placed under the head as a restorative,” or be “brought into the sickroom as an aid to health.”

The “mere presence” of a Bible “would ward off evil spirits,” and hence



**HIGH ATTENDANCE** — Many churches in growing towns and communities consider the 1950s as their hey-days of Sunday School. First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga., for example, had a large Scrap Iron Class for men (shown here in 1956) and a corresponding Fidelis Class for women. Such classes — with elected leadership, operational and mission funds, and lecture-style lessons carried by local radio — were communities within the larger church fellowships. While smaller now, the classes still function in some similar ways.

disease. In houses, Bibles were frequently “found in the bedchamber, where it [the Bible] was available for use by the sick or dying.”

Few people spent much if any time systematically reading the Bible, but many took the Bible flippantly. Opening the Bible served as a way of quickly discerning providential guidance.

“The book had power,” summarizes Cressy, “which could be released and focused through the blind stabbing at a randomly opened page,” thereby using the Bible “like fortune cookies” to steer actions or see the future.

“Dipping” the Bible “before twelve o’clock on New Year’s Day” and reading the “first verse that meets the eye” as an indicator of “good or bad fortune” was a common practice.

Another custom consisted of mounting the holy book on a pole above one’s head while going into battle, “like a legionary standard.” The “Bible, held aloft, served as an inspirational emblem and as a weapon” when going into battle or confronting “reprobate neighbors.”

The Bible was also used to identify guilty persons through divination. One “Bible and key” method called for having a key fastened in the middle of the Bible

— with the key ring held between the forefingers of two persons.

When the name of a suspected thief or other offender was said aloud and a verse or two read, the key “will turn around” if the individual is guilty.

### **CULTURALLY EMBEDDED**

Securely embedded within the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Western mindset — whether widely read or not — the Bible by the 18<sup>th</sup> century stood positioned to culturally advance American Christianity.

Yet as the number of colonial churches rapidly expanded in the first half of the 1700s, not a single American printer yet produced an English translation of the Bible. England still supplied virtually all Bibles owned by American colonists.

Not until the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century did American publishers begin printing Bibles — paradoxically, at the very time church attendance declined in America to approximately 5-10 percent of citizens.

The downturn was attributed in part to the distraction of revolutionary fever, and in part to public disinterest in establishment (government-supported) churches being discriminatory and

lacking religious vitality.

But only briefly would church attendance remain at its low point, rising once again in the early 1800s, enabled by a free market of religious ideas brought about by the separation of church and state in the 1791 Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution.

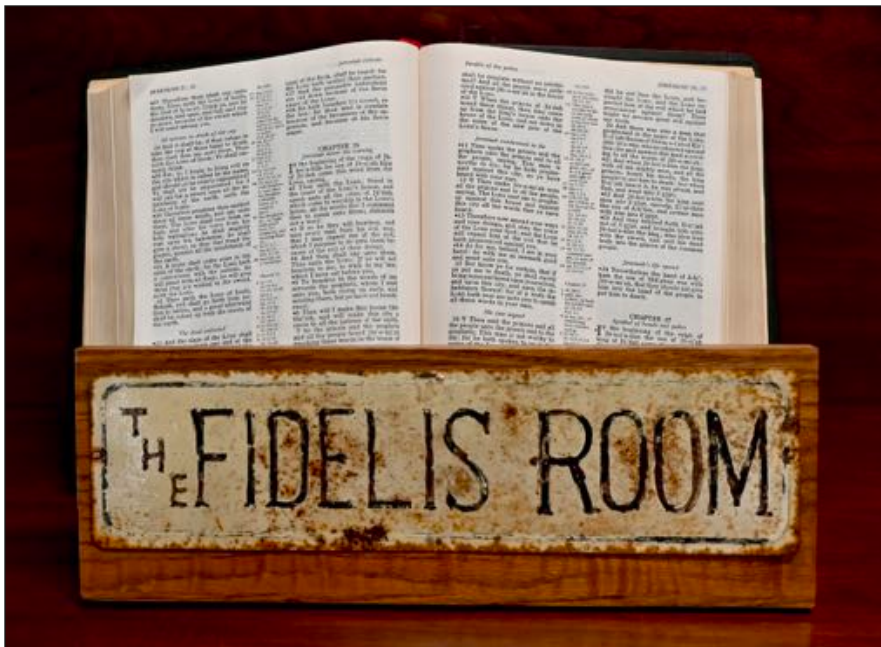
Within this environment Baptists — a minority group heavily persecuted by establishment churches in the colonial era — prospered. At the same time many new denominations emerged, each claiming truth.

American Bible publishers, well established by the Second Great Awakening in the opening decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, happily swamped America with their wares. Within a short period of time, Bibles in a dizzying array of formats collectively targeted all classes and pocketbooks and denominations.

### **NEW DEVELOPMENT**

As Americans returned to church pews and Bible-reading reached new heights, a late-18<sup>th</sup>-century Western development — the Industrial Revolution — paved the way for yet another popular cultural use for the Bible.

Originating in England, the Industrial



**BIBLES EVERYWHERE** — The omnipresence of Bibles in churches and homes — and the ability to read them — was not always the case. The emergence of translations, printing and literacy — and resistance to efforts to keep Bibles in only the hands of church leaders — fueled common access to the scriptures.

Revolution lured many impoverished rural families to urban centers. Trading hoe, plow and an outdoor life for dawn-to-dusk factory work, entire families, adults and children alike, often labored mightily for what amounted to a different type of poverty.

In Britain's big cities, children typically worked in the factory six days a week for up to 15 hours a day. On Sundays, their only day off work, gangs of poor, illiterate children roamed city neighborhoods looking for fun and sport, often causing trouble.

Lack of educational opportunities for poor children, in the minds of some reformers, contributed to high incarceration rates in urban areas. Robert Raikes, a British newspaperman and Anglican from Gloucester, put the theory to test.

For more than a century, Puritan congregations in theocratic Massachusetts had been conducting grammar schools primarily focused on religious instruction for Puritan children.

In the 1780s Raikes established a public reading and instructional school for urban boys on Sundays. This innovation opened his schools' doors to all comers and for largely secular instruc-

tional purposes.

Recruiting laymen as teachers and the Bible — the most available book in Britain — as reading material, "Raikes Ragged School" quickly grew, and soon included girls. Parents of the newly schooled children were grateful.

However, many citizens not trapped in poverty criticized Raikes' efforts as violating biblical laws against working on the Sabbath and subverting home-based Christian education available to financially stable families.

### EXPANDED EDUCATION

Nonetheless, Raikes' schools expanded widely and provided valuable public education to the least fortunate of young people. Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution reached the U.S. in the form of textile mills.

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reformers and philanthropists fretted over growing urban poverty and crime accompanying early American industrialization.

Early 1800s reformers, businessmen and philanthropists (often one and the same) in the major cities of Philadelphia, New York and Boston financed a slowly

growing, privately funded public school movement focused on educating poor white children. Churches and benevolent societies operated many of the schools.

For their part, many moneyed families provided for their male children's education through homeschooling, by hiring schoolmasters or private tutors, or sending their sons to boarding schools or apprenticeships.

In some instances, young girls received education via finishing schools. But whether poor or wealthy, only a minority of American children received grammar-level education through much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Far fewer attended high school.

Ultimately, charitable and privately financed educational efforts had their limits. Growing calls for publicly funded education for all white children — with Black young people rarely considered worthy in America's racist culture — led in the 1830s to early taxpayer-supported public schools. Massachusetts led the way by establishing a state board of education in 1837.

### A TRANSITION

Alongside the gradual ascendancy of public education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sunday School slowly transitioned from broad, basic education toward primary religious instruction for all ages.

The 1824 formation of the American Sunday School Union during the Second Great Awakening signaled the beginning of the shift. In the coming decades the number of Sunday Schools grew — as did the volumes of books in Sunday School "libraries" — primarily in the urban East.

Evidence points both to a peaking of the Sunday School movement by 1850 on the one hand, and an institutionalization of Sunday Schools on the other hand. As movement gave way to institution, Sunday Schools continued to grow numerically.

In 1860, on the eve of the American Civil War, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner reported: "In the Free States the Sunday-school libraries are

1,713 and contain 474,241 volumes; in the Slave States they are 275 and contain 68,080 volumes.”

Formal education of any kind remained rare among whites in the slave South, while educating Black people was a crime in most southern states. Quite likely, most of the library books in Sunday Schools were religious in nature and would have been off-limits to Blacks.

Diverging portraits of Sunday School cloud the period from about 1870 to about 1890. This was a time of rapid public school growth — alongside the rise of white Protestant triumphalism and corresponding with the “Gilded Age,” an era of extreme wealth inequality.

During this time Sunday School — once a loose movement incorporating both religious and secular educational components — transitioned to the modern age with the introduction of age-graded, uniform, common curriculum for children and adults.

By some accounts the number of Sunday Schools soared to 70,000 nationwide and beyond. Other data suggests little to no numerical growth took place.

Denied equal rights, economic justice and adequate educational opportunities even after the end of slavery, Black Christians formed their own denominations and created their own Sunday School literature focused primarily, but not exclusively, on religious teaching. Individual and community uplift also played an important role in African-American churches.

## NEW CENTURY

Sunday School — institutionalized and (for white Christians in particular) increasingly evangelistic in focus — entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a far different look. Rather than serving local communities at least in part, the newer incarnation was insular in nature.

According to one narrative common in church history studies, Sunday School during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century drove record church growth.

Enabled by robust, evangelistic-oriented Sunday School programs replete

with age-graded Bible study lesson plans teaching the “plan of salvation” and institutional doctrine, America’s Christian churches and denominations experienced their golden age.

Perhaps no denomination benefited more than the Southern Baptist Convention — the largest of Protestant denominations — for whom standardized Bible study lessons grew church attendance and solidified denominational identity.

In this narrative, Southern Baptists and some other denominations peaked during the 1950s, an era of Cold War fears that drove more Americans to church pews during a period of civil (or patriotic) religion. Ever since, institutional American Christianity — and hence Sunday School — has been in numerical decline.

Some data, on the other hand, suggest a different story. In this alternative narrative — encompassing a larger trove of now-unavailable data that allows for comparative popularity based on keywords — Sunday School interest dropped dramatically during the Gilded Age and afterward peaked far earlier than the Cold War.

This lone era of notable growth paralleled America’s Progressive Era (approximately 1896–1920), during which the federal government reined in some excesses of capitalism and weighed in on the side of working-class Americans.

This led to shorter work weeks for adults and, most importantly, put an end to child labor. No longer forced to work in factories to help support their families, urban children filled public school classrooms as educational mandates became the norm and high schools proliferated.

## UP AND DOWN

During the Progressive Era, conservative and progressive Protestant churches — with many using Sunday School as an effective tool — increased church membership.

Conservative churches focused on evangelization, while some progressives

in large cities embraced a “social gospel” — a theology of social justice based on Jesus’ teachings of a responsibility to provide for the least of persons.

In the late 1910s the Progressive Era encountered the headwinds of World War I, and then came to an end in 1920 with the securing of national suffrage for women.

Following the hardships of World War I and an accompanying massive flu pandemic, the economy rebounded and Americans sought happiness. A second Gilded Age of massive wealth inequality emerged in the 1920s as conservative administrations in Washington cut taxes on the rich and reduced business regulations.

Approximately one-half of Americans remained impoverished, but the mostly white middle class grew — albeit at the expense of consumer loans. Seemingly well-off, non-rural white, middle-class Christianity embraced a gospel of wealth and prosperity.

Businessman Bruce Barton’s popular book, *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus*, recast Jesus as an astute business leader. Middle-class families bought cars and began driving around town, or out of town, on the weekends.

From pulpits irate preachers fulminated. Sunday School attendance appears to have dropped dramatically. Not until the depths of the Great Depression did the steep drop in Sunday School participation reverse, briefly ticking upward again, only to plummet following the arrival of World War II.

Leveling off during a period of civil religion in the early 1950s — rather than expanding, as some accounts claim — Sunday School turned downward again by the end of that decade against the backdrop of revived national prosperity.

Since then, Sunday School participation at best has very briefly leveled off now and then, the latest period of leveling seemingly being the years from 2016 to 2019 — the last years for which data are available.

“...Sunday School literature giving minimal attention to Jesus’ teachings echoes a largely Jesus-absent ‘biblical worldview’ that emerged with the formation of the politically oriented, culturally aggrieved Christian Right in 1980.”

### DIFFERENT FOCUSES

Neither broad interpretation of modern Sunday School participation offers specific insights into African-American church life. However, there are indications that since at least the 1980s, Black Christians have been more engaged in Sunday School than have white Christians.

For decades the annual convention of the Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, USA, has routinely drawn 10,000–20,000 attendees in person (not including the COVID years of 2020 and 2021), a remarkable number greater than annual Southern Baptist Convention attendance since the 1980s.

Describing itself as the “largest publisher among all Black religious publishing agencies in the world,” the SSPB “provides African-American-based curriculum materials, programmatic, merchandise, and supplies for over 36,000 churches and patrons from the general populace.”

SSPB publications focus on Bible studies, discipleship, leadership, spiritual growth and children’s materials that give prominence to the teachings of Jesus.

By contrast, a compilation of introductory information gleaned from 64 “Sunday School curriculum providers” — primarily white conservative publishers, including the SBC’s Lifeway, but also one minor Black publisher — gives hints of theological divergences within the Sunday School landscape.

All the identified publishers focus on Bible study, but only 13 mention Jesus. Two are lectionary-focused, two include an emphasis on discipleship, none mentions “spiritual formation,” and none teaches leadership skills.

Based on this information, white conservative Christian Sunday School literature clearly places Bible study far above all else, but with Jesus-centric teachings less important.

In a larger context, Sunday School literature giving minimal attention to Jesus’ teachings echoes a largely Jesus-absent “biblical worldview” that emerged with the formation of the politically oriented, culturally aggrieved Christian Right in 1980.

On the other hand, among moderate-to-liberal white congregational Sunday School literature, as well as Black denominational literature, Jesus’ inclusive life and teachings are more commonly voiced. In addition, individual spiritual formation and collective social justice are common themes.

### LESSONS LEARNED

What can be ascertained about modern Sunday School history from the various data?

First, Americans’ interest in Sunday School moved sharply upward in sync with the most progressively reformist political and cultural era in modern times (the Progressive Era), and steeply downward during the starkest early-20<sup>th</sup>-century period of wealth inequality and debt-driven, middle-class prosperity (the Roaring ’20s).

It moved slightly and briefly upward during the depths of the Great Depression era of the 1930s and has steadily fallen since. An exception was at least a brief leveling off during the early 1950s era of civil religion — or perhaps in some instances, such as urban Southern Baptists churches, moving upward through the 1950s before dropping.

Second, white conservative Christians have largely confined Sunday School to Bible study, even as in recent decades they have embraced a largely Jesus-absent “biblical worldview.”

Moderate-to-liberal white Christians incorporate into Sunday School spiritual formation, discipleship, a greater focus on the life and teachings of Jesus, and, increasingly, social justice components along with traditional Bible study.

Black Christians, in addition to robustly emphasizing spiritual formation, discipleship, the life and teachings of Jesus, and social justice, also frame Sunday School as individual and community uplift within and without church buildings.

Third, “end times” theology — the anticipation of an immediate return of Christ followed by an apocalyptic war to end all wars in which faithful Christians will emerge violently victorious over everyone else — has been a highly popular Bible study subject since the 1980s.

Inherently connected to the rise in Christian nationalism — rooted in a so-called “biblical worldview” — end-times theology has likely influenced conservative adult Sunday school curriculum during the past four decades.

Modern patterns in Sunday School participation, focus and subject matter among white conservative Christian churches are — despite a primary emphasis on Bible Study (and evangelism or discipleship) — often steered by exclusive political and cultural currents outside of the church walls that shape what is taught within church communities.

Moderate-to-liberal white Christian congregations tend to be more inwardly introspective and outwardly prophetic during the Sunday School hour, shaped by inclusive political and cultural currents that influence biblical interpretation.

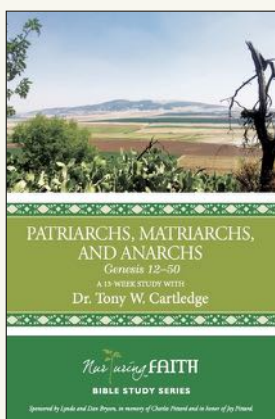
Markedly different than either, Black congregations have since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century developed and grown a more holistic concept of Sunday School. While not exactly replicating Sunday Schools’ early focus on secular education alongside religious teaching, this approach offers broad hope — both within and beyond church walls — to a minority and still-marginalized people group. **NFJ**

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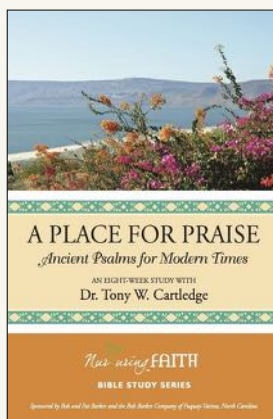
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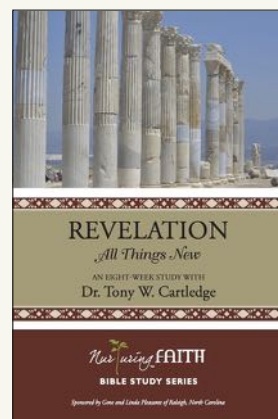
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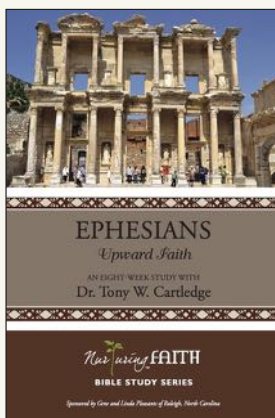
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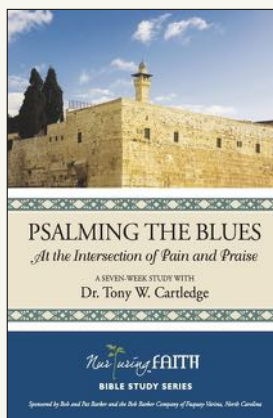
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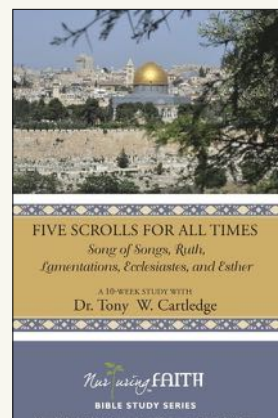
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# EXCAVATING THE SOUL

Fostering growth takes courage, modeling, probing and vulnerability

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**E**merging from “the recent unpleasantness” — as Pastor Shaun King refers to the pandemic shutdown — the ministerial team of Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga., a north Atlanta suburb, gathered to examine their overall strategy of spiritual formation.

In addition to looking at what is traditionally called Christian education, their wide considerations included everything from welcoming newcomers to weekly worship.

Seven core values serve as lenses through which their exploration passed: excellence in worship, theological depth and diversity, authentic Christian community, the gospel of Jesus Christ and his church, congregational courage, responsible Christian stewardship, and a missional consciousness where every member is mobilized to serve.

At the core of their ongoing questioning is a basic and crucial one: if, when and how the church is forming faithful followers of Jesus.

## THE PEWS

“Joe and Betty Pew” are always on the minds of church leaders, said Shaun. The “Pews” collectively represent the varied persons connected with the congregation.

Hearing from them and having them top of mind keeps the ministries focused on actual needs rather than just more busyness. So, whenever an idea arises, the ministers quickly ask one another about how doing such might impact the spiritual lives of Joe and Betty.

Shaun said the pandemic and its related challenges “unveiled some things” the church needs to address. One is “a sense of codependency” with institutional expressions of the church.

“We’re culpable for nurturing that,” he said confessionally. “We’ve said, ‘You have to be here.’”



Shaun King (left) and David White are engaged with other ministers and lay leaders at Johns Creek Baptist Church in exploring ways the congregation can “inspire the desire” for faith formation.

Then during the pandemic, he said, we expected them to figure out how to grow and be faithful without being here.

Connections Pastor David White said one early and important endeavor was to discover “where” church members are — physically, emotionally and spiritually — after enduring and aging through a lengthy pandemic. Such awareness of needs, he said, provides opportunities for offering helpful resources and community experiences to aid the journey toward faithfulness.

“We believe that the life Jesus promised is very much worth living,” said David, “and is available to everyone, and available right now.”

So the ministerial staff is looking more intently at their “overall spiritual formation strategy” — not to appease the Pews, but to discover intentional and effective ways to help them to be formed into more faithful followers of Jesus.

## INTENTIONALITY

Checking in on the Pews, church leaders discovered members who feel overwhelmed, tired and disillusioned — and yet others who are hopeful and ready to move forward.

This unprecedented time, the ministers believe, calls for asking harder, more defining questions than before. Where is God in all of this? What did we learn from the experiences of the last couple of years?

After an extended time of being away

from the congregation’s usual ways of being church, it seems the whole idea of priorities is up for grabs. Yet, the ministers said, the soil is prepared for digging in ways they might not have done so otherwise.

“Perhaps we’ve not paid enough attention to nurturing true spiritual formation,” David confessed, voicing the possibility that “what we’ve taught in the church is how to behave.”

Emphasizing the priority of being like Jesus in attitude and action, he said, goes up against all kinds of messages the Pews are hearing elsewhere: “You’ve got to succeed; you’ve got to excel; you’ve got to rise to the top.”

“The world rewards them” for such accomplishments, David acknowledged. So, with personal success so highly valued culturally, how does the church raise faithfulness to the way of Christ as the highest priority?

Going against this stream to follow Jesus, said Shaun, “is not just hard, but it’s impossible without brokenness and failure.”

So, a lot of his conversations and preaching, he said, are confessions and urgings to that end. To faithfully follow Jesus, he insists, “requires an excavation of the soul.”

Countering the idea that brokenness and failure are to be avoided, Shaun preaches that “chosen vulnerability” is essential to becoming more like Christ.



And he's chosen to model that approach.

"There's something truer than the personas we project," said Shaun. Faithfulness to Jesus requires cracking through the hidden motives and other aspects of one's "false self," he said, to discover that truer self.

## PRODDING

The degree to which ministers, especially preachers, can or will prod listeners in their faith development — including confronting their false selves — is challenging, said Shaun.

This is especially true when addressing popular ideologies and religious beliefs that are deeply embraced, yet at odds with what Jesus said and did.

"Usually, the more clearly I quote Jesus, the more trouble I get in," he said. "But then Jesus said that would happen."

Shaun said he seeks to provide enough discomfort that listeners might rethink their values and priorities rather than leave for a place that ignores or affirms such misdirection.

"You poke, and you poke... until they say ouch," he said. "Then you go back and poke a little more."

While taking seriously what is preached, taught, modeled and offered to the congregation, Shaun said ministers cannot make individuals into the likeness of Jesus.

"Who's responsible for someone's spiritual formation?" he asks, and then responds: "They are."

The minister's role is not to form disciples, he said, but to offer the tools to "inspire them with a desire to be formed." "You have to offer it and model it," he added.

Through preaching, he said, listeners must see authenticity and the same brokenness they experience. Only then can needed changes occur.

Not all listeners hear and respond in the same ways, he said, noting the Enneagram's identification of nine interconnected personality types. "So, I try to shape the message to be heard by those not like me."

Ministers must be reasonable in their

expectations of themselves and the faith communities they serve rather than an idealized version of themselves and others, he added.

"You lead the church you have, not the church you want," said Shaun. "You recognize you're here to serve these people."

Meeting the various members of the Pew family wherever they are, however, adds to the challenge of providing resources — in a broad sense — and engagement opportunities for them to experience possibilities for forming of their faith.

## JOURNEYING

"Being present for the journey" is crucial for ministers, said David — affirming that an honest and caring pastoral presence must accompany whatever programs or resources are offered.

"[Shaun has] been leading us on a journey of excavation..." he said, "and helping us understand that it's OK to strip away, question, doubt and reconstruct."

"That's been fruitful work..." he added, but it comes with "an enhanced vulnerability."

Shaun offered a warning to ministers who assume an excavating approach to preaching, teaching and overall leadership.

"Leading from the true self comes at a cost," he said. "And people will exploit those vulnerabilities."

He motioned toward a file folder in his desk that contains some harsh, and often parting messages from those unwilling to hear about how Jesus really said his followers should live.

There's "a cost to the church too," he noted, since success is often measured in numerical ways only rather than in faithfulness to the gospel. But Shaun said his calling doesn't give him the choice to water down the gospel until it's free of what Jesus said really matters — yet he must make his appeals confessionally.

"Nobody can lead a congregation toward the liberation of false self and the discovery of true self while building up their own ego," he said. It requires leading

from the discovery of "one's true self."

Shaun's doctoral work focused on whether a congregational leader can "break through the ice" of their own false self to a truer self while leading others to do likewise. He concluded it can be done but requires "chosen vulnerability."

One way he seeks to accomplish this mind-changing, even life-changing, understanding of God's kingdom is to present "different kinds of heroes" than those society celebrates and seeks to emulate.

"You make heroes out of the behavior you desire," said Shaun. "Then you tell those stories again and again."

## CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

Deeper and more clarifying questions have come out of the pandemic — and some new, hard lessons are being learned. One is that rote responses of "Jesus" and "the Bible" to whatever questions are asked don't necessarily translate into attitudes, values and behaviors that align more closely with biblical truth culminating in the life and teachings of Jesus.

David said he is getting a jump on faith formation priorities now by conveying to new and prospective members that engaging in the life of a church calls for being challenged in and responsible for one's own life of faith.

"Don't ask if this church checks all your boxes," he advises. "Ask if it allows you to become the person God has called you to be."

David, who left a successful business career to enter ministry, said the work of spiritual formation is essential to congregational life — and what distinguishes it from other organizations.

"This work has to be done..." he said, even if some people prefer appeasement over transformation and comfort over the discomfort of living in the selfless ways of Jesus.

That's why "congregational courage" is one of the lenses through which the church views its overall ministry.

"It takes a special brand of courage to create an environment where followers of Jesus can be formed," he said. **NFJ**

# TRENDS & INNOVATION

Experienced educators discuss the changing face of faith formation

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Three longtime Christian educators were asked about the changing landscape of faith formation.

**B**o Prosser of Raleigh, N.C., leads the Center for Christian Education and directs the Ministerial Excellence Initiative for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. An author, coach and interim minister, he served earlier as associate pastor of Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C.

Karen Massey is associate professor of Christian education and faith development at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta. A founding member and former president of the Christian Educators' Network, she is a member of Atlanta's Northside Drive Baptist Church where she previously served as associate minister.

David Cassady is president of Baptist Seminary of Kentucky and founder of the creative services firm Faithlab. In addition to congregational ministry, he has been involved in curriculum development and publishing for many years.

**NFJ: What are some of the most significant trends in Christian education over the last few decades?**

Massey identified three, the first being a shift away from a focus on studying scripture.

"In some church and denominational contexts, Christian education for children has shifted to a focus on 'concepts' and 'values' rather than a focus on learning the stories of the Bible," she

said. "Adult education has shifted to a study of contemporary issues, personal self-help topics, and book studies."

Studying such things isn't bad, said Massey, but diverts attention from studying the Bible.

"Knowing the stories of the Bible is foundational to our faith," she said. "The Bible reminds us of who we are and whose we are, and it tells us how people have experienced and interpreted God working in their lives and in the world."

The second trend she identified is the increased use of technology — noting how Zoom kept congregations and classes connected during the pandemic shutdown.

"Technology has helped with efficiency, disseminating information and maintaining a sense of connectedness," she said, "but I wonder what the impact will be on the community aspect of being church. While technology is important and is here to stay, it cannot take the place of in-person encounters, fellowship and human touch."

A third trend, she said, is a move to age-grading church programs at the expense of intergenerational relationships and benefits.

Prosser recalled various emphases and shifts within congregational-based Christian education during his lifetime, with the Sunday School hour as the centerpiece.

"We existed to teach people the Bible," he said. "While this has fallen out of favor in many circles, the small group movement continues to be critical for holding community in most churches."

He recalled the Southern Baptist recruitment effort called "A Million More in '54" — a time when Sunday

School attendance in many churches grew significantly.

"Biblical literacy was at the forefront of Christian education in this movement," said Prosser. "This led to the current architecture in many churches built during that time with the large assembly room and smaller classrooms off of that."

Social issues found their way into Bible studies for many of these churches in the 1960s and '70s, he said. The Bible was used to support or reject growing equality based on race, gender and marital status.

In the 1980s Southern Baptists again sought to emphasize growth, said Prosser, shifting between numerical and spiritual growth.

"The Southern Baptist Convention was in turmoil, and this carried over to Christian education programming," he said. "Sunday School classes became more about teaching the 'party line,' depending upon which 'party' each church chose."

The rise of megachurches such as Saddleback and Willow Creek propelled the move from traditional Sunday School to small groups, house groups and more topical short-term studies, he said.

Prosser credited writers Richard Rohr, Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Henry Nouwen, Annie Dillard, Robert Mulholland, Will Campbell and N.T. Wright with influencing a shift in focus from "Christian education" to "spiritual formation" in the 1990s. These and other voices, he said, called for embracing a more holistic formation of faith.

"Studying the Bible to listen to the Spirit was more than our most traditional folks could grasp," said Prosser, recalling some resistance to this shift. "They just



### David Cassady

President of Baptist Seminary of Kentucky and founder of the creative services firm Faithlab (Contributed photo)



### Karen Massey

Teaches Christian education and faith development at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology (Photo: David Garber)



### Bo Prosser

A coach, consultant and adult educator (Photo: Richard Gee Jr.)

wanted us to teach them the Bible — in the same way, at the same time, in the same room that they were used to.”

The new millennium ushered in a fuller move toward spiritual formation, said Prosser, recalling that around 2004 he began sharing a presentation with churches titled, “Whatever Happened to Christian Education?”

“I tried to unpack the many terms that were flying around to help church leaders get a handle on what was happening in the field,” he said.

Prosser said his work with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at that time instigated and reinforced organizational efforts and resources to equip churches for “the shift from the more-narrow Christian education framework to the broader spiritual formation movement.”

Generational shifts, he noted, have lessened the emphasis on traditional Sunday School even more.

Admitting some generalization, he said: “Baby Boomers are trying to recapture the warm fuzzy feelings of their youth; Generation Xers have become less

and less interested in sitting in a cramped room hearing another lecture on mostly meaningless Bible study, and Generation Y and Z are more and more disinterested in anything to do with organized religion.”

The rise of social media has contributed to this trend, he said, as has the shift in many churches to institutional survival — most evident during the current “post-pandemic panic.” But Prosser isn’t giving up.

“I believe that the effective Sunday School class is still vital to the church program,” he said. “I also believe that a broader spiritual formation curriculum is critical to our churches staying relevant and connected to the people in our communities.”

He described Sunday School as one panel of the overarching umbrella for spiritual growth.

“People are searching for God more than ever; they aren’t searching for institutional programming as it has always been,” said Prosser. “They want meaningful interactions and trusted community that bring hope over fear.”

The question, he said, is whether they think the church is a good place for this to happen.

Cassady noted the significant drop in “program” approaches to Christian education — recalling the days when churches offered weekly programming that included Sunday School (Bible study), Church Training (history, polity, ethics, theology), and missions education.

“Each had their own meeting times and content areas, usually with age-group-specific variations...,” he said. “The post-WWII family had more time on their hands, so the church expanded programs to meet the need.”

Cassady points to the “dramatically increased competition for time” in recent decades impacting the changing role of church in American culture.

“Whereas once Sundays and Wednesday evenings were off-limits, they are now prime sports and extracurricular time slots for schools and organizations,” he said. “Add to this an expanded work week and increased

family travel, and it is easy to see why the old model no longer works.”

The result? “We have seen most churches retreat to having only one standing program for education: Sunday School.”

Cassady also noted the shift from traditional curriculum resources to small-group, book and topical studies — in addition to moving from a single teacher to a rotating set of leaders.

With fewer program offerings, the once-familiar minister of education position is “practically extinct,” he said. “And courses in Christian education are now rare in theological education.”

As a result, churches are making their own ways in deciding how to educate children, youth and adults, he said, with decision-making heavily influenced by those leading the classes and choosing the resources to be used.

“All these dynamics combine to create a ‘wild west’ environment for education in many churches,” he said, which leads to many questions.

“For churches that value a scholarly-informed approach to scripture, support for women in ministry, emphasis on social justice ministries, and care for the poor, how are the theological and scriptural underpinnings for these supported by a church’s educational efforts?”

“How are leaders trained?” he continued. “What history is taught or avoided? Who pays attention to what young girls and boys are taught about their role — or lack thereof — in the church and family?”

**NFJ: Language changes, such as when “religious education” became “Christian education.” Then we started hearing “formation” — and Sunday School became Bible study, though not all classes study the Bible. How do you/we sort out all this terminology?**

Massey said the language shift from “religious education” to “Christian education” resulted from more conservative Protestants wanting their own

unique and focused version of educating in faith.

The term “education,” in any form, seemed “too academic and cognitive,” she said, leading to the use of “formation.” It was considered “a more appropriate term because parents, ministers and congregations should be about ‘forming’ the whole person in faith across the lifespan, which includes heart, mind, soul and behavior.”

Churches often adopt trendy language, so she expects that will continue.

“Frankly, I am not so much bothered about the language that churches use to talk about faith formation,” she said, if they consider two things:

One, the language should clearly reflect what they are actually doing, and what it means to form a person in faith — reflecting intentionality, values, and a deliberate process for growth.

Two, studying the Bible must be part of the formation process.

“This doesn’t mean other topics, issues and books cannot be studied,” she said. “But I don’t think we can fully know what it means to be a follower of Jesus without knowing the stories of Jesus.”

Prosser considers spiritual formation to be “the holistic process of disciplining — which includes but is not limited to meaningful worship, depth of prayer, generosity of resources, consistency of Bible reading, and intentional missions/service.”

Spiritual formation, he said, is “the combination of right thinking, right behaviors, and right feelings that help us grow deeper with Christ.” This best happens in community, he said, and is intended for the redemption of the world.

Christian education can be thought of as the programmatic aspect of spiritual formation, he said. “But the program is not the end of the process.”

Prosser said he still prefers the term Sunday School as being the main Sunday morning small group study time for most

church attenders.

“I love the Sunday School experience and the teaching, fellowship, and community building that takes place,” he said. While no longer the “front door” of the church, he noted, “Sunday School continues to be a vital teaching and reaching arm of the church.”

Cassady said the Sunday School model has always been heavily influenced by classroom approaches.

“Just check out the language: teacher, student, quarterly, teaching guide, etc.,” he said. “Most groups meet in classrooms that have a front of the room where the teacher stands.”

He described this approach to learning as a “banking model” — in which information is transferred from a teacher into students where it is deposited.

“‘Formation’ arose as a way to speak to a broader understanding of learning goals,” he said. “Becoming disciples means much more than simply knowing certain facts and being able to recite scripture or doctrines from memory.”

A broader goal, he said, is to involve processes that help form disciples.

“Formation certainly includes knowledge, but also attends to spiritual, emotional, behavioral and character dimensions of a person’s growth,” said Cassady.

“How do we make ethical decisions? How do we begin to shape and express our understanding of God? What is the mission of the church in this community, in this world? What does the spiritual life of a disciple look like, and what practices support it?”

A broader formational approach, he said, demands a great deal more from leaders and from the ways churches seek to “educate.” And he questions whether a “classroom” setting is best for these formational efforts to be undertaken.

“We can look at other ways of learning and growing to see models for how churches might shift their Christian education approaches,” he said.

His examples include coaching

that leads to growth in sports or a skill, mentoring that helps one grow in a career, and immersive experiences that provide firsthand encounters of learning.

“None is classroom-based, yet we all understand their effectiveness,” said Cassidy. “For example, while a coach may have some time in a classroom with players, the real work happens on the practice field. Just knowing the plays and being able to pass a test on them is massively different than being able to effectively execute a play in a game.”

So Cassidy wonders: “What if the church began to shape experiences and grow coaches and mentors who can assist a community of Christ-followers in becoming more like Jesus?”

### **NFJ: What did you notice about how churches did Christian education during the pandemic?**

“Zoom was a great way for folks to be in connection,” said Prosser. “Even senior adult classes worked hard to learn a new way of gathering.”

People were hungry for evidence of God at work during the pandemic, he said, and many teachers worked hard to help their classes see how God was at work during that time.

“There seemed to be an openness to the Bible in ways that I had not seen in a few years,” said Prosser.

“With all the uncertainty and fear, people relied on their classes to give a certainty of God in their midst,” he continued. “People encouraged and reassured each other not to panic and to be less anxious; that was a real gift to God’s people.”

Prosser began a Zoom/Facebook Live community during the shutdown. His “Monday School” was “part Bible teaching, part community building, and part overview for those who teach on Sundays.”

Massey said she noticed that adults 45 to 70 years old seemed to do the best job of using Zoom to hold their class sessions each Sunday. Older senior adults,

however, had the hardest time of feeling connected.

“I know of several churches that prepared lesson packets for the senior adults each week, and someone would drop the packets off at their homes — leaving the packets in the mailbox or on the porch — so the senior adults could read and keep up with the topics being studied,” she said. “For those who live in nursing homes or senior living facilities, some churches arranged with the administrators to play recorded Zoom class sessions for the senior adults to watch during the week.”

Zoom worked well for older children and teenagers who were doing school that way, she observed. So, ministers working with children and youth were able to adjust and adapt to online lessons.

“It was harder for younger children because their attention span is short and personal interaction is important to their ability to learn,” said Massey. “I know of several children’s ministers who prepared lessons and resources for younger children and sent them online to the parents. That way, the parents were encouraged to take a more active role in teaching Bible stories to their children.”

Finally, Massey said she observed that young adults and parents with young children were the least likely to maintain connections with a Sunday School class.

“Their reason for sporadic involvement was the same as it had been during non-pandemic times: they were simply too busy,” she said. “For those in this age group that were able to maintain connection and participation in a class, it was because the class was able to gather on Zoom at another time besides Sunday morning.”

Some Zoom classes for parents were held on a weeknight after young children had been put to bed, she said. And young adults without children preferred a weeknight online gathering as well.

Cassidy said the pandemic helped many people to realize the importance of close community — and that Zoom gather-

ings were a way to stay connected, share stories and support one another.

“One of the real gifts of a small-group approach to Bible study is that we grow deeper connections with each other,” he said. “The scriptures are best interpreted within the context of a group of believers.”

The pandemic, he said, challenged the common focus on the individual — shifting the emphasis from “me” to “we.” It raised such communal questions as:

How does what I choose to do affect others? What is my responsibility for another person in this pandemic? What can we as a community do to better support those in grief, alone, and struggling?

“Faith is a group sport, not an individual exercise, and this fact was underlined during the pandemic,” said Cassidy. “I hope we cling to these lessons; the church is stronger when we talk more about ‘we’ than ‘me.’”

Lessons learned from the pandemic — both in spiritual truths and practical processes — give possibilities and promise to including more people in ways that span distance and save time, he said.

### **NFJ: Sunday School attendance continues to decline. Is Christian education going down with it, or are there other approaches?**

Cassidy recalled his doctoral supervisor in Christian education, John Hendrix, often saying: “Nothing never happens.”

“His point was that everything we do and experience teaches, especially if we are reflective about it,” said Cassidy. “So, the church is teaching, whether it is intentional or not. The more troubling question is, ‘What are we teaching?’”

That question, he said, can be posed in another way: “What are people learning about our faith, about Jesus, from... what we do or do not do, from what we say or do not say?”

Cassidy said his friends in the Black church tradition remind him of this when racial issues arise in our culture.

“They reflect back to me that the words the white church does not say teach them a great deal about our focus and commitment to justice and fairness,” he said. “It is hard for me to hear, but I now pay attention to this dynamic far more closely, because people are indeed listening and watching.”

Cassady doesn't expect Sunday School to return to what it once was — although it remains for many a valuable part of their learning and sense of community.

“For them, it will continue to be vital and relevant,” he said. “For most, however, for reasons I listed in an earlier response, this approach is simply not a good fit.”

He noted that Christian education existed in churches far longer without Sunday School than with it.

“For most of Christian history, education has happened in other ways, and it will again in the decades ahead,” said Cassady.

“The ancient Hebrews taught within the family, using teachable moments, holidays, rituals and festivals to pass along their faith,” he continued. “In pre-literate Europe, stained glass windows in cathedrals were powerful teaching tools, sharing key stories from scripture and Christian history.”

Rather than lamenting a reduced role for Sunday School, advises Cassady, congregations have an opportunity to again ask the most important questions:

“How do we pass along our faith tradition to the next generation? How do we form disciples of Christ — and what do we mean when we say that?”

“The real question is not how many people are attending,” said Prosser. “The real measure of our effectiveness is how many people we are reaching and touching.”

Many churches now, he noted, are offering Bible studies at times and in places beyond the Sunday morning church classroom.

“The church is going to the people

instead of waiting for the people to come to the church house,” he said. “Coffee houses, local pubs, retirement centers, and recreation buildings are all places where creative small group discussions about the Bible, God and our faith are held each week.”

“This is incredible!” he continued. “But we don't count those in our weekly attendance reports. However, I'm not interested in making attenders; I'm very excited about developing disciples.”

Massey said many factors contribute to the decline in Sunday School attendance and church participation overall.

The first, she said, is a lack of relevant responses to timely issues such as sexism and racism. “We have been taught to judge others more than love them.”

Second, churches don't always welcome hard questions or doubts.

Third, good biblical and theological scholarship is avoided in favor of very narrow understandings of scripture that provide black-and-white answers to complex questions.

Fourth, such narrow understandings of scripture tend to produce more fear and judgment than offering “a faith that is vibrant, joyful and welcoming.”

**NFJ: I heard a pastor say, privately, that he has members who've been in weekly Bible studies for decades, yet their attitudes and values don't reflect Jesus. Have congregational education programs worked in that regard?**

“I can't argue with that pastor's conclusion,” said Cassady. “Teaching facts does not make disciples of Jesus. Faith is much bigger than just ‘right beliefs.’”

Many people find reflecting on past educational efforts to be uncomfortable, he said, but assessment is a central part of higher education for a reason.

“For example, we could ask if separating families into age-group units is a best way to shape faith,” he said. “We might inquire if our tendency to only

share the ‘heroes of the faith’ as we teach children might actually do them the disservice of not seeing scriptural personalities as real, often deeply flawed persons — yet used by God.”

“For adults, who bring rich — and often painful — experiences with them, how do we help involve those stories and experiences in the formation of a disciple?”

One of the more powerful ways the church has done education historically, said Cassady, is through spiritual practices such as prayer, contemplation, service, fasting, study, silence, gathering, eating together and binding one another's wounds. He wonders how those practices might be reshaped for today's busy, stretched, stressed and exhausted believers.

“In terms of adult education, we might recognize that relevance is a massive dynamic,” he said. “We learn what we need to learn when we need to learn it.”

YouTube videos, he noted, are how most adults learn the knowledge and skills they need at a particular time.

What are the needs that the adults in our congregations have and how can we help meet those with knowledge, skills and practices?

A mission trip to Appalachia, for example, provides the chance to learn about the people, the culture, the needs, and the ways scripture and faith call one to serve, he noted.

Another example he offered is that one called to be a deacon needs to learn some pastoral care skills, something of the church's history and the community context — and to be watching for God's leadership as needs arise.

“If we connect learning with real needs and tasks, adults will participate,” he said. “This type of education looks a lot different than ongoing weekly programs but can be very effective.”

“More times than not, our Christian education has taught us to love the Bible more than we love Jesus,” said Massey.

There is no quick fix to the challenge of Christian formation, she said, but that the answer will be found in something deeper than Sunday School structures and Zoom meetings. At the root is biblical interpretation.

“If we view the Bible as the word of God — as inerrant, infallible, and literally true — then we run the risk of elevating scripture above Jesus Christ,” she said, “and of believing that all we can know about God and truth is contained within the canon.”

Such a viewpoint limits one’s understanding of God’s ongoing revelation and also understanding the world and the people in it, she added, and the Bible becomes a set of propositions by which we must live and by which we judge others.

“If we believe Jesus Christ is the word of God, then we believe that Jesus is the one to whom we commit our lives and in whom we must follow,” said Massey. “We recognize that Jesus came teaching a different way to love God and love neighbors that often runs counter to the laws of the Old Testament and the teachings of Paul.”

Such an understanding of scripture must be foundational to whatever else is taught or learned in the church, she said. Otherwise, “we would rather quote scripture to defend our faith and values rather than live like Jesus,”

**NFJ: Have churches played it too safe — by avoiding the best available biblical scholarship and not welcoming really hard questions — and therefore left many adults with a less-reflective understanding of the Christian faith?**

“Absolutely,” said Prosser. “Most churches enlist a teacher, thrust a teaching plan in their hands, and say good luck.”

Often churches have little to no ongoing teacher training, he said. This results in many teachers not being equipped to deal well with changing

**“Christian education in churches has too often been about socializing people into a particular mold, rather than real explorations and growth.”**

times and hard questions.

The result, he said, is that issues such as political strife, racial tension and gender equality are reduced to dualistic arguments. “Too many of us just take the easy way out and on the hard topics, we gloss over these like the glaze on donuts.”

Many participants are unwilling to confront their fears in a class setting, he said, and just want the teacher to tell them what the Bible says so they can live by it — “unless it contradicts my current thoughts.”

“Dealing with hard topics in a class setting always runs the risk of breaking fellowship or dividing the class,” Prosser admits. “Nobody really wants to see that happen, so we settle for the status quo and move on.”

Cassady agreed that playing it safe is too often the path we take, and the resulting lack of relevance, depth or real challenge cheapens the gospel.

“Would you want someone serving as your dentist or mechanic using nothing but a weekly ‘teaching guide’ to prep their skills?” he asked. “That’s where we have been with Sunday School.”

He commended those resource providers that offer challenging lessons in varied formats and make use of video and other technology. Congregational leaders who teach and facilitate now have access to extremely skilled and knowledgeable teachers, he noted, delivered by video or livestreaming.

By playing it too safe, said Cassady, “curriculum has been so dry it has sucked much of the radical nature of the biblical story out of the scriptures.”

“I’ve been involved in curriculum development projects constantly over the

last 35 years,” he said. “The line between ‘challenging learners’ and ‘this might be controversial to some’ is difficult, and too often curriculum editors choose the safe path.”

Doing so, he said, ignores the deeply challenging and even disturbing nature of scripture when truly explored.

“How do we allow the radical nature of scripture to transform us? How do we create safe spaces where real, difficult conversations can be shared — where honest (and often obvious) questions can be asked?”

Answers to those questions, said Cassady, are tied to congregational culture.

“Our tendency to filter and mute also plays into the lack of interest from our youth and young adults,” he added. “They have no time for the way churches expect conformity in beliefs and behaviors and shy away from the hard questions they and their friends are asking.”

Cassady said it’s not necessary to have all the answers to the questions — and appearing to do so is arrogant.

“We simply need to create spaces where hard conversations and questions can be aired and welcomed,” he said. “Christian education in churches has too often been about socializing people into a particular mold, rather than real explorations and growth.”

He urged caution in vetting and selecting curricula to ensure they align with a congregation’s stated values. That selection process, he said, also offers “teachable moments.”

**NFJ: What do congregations need to know about how those of varying ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities hear and learn differently? And practically, how can those differences be addressed?**

“The church must be flexible and adaptable in accommodating the different needs that exist,” said Massey, who expects the American church of the near future to be older, browner and less

# “Chaos is not always bad. I hope that something new is emerging, and I don’t want church leaders to stand in the way of a much-needed change.”

religious.

Some older participants may struggle with the technology others use with ease, she noted. And those coming with no religious background may struggle with understanding religious language, rituals and theology.

“Basically, the way we do Christian education can no longer be ‘one size fits all,’” she said, before raising a word of caution.

“Because the needs people bring to church are different and varied, it would seem reasonable that we would want to group them based upon their needs or interests in order to give them focused attention,” she said. “While this may be helpful, we must not neglect getting these various groups together in the same space.”

Intergenerational programming helps those of different age groups better understand and learn from each another, she said.

“Younger adults will never understand why senior adults only want to sing traditional hymns if we keep separating our worship into contemporary and traditional services,” she said. “We must do the hard work of sitting together in the same worship space.”

Rather than relegating folks with no religious background to a class where they “learn the ropes,” Massey suggested connecting each willing person with a mentor for one-on-one conversations and fellowship.

“People with differences can learn much from one another when they are provided opportunities for dialogue and engagement,” she said.

Prosser said he uses varied teaching methods to engage a wider range of learners, and suggests teachers be trained on how to do this.

“Not everyone learns in the same way,” he said. “The different

generations of adult learners surely process information differently. People with differing economic means hear information differently.”

He recalled entering a class he taught and announcing that the lesson was based on the popular biblical story of David and Goliath. With tears in her eyes, a young woman confessed to not knowing that story.

“I’ve never forgotten that day,” said Prosser, warning himself and others about making assumptions based on our own experiences.

This is a great question and I’ll ask the grace to speak bluntly, said Cassady, shaping his response to the reframed question, “How do we help our congregations become more diverse.”

“Power dynamics are central to expanding the color and activities of congregations,” he said. “Until we can allow others to have power to make changes, to make decisions, to spend funds — things won’t change.”

“Expecting younger persons and people of color to come to our spaces and adopt our ways is a prescription for disappointment,” he added.

Cassady said “a mountain of negative stereotypes” — about what church and Christians are like — must be overcome to reach younger persons.

“This requires churches to be bold about showing they are not spaces of judgment, critique, control, political expectations or self-interest,” he said. “We must let people be themselves and love them for who they are. And that’s going to look and feel very different from what 1950s churchgoers experienced.”

Due to the strength of traditions, cultural power and money (who has it and who doesn’t, and who decides how it is used), predominantly white churches might stop trying to attract Blacks, Latinos, Asians and other diverse groups to our churches, he said, and go to the

churches and spaces where these groups are already thriving.

“We will need to be in rooms where we are not in charge and our ways are not the norm,” said Cassady. “If that feels uncomfortable, then we are beginning to understand how these same people feel in our churches.”

And if your dwindling, predominantly white church is one that closes, leaders might consider donating the space to a congregation of color, he suggested. “Then attend and give to support it.”

On the other hand, he affirmed, congregations blessed with diversity can learn about the different traditions and preferences the represented cultures bring.

## **NFJ: What is one succinct piece of advice that might help church leaders today in seeking to educate their membership?**

“Be adaptable and flexible,” said Massey. “The days are long gone when Christian education looked the same for most congregations.”

Having Sunday School at 9:45 on Sunday mornings will be less of the norm, she said, with learning experiences happening at times most convenient to participants.

“Some classes may meet in person on Sunday morning, but others will meet on Zoom,” she said. “Others will meet at another day or time during the week on Zoom or in someone’s home. Some folks will meet in a pub or a restaurant.”

Curricula will be as varied as the needs of the people, she said. Ministers need to be knowledgeable about curriculum options, and discerning about the theological content expressed in those options.

She expects classes will be intergenerational and diverse — and sometimes short-term.

“For a while, Christian education



will feel like it is in chaos, and it is important that church leaders be flexible,” she said. “Chaos is not always bad. I hope that something new is emerging, and I don’t want church leaders to stand in the way of a much-needed change.”

Massey wants to be clear that current models of Sunday School are “not all bad” — adding, “Many of us are products of it, and think we turned out pretty well!”

Over time, however, the Sunday School approach, she said, often became a tool for church growth rather than a process for discipleship, Bible study and spiritual growth. Where it’s lost its purpose and vitality, she added, “it is time for something new to emerge.”

“People go where they know they’ve been prepared for and are cared for,” said Prosser. “Practice the Great Commandment as much as the Great Commission. And train your teachers; give them opportunities to grow.”

“Start by using experiences and events already a part of the life of your church — mission trips, homebound ministry, choral events, community events — and build learning opportunities around them,” said Cassady.

He suggested asking what knowledge and skills could make the ministries more effective. “Consider short-term opportunities to learn and be equipped.”

Additional learning can come, he said, by asking how God was experienced and how one’s faith was shaped — and what questions were raised.

“Those questions echo our Hebrew ancestors who used life experiences as teachable moments,” said Cassady.

### **NFJ: What are some innovative ways in which you see Christian formation being done today — in and out of church structures?**

Massey offered three examples of innovative spiritual formation experiences:

First is a young adult class that meets on Sunday morning during the traditional time and setting for Bible study. Then, in conclusion, they ponder: What is today’s lesson calling us to do outside of the church walls?

“After discussion and prayer, the class determines some type of ministry or service they will engage in together during the week,” she said. “Thus, Christian formation for this class involves not only study, but also living their faith. For them, study always leads to action.”

Second is a middle-aged adult group that — in order to dig deeper into understanding and interpreting scripture — all decided to audit a New Testament class at a seminary.

Third, an adult group decided a good way to better understand the Old Testament would be to attend Torah studies at a local synagogue. Each week, the group met with the rabbi and members of the synagogue to learn history, some Hebrew, and midrash about the Hebrew scriptures.

Prosser commended the innovation of churches that provided drive-in worship experiences in their parking lots during the pandemic — and classes that met in someone’s backyard with social distancing.

“I love seeing/hearing a word of devotion and prayer prior to a basketball game or soccer match or a church service,” he said. “This is spiritual formation.”

“I love seeing the church at Starbucks and Joe’s Pub discussing the Bible and talking theology; not being divisive but seeking to understand,” he said. “This is spiritual formation.”

Prosser added that he loves seeing Sunday School classes reach out to migrants, write letters to government offices, collect supplies for a women’s shelter or a mission cause.

Innovation happens when people are taught the truth of the Bible, he said. “So, prepare for them and care for them. It’s not transactional; it’s relational.”

Cassady pointed to two examples. The first is the Gospel Gothic radio program in Macon, Ga., hosted by Baptist minister Jake Hall along with local radio DJs.

“Rather than offer another sermon over the radio, the program offers a look at ‘faith, music and meaning in the Christ-haunted South,’” said Cassady. “The show teaches in a very unconventional manner.”

Cassady noted that the hosts play secular music of the South that speak to the chosen theme — with each episode offering a theme such as forgiveness, grief or betrayal.

The weekly program produced by radio station 100.9 FM The Creek is also available online.

“Listen for how theology is woven through the program addressing relevant real-world dynamics,” said Cassady. “After all, these are the same dynamics to which our faith speaks and where it matters most.”

Given the power of the Internet, Cassady asks, “What sort of creative media program might your church create to teach, share and connect?”

A second innovative example, he said, are the “mini-seminaries” hosted by First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C., and Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco — in collaboration with Baptist Seminary of Kentucky that Cassady leads.

“On opposite sides of the country and in very different settings, these two congregations are forming a new structured approach to Christian education,” he said. “...Should this program prove effective, the hope is to make the approach available to other congregations.”

Finally, Cassady encouraged congregations “to strive for opportunities to celebrate mystery, live humbly, and wonder at life and God’s work within it.”

“We have for so long been focused on doctrinal purity that we think we have faith figured out,” he said. “We don’t, and that’s good news!” **NFJ**

# MOVING, BREATHING, CONNECTING

Young adults seek more than biblical knowledge and classroom doctrine

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**W**hen Sunday morning rolls around, many young adults who spent all week working in front of computer screens aren't likely to sit in a church classroom followed by another hour in worship, said Meg Lacy Vega. They want to move.

"Rather than expecting them to come to a specific place at a specific time, go to them," she said.

And where are they? Hiking, biking, throwing pottery, at the lake — she gives as a few examples.

With a strong background in leading spiritual formation for younger adults — both in and out of congregational life — Meg sheds some needed light on how churches might think beyond the Sunday School classroom as the primary discipleship function and measurement of faithfulness.

"Bless people who can't be or aren't there," she said. And rather than counting them absent, connect with them in what they are doing.

## 'HOW WE GATHER'

Meg pointed to the realities revealed in Casper Kuile's study titled "How We Gather," showing that Millennials are less religiously affiliated now.

"It profiles where young adults gather for connections," she said.

According to the study's executive summary: "Churches are just one of the many institutional casualties of the Internet age in which young people are both more globally connected and more locally isolated than ever before."



However, Kuile has an encouraging though challenging word out of his findings: "Against this bleak backdrop, a hopeful landscape is emerging. Millennials are flocking to a host of new organizations that deepen community in ways that are powerful, surprising, and perhaps even religious."

Churches, said Meg, will decide if they'll be such places, or stay with old methods alone and lament their losses.

Six common themes were found in the study of groups — though widely different in identity and function — that attract and engage younger adults: community, personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity and accountability.

These groups ranged from Soul-Cycle (that pairs fitness with "finding your soul") to the Millennial Trains Project (that leads crowd-funded journeys across the U.S. for young innovators).

The study gives clues for how those seeking to engage younger adults in spiritual formation might do so in the context of their interests and arenas. It's a more proactive and positive response than failingly trying to guilt those who are more at home outside the church walls.

"All of these are formational, though not particularly Christian," Meg said of the groups studied. "People are looking for faith and God."

Church deciders will need to get over the idea that what they offer is appropri-

ately spiritual and whatever takes place outside the church is not. Poet Wendell Berry's line comes to mind: "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places."

Those who deem non-church activities as secular might take note of how often in-church Bible studies turn into political debates and sports conversations, and how often Sunday School classes don't really study the Bible.

Meg said she found two revelations in the "How We Gather" study to be particularly important for those seeking to do effective spiritual formation in ways to connect with younger adults.

One, she said, is the need for "engagement with cultural ills." For Millennials, spiritual formation is not separate from the social issues, activism and core values they hold dear.

Two is a recognition of how "super-embodied" younger adults are when seeking connections and meaning in their lives.

"We don't want to sit somewhere on Sunday morning; we want to move somewhere," she reiterated — listing yoga, surfing and cycling as some preferred alternatives. "People are not just interested in a set of beliefs in their heads."

This understanding of recreation as re-creation — rather than merely fun or frivolity — doesn't fit old Puritan mindsets that seeped into Protestant evangelicalism. But Millennials are not buying that divide — and neither are many older adults.

## PERCEPTIONS & POSSIBILITIES

To be trusted by younger adults, said Meg, the church could benefit from introspection about how it is perceived culturally — followed by needed redirection.

Young adults, she said, take note of how patriarchy is advanced by church leaders and used as tools of oppression — often supported by scriptural renderings and an allegiance to tradition.

Sticking with the “banking model” — in which information is deposited into willing minds — is of no interest to younger adults who think critically.

“That’s a real thing for young adults,” she said. “They have a BS meter.”

Listening to the concerns of young adults is more effective than offering an info dump, she noted. Hence her warning: “Don’t talk too much.”

Meg recalled attending an addiction recovery meeting — to mark the sobriety milestone of one member in a church she served. Noting the openness and honesty, she wondered: “Why does this feel so much more like church to me than what happens on Sunday morning?”

One of the great cultural shifts for churches to consider relates to work — with the 40-hour week divorced from home life being a thing of the past. Millennials, said Meg, are navigating this change too.

“Churches need to do a better job of helping people find meaning in their work and work that has meaning,” she said.

Young adults have busy lives, Meg added, and are seeking to find a needed balance. This is especially true, she noted, for growing families.

“I don’t think young parents have a lot of time,” she said. So, the church should not expect open-ended or long-term commitments to classes or projects.

Short-term studies — about subjects of interest that can be applied to their lives — will be more attractive, she said. “And providing childcare is very important.”

Meg told of one group of young adults that meets by Zoom each Tuesday night. The 40-minute session includes sharing and prayer — while allowing for participants to drop in and out as needed.

“Then, monthly,” she said, “they get together for dinner, hiking, TopGolf or some other activity.”

## ‘BLESS BOTH’

Meg suggests building relationships within “little pockets” — or affinity groups — around whatever interests and activities draw young adults. These are not only hobbies, she said, but many young adults will rally around service.

Doing meaningful community service opens the door for spiritual formation by asking probing questions about what is behind such engagement, she said.

“Where did you feel God present?” she might ask. Or offering a reminder: “It felt good not just to help, but because it’s holy.”

She advises being sensitive to the leadership of the Spirit already at work in people’s lives in whatever places they find themselves.

“There is a need and desire for space to look for God in their lives,” she said, “instead of telling them how to do it.”

Churches are not being asked to give up something that is valued by many, said Meg. Rather, they are being encouraged just to expand their offerings and approaches without judging one over the other.

Traditional and innovative ways of learning and practicing biblical truths — and creating communities that encourage living in ways that reflect the life and teachings of Jesus — can meet important needs.

“Let’s bless both,” she said.

## BREATHE

With degrees from Samford University and Emory’s Candler School of Theology, Meg served in ministerial roles focused on faith formation at Emerywood Baptist Church in High Point, N.C., and with Tabernacle Baptist Church in Richmond, Va.

Having recently moved to Signal Mountain, Tenn., where her husband works from home in the computer software field, she is receiving Clinical Pastoral Education and carving out a new multi-faceted ministry.

While living in Atlanta she took advantage of a \$5 yoga session “to do

something with my stress,” she said. As a seminarian at the time, she was “living in my head” and not feeling good about her body.

Those serving in high stress vocations “need a creative niche that nurtures your soul,” she said. “Yoga was the thing I did for me.”

After the pastor of her North Carolina church retired, Meg recalled doing 11 funerals in three months. Her yoga mat, she said, “was the only place I cried.”

This discovery led her to become a well-trained yoga teacher and, in 2020, to launch her own Sacred Space Yoga & Spirituality — which places yoga within retreats, including clergy renewal. (Visit [meglacyvega.com](http://meglacyvega.com) for more information.)

Being invited to “teach us how to breathe” at a multi-state Cooperative Baptist Fellowship beachside retreat for women last year led Meg into a deeper study of the biblical concepts of breath and breathing.

“Growing up, I was taught that the body was bad,” she said. “We’ve really neglected the body as part of the spiritual life.”

She discovered, however, that the biblical word translated “flesh” is not the same as “body.” That the word for body comes from the same root as the word for salvation — and that “the body is never separated from the spirit.”

Yoga and other practices that keep the body and spirit connected are essential to spiritual formation for many people today, she added. That is a change from what has long been emphasized in many congregations.

Meg reminds church leaders that Moses met opposition when leading the Israelites to the Promised Land — hearing cries of, “Take us back to Egypt.”

When advocating for needed changes, she noted, congregational leaders can expect similar pushback.

“But something new is being born,” she said. “We’re being called into the wilderness.”

Where will it lead? God only knows.

NFJ

# ‘LAST EDUCATION MINISTERS’

Spiritual formation taking on new aims, forms and vocabulary

**STORY AND PHOTO  
BY JOHN D. PIERCE**

**C**hurch staff listings have changed to the point one might wonder now what job assignments actually match the titles listed on the website or worship bulletin. Once-familiar designations of pastor, minister of music, etc. rarely appear.

Though having nothing to do with age or tenure, even a small church with a part-time office worker, a volunteer music director and an old dog that hangs around the parking lot all week is likely to have a “Senior Pastor.”

Completely missing in most cases now is the long-titled position of “Minister of Education” who oversaw the various programming of Bible study and discipleship — with Sunday School as the centerpiece.

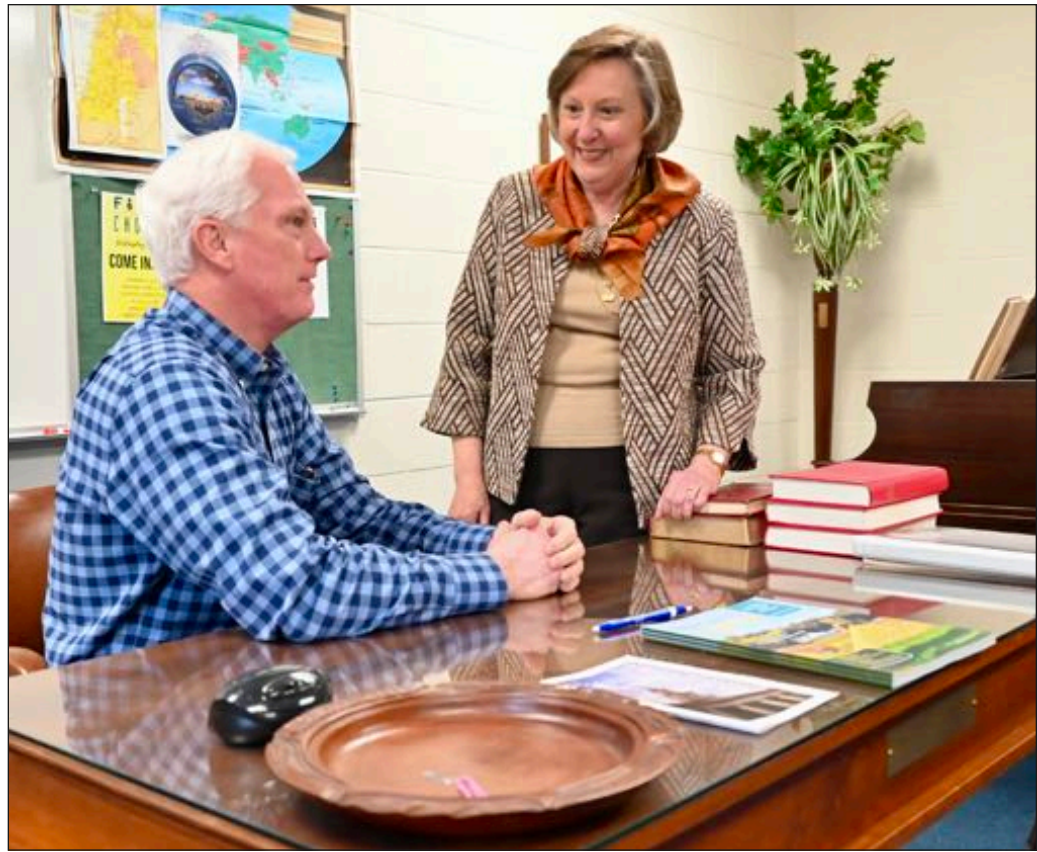
## TERMINOLOGY

Frank Granger, longtime Christian educator at First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga. — who now bears the title of minister of Christian community — recalls his earlier years of telling someone outside the church that he’s the minister of education and hearing, “So you have a school?”

Terminology, he said, tends to catch up with what churches are actually doing or seeking to do. For example, “spiritual formation” conveys an intended shaping of one’s life beyond learning facts about the Bible.

Tamara Tillman Smathers, minister of education/administration at First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga., graduated with a master’s degree in “religious education” from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1984. The next year she received a replacement diploma that read: Master of Christian Education.

Times, titles and more have



Veteran Christian educators Frank Granger and Tamara Tillman Smathers

changed. And those currently leading Christian education efforts — or spiritual formation endeavors, as they may be called — are raising timely questions while seeking good answers, all the while facing challenges unknown to those who carried out such ministries in the past.

## BEYOND KNOWLEDGE

“We’ve been trained to organize programs,” said Tamara. And those programs, she noted, focus on being good teachers and learners.

To the broader question of whether these programs form Christ-followers, she confessed: “I’d love to give a good answer that says, ‘Of course we are.’ But it’s a question of discipleship.”

Frank said churches tend to work out of a “schooling model — not Jesus’

relational model.”

To move from knowledge to practice, he said, requires “reflection learning.” He points to Jesus’ use of parables as a model that requires an active response.

Beyond absorption of information is the discipleship question: “What are you really learning?”

While jokingly referring to Tamara and Frank as “the last Christian educators” — though there is truth in the ministerial staff position shifting and sometimes disappearing — there is significant attention being given to evaluating and revising how churches deliver their spiritual formation offerings.

And those still doing this work from a ministerial staff position — whatever it might be called — are drawing from a wider range of resources. No longer, said

Tamara and Frank, are they relying solely on resources produced by one denominational entity.

“Now I draw from faith groups I’d never previously used,” said Tamara.

Frank, who calls his ministerial role “a generalist position,” said too often Christian education gets “siloes” and is seen only as “what takes place prior to worship” on Sunday mornings.

Formation involves more than curriculum, he said. A broader view of spiritual formation would include Bible study, worship, mission experiences and more.

## THE FOUNDATION

While admitting that those who have long attended Sunday school, worship and other church programming don’t automatically exhibit the attributes of Jesus, Tamara suggested that congregations focus on “doing better” with their faith formation efforts rather than “doing without” them.

“We can’t throw out the teaching and learning...,” she said. “I want people to know scripture so they can have a depth of understanding of Jesus.”

Such learning, she noted, is to be the “strong foundation” on which living out one’s life in response to following Jesus is built.

The two ministers recalled a time when Christian faithfulness was measured in large part by the offering envelopes members brought to Sunday School each week containing a tithe of one’s weekly income.

On the front were six little boxes to be checked indicating that one was not only present but also on time, had studied the lesson and brought one’s Bible, enclosed an offering and would stay around for the worship service — which was simply deemed “preaching.”

Each of the six carried a percentage ranging from 10 to 30 percent in pursuit of 100-percent faithfulness. Clearly no ministers or church treasurers were involved in the process of producing these envelopes, since giving an offering

May 1st Sunday MY REGULAR OFFERING FOR THE UNIFIED BUDGET OF MY CHURCH						
Name _____ <small>If used in Sunday School fill in spaces below.</small>						Total Contacts _____
Visits _____ Phone Calls _____						Class _____
Amount \$ _____ Other Contacts _____						Dept. _____
Present 20%	On Time 10%	Bible 10%	Offering 10%	Lesson 30%	Preaching 20%	TOTAL GRADE

was tied for the lowest percentage.

Additionally, there were spaces for listing the number of visits and phone calls made — to be added up as “total contacts.” However, institutional involvement and support were clearly the priorities being established through this once-popular tradition of record keeping.

“It was a grading system,” said Tamara, giving credence to what Frank called “a schooling model” of Christian education.

That “sense of being faithful,” said Frank, didn’t really accomplish “the full goal” of forming followers of Jesus.

## RESOURCES

Implementing a denominational program was quite different than the realities of congregational Christian education today. As a result, those leading such efforts shop around for what might work better for a particular class or event.

And with so many people working, traveling or being involved in other Sunday activities now, they look for times and places to bring members and others together for study, reflection and applications of faith. For example, Tamara teaches a Bible study for mostly retired women each Monday.

One shift many churches face is learning to count differently. Using Sunday School attendance as the sole or primary measuring stick is likely to leave poor marks and to miss all the other ways churches offer formative opportunities.

Another carryover from the glory years is seeing Sunday School as the “outreach arm of the church, the entry point,” said Tamara. “That’s reversed now.”

It is more likely someone will visit a worship service as the first point of contact — often after checking the church out by its online presence — then, after engaging cautiously awhile,

participate in a smaller class. Short-term commitments to formations offerings are appealing to some participants also. Classes studying a particular topic for a stated number of weeks draw those who might not remain in the same class for years or even decades.

Even the whole idea of an “active member” means something different than when pins were distributed for perfect attendance — and families on their one week of vacation travel would visit the Sunday School at a nearby church.

And if the church was of the same homogenized denominational tradition, the lesson would likely be the same as the one being delivered back home.

## IN THE NOW

The so-called good old days or glory years might be remembered fondly by some. But “high attendance Sunday” didn’t necessarily lead to repentance for the social sins of the day or other reflections of Jesus.

So the question is how to form more faithful followers of Jesus in the time and places in which we now live.

“We didn’t have the societal options like traveling sports teams for children on Sundays — or even Wednesdays,” said Frank of his early church experiences.

Blue laws kept commercial life closed on Sunday, he recalled, and it was common for banks and other businesses in some towns to close early on Wednesdays.

But the challenges of congregational offerings of spiritual formation just might be what is leading to their innovation and more focused attention on getting beyond record keeping and the mere dispensing of knowledge to the possibilities for changed lives.

Tamara said her church’s adult Christian education committee was asked to define discipleship. They took the question seriously before concluding: “A disciple learns, worships and serves.”

“It makes perfectly good sense,” said Tamara. “I’m just not sure we’ve

communicated it that well.”

However, she does see evidence of the integration of all three practices within the church.

Instead of youth just going on a mission trip for a week, she said, it is helpful for them to understand the poverty that created the situation those people are in.

“I feel like my work is well done when I’m able to facilitate relationships and provide resources that enable people to live into their callings,” she said.

Frank told of a Sunday School class working with a homeless person who sleeps at the church, helping him transition to something more stable than being on the street. Another class is preparing podcasts that create a learning opportunity that is shared more broadly.

“It’s about more than what is happening at that one hour,” he said of the class.

Tamara said some classes at her church are involved in a poverty-related ministry called “Bridges,” while others are deeply engaged in mentoring.

“People invested in those ministries are changed,” she said. “What would it be like to have twice as many people involved?”

That is the kind of measuring she prefers over the statistics of old.

She sees one of her ministerial roles as helping members discover their individual callings and bless them to carry out those callings — even when they’re not programs the church controls.

“We can set people free in their individual callings,” she said, “and then walk beside them while they figure it out.”

## LIKE JESUS

What never appeared in reported statistics or the little boxes on envelopes was how attendance, punctuality, reading one’s lesson and attending worship made someone into a more faithful follower of Jesus.

That result was likely assumed, or perhaps the educational process became an end rather than a means.

Opportunities for spiritual formation, even when done well, can only be offered, the two veteran ministers said.

“If being Christian is defined by the tenets of what you already believe, it becomes transactional,” said Frank. The transformational and relational aspects of discipleship, he added, require the willingness of participants to integrate into their lives what they are learning.

“Part of the void in Christian education are the practices of prayer, fasting and other disciplines,” said Tamara. “Sometimes we’ve failed at helping followers of Jesus settle into a practice of listening and contemplating.”

Being more focused on Jesus’ life and teachings is a priority, said Frank, noting how identifying as “Christian” can take on meanings that downplay or ignore Christ.

“I’m experimenting with a seven-week period of reading all four gospels in 40 days,” he said, taking them in the order they were written: Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Those joining him in this experiment are multigenerational, he said, and meet on Sunday mornings.

“Some of these are in other [Sunday School] classes; they self-select and are not leaving their classes longterm,” he said. “Others are newer to the church and are not in a group.”

Frank said he’s “trying to reimagine how we do some of these things” rather than taking the familiar programmatic approach in which so many were raised. He is responding to a question that deserves a lot of attention, he said: “How do we incorporate some new things — within a model like Sunday morning — that result in spiritual formation?”

While questions keep arising, innovation continues as well in congregational life where old ways are not the only ways. Even longtime education ministers — whatever title gets hung on their doors — are seeking and finding fresh ways to fulfill their own callings as disciple makers.

“We could do much better,” said Tamara, “but we’re doing some good.”

NFJ

# 10 things we’re “pretty sure we are sure” about regarding ministry with adults

BY FRANK GRANGER

When teaching a “Ministry with Adults” class at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology several years ago, I enlisted some colleagues in congregational Christian education to speak to the students.

These experienced colleagues were invited to share a few things they were “pretty sure they were sure about” ministry with adults. Collecting their statements — and adding a couple of my own — is how this list of “10 things” was generated.

1. I get by with a little help from my friends. *Frank Granger*

2. It’s all about the prep. *Frank Granger*

3. Just because I like it doesn’t mean everyone else will — and just because I don’t like it doesn’t mean it isn’t appropriate (or OK) to use. *Kathy Dobbins*

4. People go where they know they’re prepared for and cared for. *Bo Prosser*

5. There’s no such thing as a one-size-fits-all curriculum. *Will Dyer Jr.*

6. Don’t be afraid of failure. *Will Dyer Jr.*

7. Sunday School is not school, nor is it just on Sunday. *Tamara Tillman Smathers*

8. “Let’s get coffee” is less about the coffee and more about relationships. *Tamara Tillman Smathers*

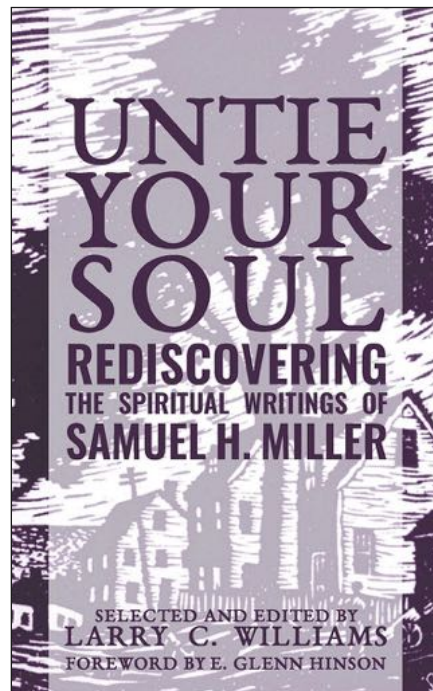
9. You will never change by logic what decision wasn’t reached by logic. *Sharyn Dowd*

10. You have heard it said that children and youth are the future of the church, but I say to you that it is the adults who are the future of the church. *Sharyn Dowd*

# A long labor, a full circle and a source of great wisdom

By Larry C. Williams

It took me 12 years to complete *Untie Your Soul: Rediscovering the Spiritual Writings of Samuel H. Miller*, published by Nurturing Faith. It is a collection of excerpts from Miller's writings.



Those who have never heard of Samuel Miller are in for a treat. Others who read his writings years ago are in for a treat, too, because these writings are timeless and can mean as much now as when read the first time — maybe even more.

Miller was pastor of Old Cambridge Baptist Church for 24 years. Then he became dean of Harvard Divinity School where he served for 10 years before his death in 1968.

He came to Harvard determined to put an emphasis on pastoral ministry. It was one of his great contributions to a great divinity school.

The first six years of compiling these writings were easy and pleasant. Many Wednesday mornings I drove to a small cabin about seven miles from my home. There I unloaded the books by Miller and read slowly.

That's the only way to read Miller's work. I would mark the excerpts I wanted to include in the collection, give them a tentative title and take in the timeless wisdom.

Miller wrote with passion, especially in *The Life of the Soul* — reminding me of the passion of Thomas Kelly in *The Testament of Devotion*. However, Miller's masterpiece, *The Great Realities*, was more orderly and studied.

My seminary president, Sid Stealey, used to tell us in chapel services that he

kept a copy of *The Great Realities* on his nightstand so he could soak in some of Miller's wisdom before going to sleep each night.

At the cabin in the woods on Wednesday mornings, I would have my own time of soaking in the spiritual depths of Miller. He gradually became my spiritual guide.

The last six years of bringing this book to life, however, were challenging. I came to think of that time as "a very long labor." The most difficult and recent part was trying to get permission to use excerpts from Miller's books during a pandemic when the archives were closed.

I could not have brought this baby to birth without my midwife, Meg Hess. She had been one of my favorite students when I was campus minister at Meredith College in Raleigh, N.C.

Meg was full of fun and humor. One day in her senior year she told me that she had received a call from God to be a minister. She had all the gifts needed and a calling, but I still was surprised at her announcement.

Meg graduated from Andover Newton Seminary near Boston, won the preaching award her senior year, served as pastor of two churches, wrote articles for the *Christian Century*, and was a part-

time instructor in preaching at Andover Newton. We kept our relationship alive with telephone calls and my occasional trips to Boston to see the Red Sox play.

One day I received an email from her that she was training to be a life coach and needed a guinea pig in her program. I knew exactly what struggle I would bring to our sessions.

I told her about working on the spiritual writings of Samuel Miller. She replied, "That would be a real pleasure since I served as interim pastor at Old Cambridge Baptist Church on two occasions where he had served as pastor."

My, how God's fingers can weave a beautiful tapestry. The circle was completed.

I had served as her minister, and now she served as my minister. She was my midwife in birthing the book.

After 12 years and a very long labor, the baby has been born. Come and see for yourself. N.F.J

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# Questions Christians ask scientists

If you could add one scientific idea into the language of the church, what would it be?

BY PAUL WALLACE

**D**uring my freshman year at Young Harris College, I first learned about the total solar eclipse of 2017. Jimmy Westlake, our astronomy professor, told us it was coming and would even be visible from campus.

We laughed: in 1987, “twenty seven-teen” didn’t even sound like a year. But he went on, telling us that not only was the eclipse to take place on Monday, Aug. 21, but that, as seen from campus, the total phase would begin at 2:36:07 p.m. and would end precisely at 2:38:30 p.m.

He told us it was inevitable, a mathematical certainty. Again, this was 30 years before the event itself. I put the date on my calendar and got on with life.

Ten home addresses, three degrees, five jobs, one wedding, 26 years of marriage and three kids later, Monday, Aug. 21, 2017, arrived.

My wife Elizabeth and I took the children out of school and left Atlanta for the mountains of North Georgia where, at about noon, we joined a happy throng of students on the Young Harris quad. We waited and stood and watched.

At 2:38:30, the moon completed its long slide over the sun and darkness fell. Venus and Mars appeared. Birds fell silent and a cool wind blew across the weirdly lit world. Exactly two minutes and 23 seconds



later the edge of the sun emerged, blue like burning phosphorus, and the world slowly returned to full light.

It all happened just as Professor Westlake had told us three decades earlier, and precisely, exactly on time. Isaac Newton won again.

This kind of certainty is rare in the world, and a great part of that day’s joy derived from the fact that I had known it was coming, and right when it was coming, and I had known it for so very long. This exact certain knowledge, manifested as it was in such a politically and socially uncertain time, struck me as a thing of fabulous beauty.

It still does. It makes me feel safe. It assures me that, underneath everything, the world makes sense.

We all need fixed points to stabilize our lives. They keep us from guessing all the time. We rely on our planners and calendars and weekly cycles. We like to know how our days are going to go, what to expect.

Routines keep us happy and safe. Every year we find peace in the traditions of Advent and Lent, and the holy hopeful days of Christmas and Easter.

These and other annual seasons and days mark time predictably, regularly, soothingly. Order is very good; creation itself is a triumph of order out of chaos.

But the chaos, as we all know, was never completely vanquished. It remains all around us and within us, threatening to undo us still. Seas swell and winds blow. And sometimes winds grow into storms, and we latch hard onto handles of belief and habit that in easier times we would hold lightly.

Not all these handles prove to be stable, unfortunately. Some of them, unlike Newtonian physics, are mere figments of our need and end up failing us. Some of them are not designed to withstand so much stress. In such times we seek something nearly impossible to find under the sun: certitude.

A large portion of the American church has fallen into such a situation. The political and social tempests of the last 50 years have

**Paul Wallace** is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to [john@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:john@goodfaithmedia.org).



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caused many people in the church to seek the solace of certitude, some impenetrable shelter of assurance and truth and comfort.

This longing for certitude takes on many forms. In the face of social upheaval and uncertainty, a large segment of the church holds ever tighter to such fixed notions as young-earth, six-day creationism.

Fiery, hard-edged rules about who is righteous and who is not have gained dominance. And, most distressingly, a very large fraction of American Christians has sold out the faith for political expediency and social control.

A mountain of clear evidence stands against six-day creationism, yet this belief persists in our churches, evolving into ever-more-fervent forms. Suspicion and fear of people who are not white, Christian and straight has driven churches inward, setting them against the world and turning the good news into bad news for everyone outside their walls.

The recent betrayal of the church to the powers and principalities that would eliminate all dissent is a grievous episode in American religious history.

These Christians' beliefs and actions are grounded in firm certitude about scripture, the nature of creation, the lines between ingroups and outgroups, and the righteousness of their own religious and political will. Surely, this segment of the church views uncertainty as a liability.

It is for this reason that, if I were to introduce a scientific idea into the language of the church, it would be the uncertainty principle. This law of physics, first derived by German physicist Werner Heisenberg in 1927, rests at the foundations of quantum mechanics, our physical theory that governs

tiny objects such as atoms and their nuclei.

I'll not dive deeply into what the uncertainty principle, which has to do with simultaneous measurements of certain pairs of physical quantities, means. It suffices to say that this principle tells us that uncertainty in science is not just an effect of our imperfect lab equipment or our limited research budgets.

It tells us that there are in-principle, inescapable limits to what we can possibly know about the universe, and no amount of money or clever lab hacks can get around them. These limits do not play a major role in the Newtonian physics of big objects such as the sun and moon, but they play an enormous role at the atomic and subatomic levels, and we have them to thank for the large-scale structure of the universe.

The universe is an uncertain place, and there is nothing we can do about that. Absolute certainty doesn't exist anywhere — not even in Newtonian physics. It is no more than an expression of our longing.

Taking this simple truth out of labs and classrooms and into the church might have some powerful and positive effects.

First, it would encourage us to stop clinging so desperately to things that are not real, that hurt people, and that compromise the gospel.

The picture in the minds of young-earth creationists exists nowhere else but in their minds. It does not correspond to anything in reality. Christians are always called to let go of such unrealities, and even a little uncertainty can go a long way toward this end.

If Christians were to welcome a little uncertainty into their views of others, they might come to see that Jesus called us

precisely to love and honor those who are marginalized, powerless and unfamiliar. Jesus' enemies stood among those whose power and social positions he threatened, and never among those on the margins of decent society.

These days in America, Jesus would find wide acceptance among immigrants, sexual minorities, racial minorities and so forth — the very people so many Christians have lined up against. To drop all need for certainty for one minute and simply ask the question — “Did Jesus love and accept the same people I do?” — would be a new beginning for the American church.

One moment of real uncertainty about the church's political commitments could work wonders: Does it further the gospel to tie the church to a political agenda that demonizes people? One that traffics in fear and is grounded in falsehood and deception?

I cannot imagine the amount of damage American Christianity's fetish for political power has done to the message of Jesus Christ. It is incalculable.

Many Christians, of course, do not cling to certainty about their theology, their relations with others, and their attachments to political figures. They allow themselves to be uncertain, to ask questions, to think critically about their own thoughts, actions, and commitments.

Yet too many allow themselves no such freedom. They cling to their own dream of certainty, to the ruin of many. And the uncertainty principle, rightly translated into the theology and practice of the American church, would be a gift not only to the church but also to the world. **NFJ**



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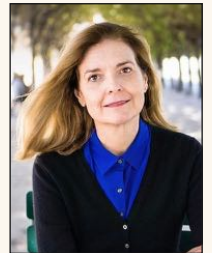
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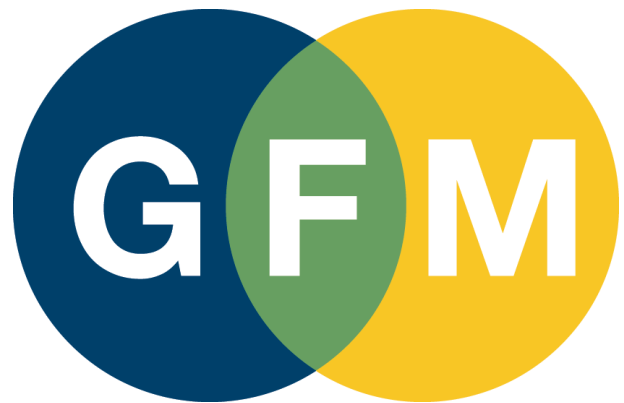


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