JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2023

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Journal & Bible Studies

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Honest to God

Truth and its poor substitutes

Confronting lies pastorally

Challenges for truth-tellers

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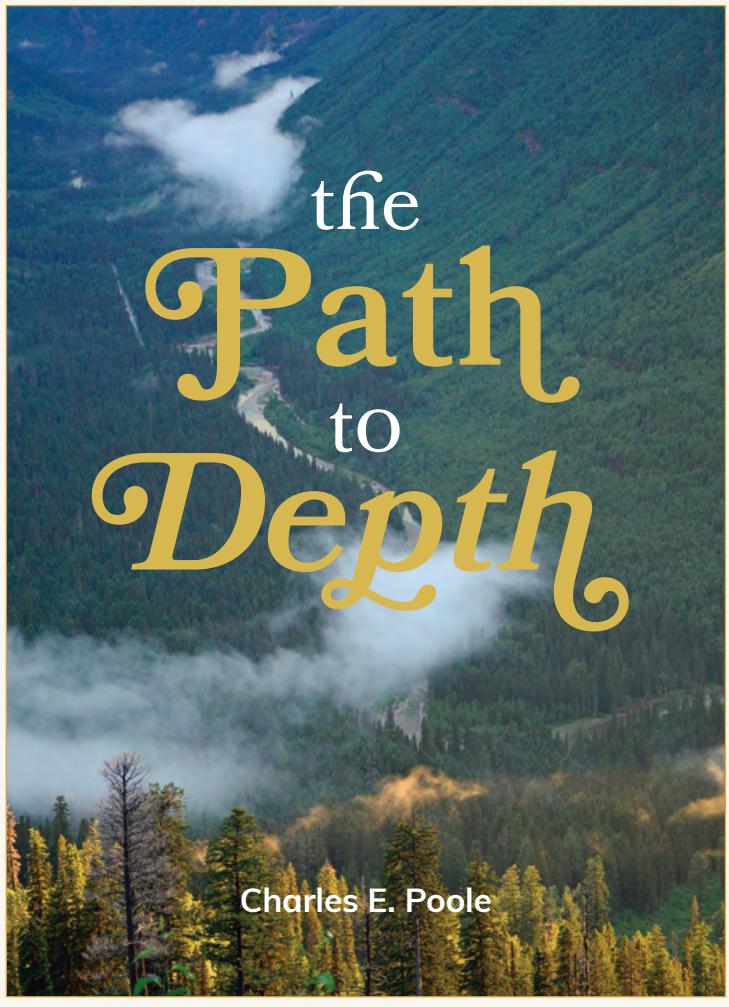

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Editor's Letter

The late Claude Williams Jr., who founded a newspaper and outdoor advertising company among other successful enterprises, once scolded me at his home office in Athens, Ga. Since it came with both wisdom and support, I listened attentively to what the then 90-something-year-old had to offer.

"You do really good quality work," he said of the expanding Nurturing Faith publishing efforts. "But you need to charge more for it."

Of course, the nonprofit world is quite different than the commercial one. But each time I've struck too good of a deal, I hear Claude's words echoing in my head.

Despite the rising costs of paper and printing, we have not increased our subscription rates in several years. However, we need to do so in this new year for individual subscriptions (which will get the added bonus of digital access) and also adjust book pricing.

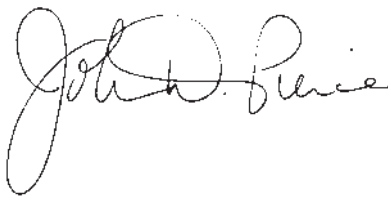
The increases are modest — surely less than would please Claude. But please know that both revenue and charitable gifts from those who share our mission enable Good Faith Media to carry out its varied and important work.

For example, in this issue we take a dive into the often-ignored but timely issue of truth, truthfulness and truth telling. Our goal is not to be divisive but to be, well, truthful.

If truth continues to be flexible, ill-defined and dismissed to achieve more selfish goals, it will be impossible for the teachings of Jesus — the one who is the way, the truth and life — to be centered in the Christian experience.

Some readers may think we're being "too political" (meaning politics with which one disagrees) or suggest a faulty "both sides" rationalization would be preferred.

However, it would be contradictory and misleading to focus a journal issue on truth and not do so in a truthful way, especially in a time of crisis when the Christian designation has been captured for political gain and lives of the very persons Jesus championed are put at greater risk.



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

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

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

Nurturing Faith Journal (ISSN 1072-7787) is published bimonthly by: Good Faith Media, P.O. Box 721972, Norman, OK 73070. **Subscription rates:** 1 year, $30; 2 years, $51; 1 year groups of 25 or more, $18; 1 year groups of less than 25, $24; 1 year Canada, $42; 1 year foreign, $100. Periodical postage paid at Macon, Ga. 31213 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address corrections to: P.O. Box 721972, Norman, OK 73070 • (615) 627-7763 •

GEM ADVOCATES

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'AFRICAN' BEFORE 'BAPTIST'

How Gullah Geechee slaves converted Southern Christianity

By Bruce Gourley

THOUGHTS

Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Ancient footprints mark Dinosaur Ridge outside Denver, Colo. Related column on page 41.

FEATURES

FACTLESS FAITH

The challenging pastoral task of confronting lies

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Veteran church and denominational leaders have some sage advice for addressing untruths in congregational settings.

Mike Smith of Knoxville, Tenn., is a retired pastor now serving churches in consulting and interim roles. He notes that the primary responsibility of a pastor is in service to his or her own congregation.

PASTOR FIRST

"I must be their pastor first, which entails getting to know and understand them, listening to them, loving them, and interacting with them even when it's personally difficult to do so," said Smith. "Doing so paves the way for dealing with lies…"

Ways of confronting untruths was the subject of Smith's Aug. 4, 2022 "Lectionary to Life" reflection for the Center for Congregational Ethics.

In response to the designated lectionary texts for the day, Smith titled his reflection, "Discerning lies."

He formed and addressed the question: "How might we best respond when Christian leaders peddle theological or political lies, convince large numbers of Christians to believe them, and insist the way of Christ is the wrong way to deal with contemporary challenges?"

Smith notes that "God calls us to expose lies, even as we articulate and practice an alternative approach to life."

He writes that in Psalm 50, God models such an approach. — warning the Israelites of their slanderous and destructive ways, for which they claimed God's endorsement of their actions.

Smith adds that Isaiah (9:8-17) emulated God's approach when confronting religious leaders who misled people, regardless of their motivations for doing so.

"The fruits of such leadership include social and political violence and the defamation of God's good name," said Smith.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Turning to New Testament texts, Smith writes that Paul (in Rom. 9:1-9) — when encountering those being misled — chose anguish for them rather than exhibiting rage, hatred or abandonment.

"In spite of his disappointment, Paul opted for empathy even as he continued to present the gospel to his own people," said Smith.

Likewise, Smith added, Paul chose hope over despair.

Expanding on the ideas in the brief reflection, Smith offered a few other related thoughts for a pastor to keep in mind when dealing with widespread lies pushed by those with religious or political intent.

The first involves homework.

"If I'm going to address the lies, I must know their content, sources, vocabulary, targets, and consequences — both intended and unintended," he said. "It's especially useful to know consequences in the form of stories about people injured by the lies."

Second, Smith advises fellow pastors "to consistently present biblical counter-narratives to the lying narratives."

This involves focused preaching and teaching on the stories of Jesus and on other biblical stories of radical transformation — where individuals repented of their wrongly held and damaging ideas.

Third, Smith recommends the use of contemporary counter-narratives, too — such as stories about former KKK members or other extremists whose minds and hearts were changed. Often, he noted, that transformation was sparked by interaction with the kinds of people they had learned to demean and hate.

Finally, Smith said some of the more effective work in addressing lies might occur in smaller group settings.

"In such settings, and with the consent of the group, I help them explore the biblical, theological, political and social aspects of issues and subjects," he said. "I've found

such groups then act as a leaven in the larger church body."

FALSE WITNESS

In a Baptist News Global column titled "A 'Christian' nation beset by false witness," church historian Bill Leonard noted how directly the Bible addresses lying.

Examples are aplenty from one of the 10 Commandments stating, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 3:9) to the Colossians being told, "Do not lie to one another…" (3:9).

"It gets worse," wrote Leonard, pointing to Rev. 21:8 where "all liars" get subjected to the licking flames of a sulfuric fire along with murders, sorcerers and other offenders.

While lies take on various forms and are found throughout humanity, Leonard is particularly concerned over one falsehood — with an embedded contradiction — that is now being energized.

"As a historian of religion in America, what haunts me these days is the increasing connection between the idea that the United States is a historically 'Christian nation' and the increasing acceptance, even by Christians, of the politics of lying in the public square."

Leonard fittingly asks: "Aren't the two concepts mutually exclusive, biblically, if not ecclesiastically?"

He frames it another way: "If the American Republic is foundationally 'Christian,' then why do so many advocates of that belief appear to accept or tolerate prevarication so readily?"

Leonard notes that Christian nationalism and the related rampant false witness issues are problematic for American congregations and denominations — marked by internal strife over politics, theology, doctrine and culture

He points to the reality that one in five Americans now claims no discernable religious affiliation.

"Apparently, many Americans, knowingly or unknowingly, need a new sense of the church's witness," he surmises. "And it better not be false."

A TIME TO SPEAK

Longtime Zebulon, N.C., pastor Jack Glasgow noted: "We are clearly living in an age where social media has turned everyone into an editorial journalist, where professional media and political parties have intentionally divided us along ideological lines, and where any factual truth can be challenged as false, and any false proposition defended as truth."

Navigating this new reality, he said, proves quite challenging for pastoral leaders.

"Take on the responsibility for correcting lies and defending truth and you will be praised by those who share your perspective and villainized by those who believe you are contradicting their position on what is really true," he said. "You are unlikely to change many if any minds."

It is nearly impossible, he noted, to hold congregations together when there are passionately-held, diverse political and ideological viewpoints — revealing that even a basic embrace of what is considered to be true and false is incompatible.

Pastors, said Glasgow, need to follow the wisdom offered in Ecclesiastes, that there is a time to be silent, and a time to speak. And neither is the best response at all times.

"Discerning those times is crucial," said. "I have come to realize that confronting our differences of perspective on what is true and factual — in the belief that we can talk our way into agreement — is futile."

Parishioners who are confronted with truth about their spreading of untruths are highly unlikely to show appreciation for such guidance and change their minds.

PURSUING TRUTH

"I have to admit that I am a pragmatist, perhaps to a fault," said Glasgow. "Therefore I am less inclined to take on what I perceive as lies told as truths — or truths slandered as lies — than I am to simply point out to the congregation the truth about the world we live in."

Widely accepted truth cannot be found today, he said. Like beauty, truth is in the eyes (and ears) of the beholder.

"We are a deeply divided culture — political, socially, and within the church, theologically," said Glasgow.

"There are voices that defend any and every idea and position as true, with ample stories, whether real or fabricated, to defend any point of view," he continued. "If we can at least get Christians to recognize this truth, then we have accomplished something important."

He calls first for introspection followed by confession.

"If we will own up to our own biases and how they affect our perception of the truth, then perhaps we can at least understand why others do not share our perception," he said.

"With at least that degree of understanding, the church can pursue truth together in our preaching and study of scripture, in the word of God revealed in Jesus, in our communal life together, and in our shared commitment to do the work of the kingdom of God." NFJ

WORTH REPEATING

"IN MY CHILDHOOD BRAIN, HEAVEN WAS A HUGE DRY COUNTY FILLED WITH BAPTISTS."

— Sean Dietrich, "Sean of the South" columnist

"Those who cherry-pick biblical texts to prooftext their doctrines rarely cherry-pick from the lips of Jesus."

Kevin M. Young, founding director of Christ's Table (Twitter)

"The irony is, they're excluding us for not excluding people."

Pastor Michael Usey of College Park Baptist Church in Greensboro, N.C., on disaffiliation by the Southern Baptist Convention for the church's openness to LGBTQ persons (RNS)

"[Jesus'] teachings are entirely inconsistent with an approach to public engagement that says: 'This Christian country is mine. You are defiling it. And I will take it back by any means necessary.'"

Michael Gerson, former speech writer for Pres. George W. Bush (*Washington Post*)

"Someone who is not Christian described their general experience with white evangelicals as 'people who don't have any questions.' I immediately knew what they meant and am going to be thinking about that statement a long time."

Author/historian Jemar Tisby (Twitter)

"[E]vangelical used to be a theological category... It's become a slogan for 'I don't like some things going on in my country and I'm kind of angry about them.'"

Author Philip Yancey (CNN)

"Jesus elevated the outcast and turned the social order upside down, reminding us that everyone is created in God's image and therefore infinitely valuable and worthy of love. Hard to believe religious folks around Jesus had forgotten that."

Steve Cothran of Central Baptist Church in Newnan, Ga., whose youth worked with migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border (*Newnan Times-Herald*)

"[E]ven though they have a lot of cultural and political power, they will continue to insist they are actually the ones who are embattled and, therefore, what choice do they have but to be ruthless and to seize power?"

Historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez on modern American Christian nationalists (PBS)

"People are increasingly using politics as a reason for changing their religious identity and changing their congregation and house of worship they attend."

Monmouth College political science professor Shay Audette who conducted the study (The Center Square)

"What is being done by many people on the American right in the name of Jesus is a desecration of the actual Jesus — the Jesus of the Gospels..."

Peter Wehner, who served in the administrations of three Republican presidents (*The Atlantic*)

Truth and its poor substitutes

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Jesus said he is the truth, and that truth will set us free. Yet many who claim his name prefer poor substitutes.

Comfort, fear and control are often favored over truth — especially painful truth that disrupts one's nice-fitting mindset or societal privilege. Quickly dismissed are Jesus' calls for wide acceptance of others and personal sacrifices on behalf of the common good.

Some even fear that emerging truth will somehow unravel their neatly constructed and highly defended version of faith. For Christians, however, "alternate facts" create an alternate faith to following Jesus.

Sadly, history attests to the reality that passing along truth has not always been the church's strength. Many of us can recount even well-intended but demonstrably false information we received as divine truth.

Noting these is neither a repudiation of our early faith development nor a personal assault on those who taught us. Learning to unlearn, however, is needed in our pursuits of truth.

Confronting and countering untruths taught by the church is essential to both our personal spiritual growth and the public witness of our faith.

For many of us, examples of lies the church told us — not in a menacing (in most cases) but uninformed way — are plentiful. Some have and do, however, result in significant harm to others.

Removing Native Americans from their homelands resulted in their evangelism, we were told. Enslaved Africans benefited similarly.

Women have their own Bible-prescribed, secondary roles as "helpmates" to men, preachers and teachers told us. Some even used images of an umbrella to show how God dispenses authority — flowing from the divine to males to women to children.

Distrust of science created a defensiveness that resulted in young minds having to choose between their inherited faith and the common-sense lessons in biology class. Protecting such faith often required redefining it.

As a result, much of the misinformation passed along by Americanized Christianity has occurred by a shift in devotion from following Jesus to "believing the Bible" in a redefining way.

The latter allows for scouring the scriptures for evidence to somewhat support one's preferred conclusions — with no regard for how it might conflict with the life and teachings of Jesus.

Moving from a focus on following Jesus to claims of "believing the Bible" allowed for a secondary shift in which personal righteousness is much more important than social justice.

That puritanical idea helped wipe out indigenous peoples and enslave Africans by those claiming to be holy. And the same mindset allows the demeaning of migrants, women and others today.

At this particular point in history, however, is another shift of great concern. There is a difference in teaching nonfactual information — particularly about the Bible — out of ignorance and boldly embracing and proclaiming untruths by choice.

Truthfulness is not even a claimed goal within much of Americanized Christianity — where truth has gained a pejorative meaning apart from that which is factual.

Rising Christian nationalism — seeking governmental power at all costs (precisely what Jesus refused to do) — depends on professing Christians to empower religious and political leaders who are proven habitual liars. Yet their lying ways soothe the souls of those who consume their fear-fed lies.

White Americanized Christians are the primary purveyors of untruth today. And that's a very uncomfortable truth.

Without truth as its north star, the church has little to offer in terms of an authentic Christian witness.

Until this elephant in the sanctuary is addressed and rectified — or at least publicly challenged in a significant way by a large and visible segment of Christians prone to timidity and resistant to even constructive conflict — there will continue to be a sea of change in Americanized Christianity's self-identification as siding with and empowering bigotry, fear and control.

Blissful ignorance is inexcusable for Christians with easy access to facts. One only needs to read the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution — and the larger document also — to see that the nation's founders brilliantly created a nation with full religious liberty for all.

Within such freedom — as opposed to a state religion — faith can and does thrive. Yet intentional misrepresentations of a desired "Christian nation" abound — with no regard for the historical carnage that has resulted from such arrangements.

It's amazing how many lies advanced by professing Christians in the U.S. today could be corrected by a mere introductory civics class and an attentive reading of one of the gospels.

With such widespread engagement in proffering lies, the church may gain some political power while losing its soul. One cannot throw its weight behind a bundle of falsehoods and expect to have anyone believe anything else they offer to be the truth.

A companion tragedy is that so many who know this current tragic crisis to be true choose to keep it quiet and unconfronted.

Therefore, it keeps gaining steam with little challenge to its consistent contrast to what followers of Jesus have been called to be and do since he scoured a distant countryside seeking his first disciples.

Attempts at keeping the peace just may result in not keeping the faith. NFJ

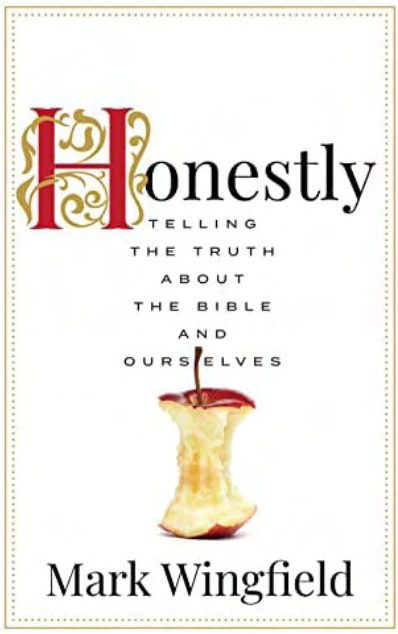
"Jesus is the embodiment of truth, and any who would follow him must value truth."

WILDFIRE OF UNTRUTH

Mark Wingfield on the Bible, Christians and truthfulness

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Writer and editor Mark Wingfield of Dallas, Texas, is the author of a new book, *Honestly: Telling the Truth about the Bible and Ourselves*, to be released by Fortress Press on Jan. 24, 2023.



The book — launched by the overarching question, "What is truth?" — addresses the role of biblical truth related to various current issues including race, climate change and creation. He also digs into how the Bible is used and often misused to support lies at odds with the teachings of Jesus and the larger biblical message of justice, mercy and love.

His earlier book is titled *Churches Need to Talk about Sexuality: Lessons Learned about Sex, Gender, Identity, and the Bible* (2019, Fortress Press).

Currently, the veteran journalist serves as executive director/publisher of Baptist News Global. Before returning to journalism fulltime, he served as associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.

Wingfield, in the following conversation with *Nurturing Faith Journal* editor John Pierce, speaks about the challenges facing Christians and congregations at a time when being truthful is often undermined and undervalued — with damaging results.

NFJ: How do you distinguish between truth and truthfulness, and what does either have to do with facts? What pejorative meanings need to be understood?

MW: There are ways to tell the truth without being truthful. We all know how to do this. We state only what must be stated and avoid telling the whole truth unless forced.

You may ask me what I'm doing, and I could respond that I'm typing on my laptop, which is true, even though I'm also eating ice cream at the same time. But I might not want you to know about the ice cream.

This is the art of the dodge that politicians have mastered. But we all do it.

NFJ: How would you place evangelicals — and Americans at large — in historical context when it comes to matters of truth and truthfulness? Are we in a different time and place?

MW: Good Lord, yes. We are in a horrible and unbelievable time when the very people who claim to worship a God of truth wouldn't know truth if it walked up in front of them. The evangelical church in America has sold its soul to the devil for the sake of gaining political power.

NFJ: Where are the corners of American society today where you want to yell the loudest, "That's not true!"

MW: The list is long but would have to start with election deniers, climate change deniers, racism deniers, religious liberty deniers, LGBTQ deniers, history deniers. There's a common word in this answer: deniers. The bulk of lying we experience in public discourse today seems to revolve around denying that real things are real.

NFJ: Church members buying into untruths has been around awhile. We recall gullible church members distributing mimeographed petitions with the bogus goal of stopping atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair from scrubbing TV of religious programming. Has something changed other than the speed by which such nonsense is spread?

MW: How I long for the days of the mimeographed O'Hair petitions. Such a simpler time. Social media and the internet in general have become multipliers of mendacity.

It's just impossible to overstate this case. That, combined with the willful ignorance of well-educated people who fear losing their control, is like a wildfire running up a mountainside.

NF: Why did you focus on "the Bible and ourselves"?

MW: Since this book originated as a series of Bible study lessons, I knew I couldn't speak in the third person. This had to be about me, about us.

While many of us are not guilty of the worst kinds of untruthfulness, all of us are guilty of straying from the truth. And for Christians, the Bible is one of the guideposts that calls us back to the narrow road.

NFJ: You note that powerful forces, for their own benefit, keep facts from the public. Will you give an example of how that's done and why skepticism is needed when we're told something is factual?

MW: Almost all good lies contain a grain of truth. That's why they work. Politicians and business leaders call one form of this "plausible deniability."

Remember Bill Clinton's famous line: "I did not have sex with that woman." The truth of his statement all hung on the definition of "sex." He could avoid the painful truth of his actions by reframing the definition.

I could tell you that I drove from Dallas to Fort Worth today, which is true, but that would not tell you where I might have stopped along the way. Again, there is a way to tell the partial truth that is not the whole truth.

NFJ: Do you see a connection between growing authoritarianism and the demise of truth telling?

MW: Authoritarianism thrives on lies. It doesn't work to tell the truth and become a dictator. Authoritarians must create a false sense of danger or panic to which they are the sole answer.

Truth is rational; following dictators is irrational. You will not find in history any authoritarian figure who trafficked in truth. Donald Trump is the prime example of this in our present moment. Nearly every word he utters is a lie, but he tells some people what they want to hear. And that's all that matters to them.

"The bulk of lying we experience in public discourse today seems to revolve around denying that real things are real."

NFJ: How does truth get sacrificed by efforts to be "fair" — presenting "both sides" of an argument as equally valued or flawed?

MW: Back in the olden days when I was in journalism school, we were drilled on always presenting "both sides" of every issue. That's the way to present objective news reporting.

Well, that assumed both sides were telling some semblance of truth and the choice to be made was merely a value judgment. I think of Mitt Romney and Barack Obama having different views on the economy, for example.

Never in my wildest dreams — nor I'm sure the dreams of my journalism professors — could I imagine a time when reputable media outlets would have to insert disclaimers inside the text of their stories saying, "but there is no evidence to support this claim" or "that didn't happen."

Yet in our world now shaped by Trump's art of the steal, there are not two equal sides; there's truth and not truth.

NFJ: Are many people so fearful of the future, particularly of social change, that truth is simply not a high value? Aren't they more interested in security and comfort?

MW: Yes, but how shortsighted. Consider climate change, for example. You can deny the reality of climate change all day long, but the effects of climate change are still going to overwhelm you.

What you want to believe about climate change will not stop the heat, the waves, the hurricanes, the tornadoes, the drought. Truth denial often is based in a false sense of security that inevitably comes crashing down.

NFJ: Are we so used to being lied to that we expect and even accept it at some level?

MW: Sadly, this is true. Chronic liars just wear us down. They are so persistent that many people just give in at some point.

The line that gets me is when people defend lying politicians by saying, "But all politicians lie." I'm not sure that's really the case, but even if it is, not all politicians are habitual liars detached from reality.

Yet this is one of the most frequent explanations I hear for why people keep listening to Trump. They know he lies, but they no longer care.

NFJ: What is "Magic 8 Ball faith," and why is it insufficient?

"You will not find in history any authoritarian figure who trafficked in truth."

MW: Magic 8 Ball faith is a kind of bibliolatry that assumes the Good Book has the answers to all questions of all time. If we just open the Bible and point our finger in the right place, we'll come down on the answer we need.

It's just like shaking a Magic 8 Ball to get a "yes," "no" or "maybe" response. But the Bible never claims to be the kind of all-purpose reference book we want it to be.

It drives me nuts when certain people answer every question posed to them by saying, "The Bible says …"

There are many things the Bible says nothing about, and there are plenty of other things the Bible isn't clear about. It's not a Magic 8 Ball.

NFJ: Don't churches often treat bright members as if they can't handle complexity and uncertainty — and therefore offer simplistic, unexamined and often untruthful answers as truth?

MW: This is a reality that has puzzled me for years. I once knew a man who rose to be the president of a large corporation and was a lay leader in his Baptist church. The silly stuff he believed at church would have never passed muster in his work life.

But a lot of folks want to check their brains at the church door. That makes them gullible for all sorts of manipulation.

NFJ: Who are you calling a liar in the Bible?

MW: Lots of people in the Bible are liars. Some notoriously so. I can't even count them. Although if you read the book, you'll find I name some names.

NFJ: What role do preachers in particular play in truth telling?

MW: In a perfect world, preachers would be the foremost tellers of truth in all circumstances. But in real life, preachers may shy away from the truth or stray away from the truth.

They often are afraid to tell the truth because they know it could get them fired. And sometimes the truth doesn't align with their desired agenda and needs to be ignored.

This is so dangerous in the pulpit. I was reminded today of a pastor who was invited to preach in a big public forum. He stood up and read the Sermon on the Mount, then sat down. And he was castigated for preaching a divisive sermon.

NFJ: What would you say to fellow followers of Jesus about how to think about truth in terms of faithfulness?

MW: None of us is perfect, no not one. We all stretch the truth or outright lie sometimes — or ignore inconvenient truths.

We need to work toward those times being the exception and not the rule. Jesus is the embodiment of truth, and any who would follow him must value truth.

NFJ: This book grew out of a group experience. How do you hope it might be used?

MW: The book is designed to be read individually or with a group. There are discussion questions with each chapter that could be used in small-group settings.

Many of the chapters are nearly verbatim Sunday School lessons I taught, so I know it works in such a setting. What you read in the book is a cleaned-up and improved version, including comments from my class members who helped me develop some of the ideas further. NFJ

"Social media and the internet in general have become multipliers of mendacity."

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Photos by Starlette Thomas.

Nones, dones, a wedding and the church's future

By Larry Hovis

My ministerial career is almost evenly divided into two parts: church pastor and denominational executive. As a pastor, I officiated many weddings — especially in my last pastorate in a university town.

My marriage officiating as a denominational executive has been greatly reduced — limited mostly to family and friends. Last year, however, I was approached by the son of a close friend, asking if I would officiate his upcoming wedding.

He was raised in a Baptist family very active in the church, though he no longer attends. His fiancée was raised in a nominal Unitarian family with limited church involvement.

He explained that they were asking for my assistance because I was a family friend, not because I was a Christian minister. In fact, he said they did not want a traditional Christian wedding.

Instead, they wanted a ceremony that was personal and unique to them. It would be a "destination wedding" on the North Carolina coast.

I explained that because being a Christian minister is central to my identity, the only kind of wedding I knew how to officiate was a Christian wedding. Still, I assured him I would work with him and his fiancée to make it as personal as possible.

Over the coming months, I met with the couple five times over Zoom since we lived in different cities. I got to know them better, especially the bride, learning their individual stories, the story of their courtship and engagement, and their faith journeys.

I administered a pre-marriage inventory that I often use in premarital counseling. Both engaged the process seriously, especially the bride, who participated with honesty, transparency and depth. I grew to really respect her, and believe she felt the same way about me.

By the time we reached the stage of planning the ceremony, they were comfortable with me and actually had few particular requests. I offered to allow them to write their own vows, but they said they trusted me to bring them a couple of options to choose from, all of which were fairly traditional.

When the time for the wedding came, I was aware that the congregation would contain both very religious and fairly secular people. I worked hard to prepare for the service, probably harder than any wedding I had officiated in a long time.

My goal was to produce a ceremony that was personal and unique to the couple, that would be faithful to the Gospel, and yet would not cause the unchurched folks in attendance to tune out.

Based on the responses of the bride and groom, both sets of parents, and folks of both persuasions (churched and unchurched), I succeeded. The bride and groom, both families, and many in the congregation — both those who knew me and those who didn't — thanked me for the ceremony.

Both groups came together in a time of worship that included God, Jesus, the Bible and prayer. In our divided, polarized world, we experienced a moment of sacred unity with love at the center — the love of God and a beautiful young couple beginning their life together as husband and wife.

Sociologists of religion would describe this couple in terms of "nones" (the bride) and "dones" (the groom). They and many in attendance at this wedding would be folks who claim no religious affiliation, or who once would have been regular church participants.

My experience of being with these people has convinced me that most of them have not rejected God, Jesus and faith. They have, however, rejected particular forms of Christian expression.

The bride has rejected the version of Christianity she has experienced, one that is narrow, judgmental, and at odds with her most cherished values of justice, inclusivity and diversity.

The groom has rejected a version of the church that no longer has relevance for his life. Though he was active in the church for the first 18 years of his life, and still attends on special occasions, he ceased attending when he went off to college and has not made room for it, on a regular basis, in his adult life.

This experience has caused me to re-evaluate my perception of nones and dones. Rather than condemning them for their lack of involvement in organized religion, I wonder if there are new expressions of Christian community that they might find meaningful:

Perhaps expressions based on a theology of justice, inclusivity and diversity that flows from the heart of Jesus? Expressions that focus on relationships and community rather than institutional preservation?

I don't know exactly what such expressions might look like or exactly how to start them. But I'm very interested in investing mental, spiritual and practical energy into figuring it out.

I know some folks who might join me on this journey, starting with this newly married couple. If successful, such an effort might actually lead to renewal of the church I love but that has lost relevance for so many. NFJ

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

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Help us advocate for good

By Mitch Randall

Good Faith Media has created the Good Faith Advocates network as a gathering place for individuals who share the multi-faceted organization's mission — and want to be more involved.

Together we can be more effective in "Standing Up, Speaking Out and Stepping Forward" to advance the gospel of Jesus that reflects his life and teachings of justice and inclusion.

In Luke 12:35, Jesus calls his followers to "be ready for service and keep your lamps burning."

Good Faith Advocates' readiness for service will be expressed through strategic collaboration and communication. Together, as people of good faith, we will shine a light on the most critical issues we face.

In the words of the prophet Micah (6:8), we will "act justly, love mercifully, and walk humbly with our God."

Numerous and varied opportunities will be available to Good Faith Advocates to stay informed and contribute to the overall strategies of Good Faith Media.

These include invitations to participate in both in-person and virtual gatherings with GFM's team and also insightful special guests. In addition, timely topics and communications strategies will be discussed.

When vital issues arise, Advocates will receive email alerts notifying them of available resources, including articles, podcasts and videos.

Good Faith Advocates will be given the opportunity to host and/or attend local in-person Good Faith Gatherings and other GFM-sponsored experiences and events with early notification.

Additionally, to show our appreciation a bit more, all Advocates will receive an ongoing 10% discount on all purchases from the Good Faith Media online bookstore with more than 150 titles published under GFM's Nurturing Faith book imprint.

We are grateful for the excellent and supportive engagement we currently experience with our readers, viewers and listeners. Yet we want to engage with you more — and benefit from your much-needed expertise and help.

Becoming a Good Faith Advocate is an ideal way to increase those connections and to share more intentionally in the timely and crucial mission of Good Faith Media. And joining this effort is simple:

- Visit goodfaithmedia.org and click on the "Good Faith Advocates" link.
- Complete the form to become a monthly donor at any level or give an annual gift of $250 or more. (Those choosing to donate by check may download the form and return it to P.O. Box 721972, Norman, OK 73070.)
- Start collaborating with GFM staff, board members and other Good Faith Advocates as we champion for a more caring, inclusive and just world that reflects the faithfulness of following Jesus.

While financial support by Good Faith Advocates is vitally important, there are many other ways that Advocates can play a significant role. One is to help share GFM's wide range of content across social media platforms and inform others about GFM-produced resources.

Thoughtful and productive conversations are at the heart of our mission. So hosting a Good Faith Gathering would be a significant contribution.

It's as simple as inviting a small group of people to meet in your home or elsewhere (with others joining virtually if they choose). GFM staff will gladly help coordinate these gatherings — as well as facilitate discussions, addressing important topics and initiatives.

We stand at a crossroads in which one way perpetuates the darkness of fear, hate, division, injustice and exclusion.

Good Faith Advocates will be bearers of the light, illuminating the darkness with the gospel of Jesus (John 1:5). This alternative path of light promotes grace, mercy, love, solidarity, inclusion, hope, justice and freedom.

We want you to walk along with us. We will intentionally counter such bad faith efforts that present the Christian faith as being oppressive, arrogant, hostile, exclusive and rigid.

We seek and choose "a better way" to practice our faith personally and in the public square — by advocating on behalf of inclusion, freedom and justice for all.

William Faulkner wrote: "Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world … would do this, it would change the earth."

Our Good Faith Media team, directors, advisors — and now Advocates — will together respond faithfully to Jesus' call. In doing so, we will serve the common good over selfish intents, and make the world a better place.

You are invited to join us. NFJ

—Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.

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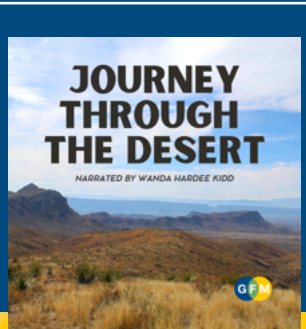

NOW AVAILABLE: *JOURNEY THROUGH THE DESERT*

Wanda Hardee Kidd is a retired campus minister from North Carolina. In early 2020, burdened by grief, she left home – alone. A road trip. Just Wanda, her truck camper, and a broken spirit. She found healing in her desert wandering.

Churches can provide community, support to ease emotional distress

By Kimberly Paige

The mental health crisis that presents on the heels of the COVID pandemic has impacted many of us either directly or through someone we care about. The wave of suicides — even in children — has moved me to share how the mental health of someone I loved nearly cost me my life.

This is my first time to write the story of my experience of being abducted as a young woman.

Growing up with faith as my foundation, my family was active in the church and my friendships arose out of the youth groups. My parents taught me Christian values that were at the core of the person I became.

They were champions of acceptance, kindness and caring — providing every opportunity to shape a life that God would want for me.

I was introduced to a kind man who was charming and fun. He seemed responsible, and he loved me. We had good friends and good times, and after a year he asked me to marry him.

Leaning on my values, I chose not to live with him prior to marriage and had much to learn. Our busy lives as a young married couple working different shifts meant that we sometimes only crossed paths for short periods of time.

As I got deeper into the marriage, I started to notice significant swings in his moods and the way he navigated his days. When I became concerned about two years into the marriage and tried to separate, the real crisis unfolded.

I was drugged, gagged, and stolen in the night and taken to a house that was so far removed, to have found me would've been like finding a needle in a haystack. For four days my family and friends searched for me, and my church community prayed.

I was living a nightmare punctuated by determination to survive. Tapping into my faith, hope and wisdom, I was intent on coming out alive.

As the deacons of my church prayed with my family on the fourth day, the call came in sharing with my parents that the horrific ordeal had ended in a suicide as opposed to a murder suicide.

As Christians, we are faced increasingly with family, friends and even strangers who are struggling with mental health concerns. As a community, we need to walk the fine line of being discerning without judgment or fear.

We need to be aware and attentive to mental health concerns, partnering with others who can provide resources for treatment and care and knowing when to reach out and get help.

Communities are struggling to recover after months of being pushed apart by social distancing. The church should be the place where people can turn for support as they recover.

The biopsychosocial model highlights the interconnectedness of biological, psychological and social aspects that have a role in health and disease. The spiritual aspect comes into play when individuals are given community and support in developing a framework to ease emotional distress.

A dear friend and family member who struggled with ADHD, anxiety and depression in her young adult life shared with me that although she had the love and support of her family and had care and treatment for these disorders, she felt the thing that was the greatest contributor to her healing was the kindness, compassion and validation she received from others.

Therein lies our opportunity. With the help of my family, church community and counseling, I moved forward and started over.

I was blessed with a wonderful and fulfilling life as mother, wife, daughter and professional. I would hope for others who are impacted by mental health issues to have the same opportunity to begin again.

The church can be a place to come for validation, kindness and grace — as well as a conduit to resources for care outside of the scope of individuals or Christian communities.

It's been said that to learn something that can significantly change the lives of others and share it with no one would be a crime. I learned firsthand that mental health concerns have the potential to impact individuals, families and even generations.

These disorders can change a day, shape relationships, or change or even take a life. When given hope in the context of faith, healing can become a reality.

As Christians and members of faith-based organizations, we cannot step aside or disregard the mental health of our communities. NFJ

—Kimberly Paige, an author and speaker, seeks to create caring communities of grace and healing through sharing her personal experiences.

This column is provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches

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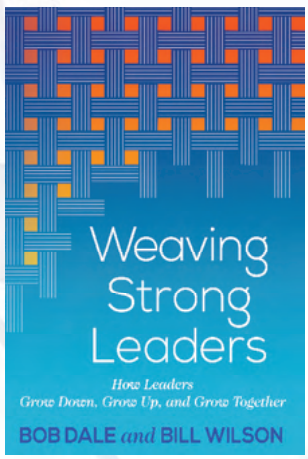

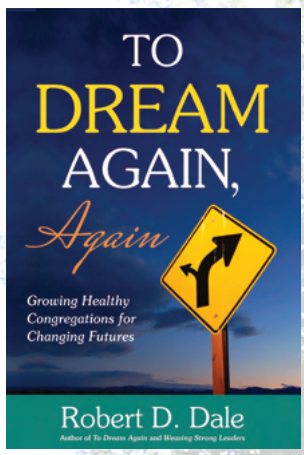

Healthy Church Resources are a collaborative effort of the Center for Healthy Churches, the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation, and Good Faith Media.

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What are the implications of Christian pluralism for the church?

By John R. Franke

In my last three columns I've been exploring the idea of the Word of God in three forms: the act of revelation, the Spirit-inspired witness to revelation in scripture, and the Spirit-guided proclamation of that witness in the life of the Christian community.

I've suggested that a proper understanding of revelation and scripture leads to the conclusion that Christian faith is pluralist by its very nature. This brings us to the third of these forms, the witness of the church in its proclamation and life in the world, and invites the question: What are the implications of Christian pluralism for the witness of the church? I will briefly mention four.

First, Christian pluralism reminds us of the contextuality and inexhaustible fullness of the gospel. This is made manifest in the cultural expansion of the church as communities emerge and interact with one another.

The process of translation and contextualization is not something that takes place after the biblical texts, their interpretations, and corresponding doctrines are established. Rather, it is fully present in all of these forms of witness and cannot be removed or eliminated.

Contextuality is an inherent part of the process of understanding and communication. From this perspective, biblical interpretation and communication are always matters involving the recontextualization of texts in a variety of social and historical settings.

This ongoing activity of recontextualization in and for a diversity of cultural settings is the essence of Christian witness from the perspective of pluralism.

Second, Christian pluralism is inherently intercultural. This involves understanding the social contexts of other interpreters and of texts and, in so doing, significantly reconfigures common notions of Christian witness with respect to the communication of the gospel.

This is particularly true with respect to traditional forms of cross-cultural activity in which the recipients of the gospel message are treated as the objects for conversion. They are expected to receive the message as presented if they are to benefit from its promises.

Such an approach leads to colonization, a situation in which the message functions as the introduction of an alien ideology that, if accepted, undermines and subverts the ecosystem of the existing culture with detrimental effects on its participants.

Instead, the model of Christian pluralism invites intercultural understanding and involves genuine and loving concern for others *and* the cultural settings that shape their identity.

With respect to Christian witness, living out and proclaiming the good news of the gospel becomes an enterprise in mutual understanding in which all of the participants provide crucial and necessary elements to the discourse.

Third, Christian pluralism is dialogical. It reminds us that while the world needs the gospel, the church needs to listen to the world to understand the gospel.

Justo González conceives of the mission of the church as being shaped not only by the need of the world to hear the gospel, but also by the need of the church to hear and listen to the world in all the diversity of its nations, cultures and ethnicities.

In this way the church will have a fuller understanding of the gospel as people from all the earth bring the richness of their experience to bear on its proclamation.

This dialogical interaction is vital to the witness of an appropriately pluralist church and provides a necessary resistance to both an inflexible dogmatism that restricts the truth and fullness of the gospel as well as an "anything goes" relativism that eclipses it.

Listening with empathy to the experiences and perspectives of people from differing cultural contexts and situations helps Christian communities to resist the danger of allowing the gospel message to be either overly accommodated to culture or viewed as something entirely apart from culture.

Fourth, Christian pluralism reminds us that while cultural, ethnic, ideological, and religious diversity and plurality is a given fact of life on earth, genuine pluralism is not. It is an achievement waiting to be realized in the face of the enmity and hostility that exist among the peoples of the earth.

In response to this situation, God has sent Jesus to reconcile human beings not only to God but also to each other for the sake of peace.

The church is called to bear witness to, and participate in, this salvific work of peace-making pluralism by becoming a new and inclusive community made up of all the peoples of the earth. Indeed, the Spirit is given to the church for this very purpose.

This divine plan is ultimately intended to restore harmony to creation and bring peace to the earth. Participation in this pluralism doesn't mean giving up Christian commitments — far from it. It means leaning into them more fully by loving God and our neighbors more faithfully for the sake of the world that God loves. NFJ

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

Truth gets out even when denied

By Starlette Thomas

This year marks the second anniversary of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol building by supporters of Donald Trump. They were "sicced" on lawmakers by the then-president following his "Stop the Steal" rally.

It was the first time the building had been breached since it was set on fire by the British in 1814. This time, the enemy was not foreign but domestic.

Still, the fact that American citizens took up arms against our government is not talked about in decisive terms by everyone. There remain at least two sides to the argument. But what exactly is up for debate?

Some pundits, politicians and others treat it as if the people who gathered to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and attack a constitutional democracy were simply having a very bad day.

They speak as if there is an angle that justifies the clear view of American citizens forcefully entering the building, attacking police officers, and stealing and destroying government property.

It was wrong regardless of their false reasoning that the election was stolen from them and, therefore, they must take back their country.

They sought to "make America great again" by taking the country back to the better and simpler times experienced by European Americans.

This campaign slogan of the former president — abbreviated as MAGA — provided an identity for his followers as he strung them along with an anti-immigrant sentiment and promises to build a border wall.

To remain president, he would use his followers' bodies as his first line of defense.

Julian Borger, world affairs editor for *The Guardian*, wrote on Jan. 9, 2021:

"Witnesses say Trump was oblivious to the gravity of the situation as five died, Congress was violated, and his vice president faced the very real possibility of being lynched."

At least initially, Republican and Democratic lawmakers realized the real danger of Trump's lies when their own safety was put in jeopardy. Later, however, many tamped down the truth.

In his opening statement at the first congressional hearings on the attack, Committee Chair Bennie Thompson said, "We can't sweep what happened under the rug. The American people deserve answers."

He added that the committee's work "must do much more than just look backwards. Because our democracy remains in danger. The conspiracy to thwart the will of the people is not over."

Consequently, we've got to get clear on this. It is a lie to call the attack on democracy just a demonstration, riot or protest. Participants were not just exercising their First Amendment right. And there are no "both sides" to blame.

The insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021 is without comparison. We've never seen anything like it in American history, save the Civil War, which some MAGA supporters are also calling for.

A survey by *The Economist* and YouGov found that 40%, that is 2 in 5 Americans — believe a civil war is likely in the next 10 years.

American psychoanalyst Walter C. Langer, who in 1943 prepared a psychoanalysis of Adolf Hitler, concluded: "People will believe a big lie sooner than a little one, and if you repeat it frequently enough, people will sooner or later believe it."

Journalists and commentators initially struggled to call Trump a liar or to describe his gross exaggerations and outright denials of reality as lies. But by the end of his presidency, they were keeping a running number, counting 30,573 lies over four years.

How many of Trump's lies do his followers believe? The number is uncertain but the most important one, often referred to as "The Big Lie," is that the election was stolen: 70% of Republicans still believe this to be true according to multiple polls.

Film producer Jeffery Robinson makes his "most important case" in *Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America*. The film opens with Robinson on a stage in front of a crowd, where he begins:

"If you have ever owned a slave, please raise your hand. (And there is not one hand anywhere going up in this theater.) Slavery is not our fault. We didn't do it. We didn't cause it. It's not our responsibility. But it is our shared history. And when we try to turn it into something that it's not, when we try to make more light of it than it was, then we are denying who we really are, and we are impeding our ability to truly move forward as a community or as a nation."

The same can be said of the January 6 insurrection. We can either tell the truth or keep lying to ourselves and others. Either way, the truth is already out. NFJ

—Starlette Thomas directs the Raceless Gospel Initiative for Good Faith Media.

If Nicole Kidman Led the Call to Worship

"Somehow heartbreak feels good in a place like this."

By Brett Younger

She walks into the theater, watches four films, and pledges her love for movies. The AMC ad starring Nicole Kidman — who has probably not set foot in a regular movie theater in a long time — is a minute long.

After a year of the ad preceding every AMC movie, some moviegoers recite it with her. They could have memorized the Gettysburg Address, but why do that when you can learn a movie ad?

They get excited when Nicole glides through the rain and mist into the theater. She walks up the stairs without using the handrail: "I've got this."

She continues: "We come to this place for magic. We come to AMC theaters to laugh, to cry, to care. Because we need that, all of us. That indescribable feeling we get when the lights begin to dim and we go somewhere we've never been before.

"Not just entertained, but somehow reborn together. Dazzling images on a huge silver screen. Sound that I can feel.

"Somehow, heartbreak feels good in a place like this. Our heroes feel like the best part of us, and stories feel perfect and powerful. Because here they are."

Fans have suggested that Kidman deserves an Oscar for this mini-movie about the magic of movies. The sequel has already been written.

But others have raised questions. She walks into the theater wearing a rain coat that disappears. Maybe she is so rich she just throws it away. She walks to the second-to-the-last row of the theater, and then she's magically seated up front.

She says, "We need that, all of us" when she is by herself in the theater. You might assume she has chosen an unpopular film. But we see her watching four blockbusters — which would run more than eight hours if seen together. If she got to the theater at 6:00 p.m. — it was pretty dark in the parking lot — she wouldn't be leaving until after 2:00 am.

Nicole says, "We go somewhere we've never been before," during *Jurassic World*, which is one of five sequels to *Jurassic Park*. It is not somewhere we have never been before. And 35 seconds into the ad, a soft drink miraculously appears in the cupholder next to her.

But even with these challenging questions, the ad is, for many, a spiritual experience. We have to ask, "What if instead of welcoming us to a theater, Nicole was welcoming us to church?"

Imagine Nicole in her stylish, silver-striped pantsuit offering the call to worship:

"We come to this place for magic. We come to this sanctuary to laugh, to cry, to care, to wander back and forth at the back because we got here late and someone is in our pew, to wonder why they don't sing the hymns we like, to mumble the Lord's Prayer, to cough during the silent prayers, to fake a smile during the passing of the peace, to pay no attention to the announcements so that we can complain about not knowing about something that was announced, to look for typos in the order of worship and unlit bulbs in the chandelier, to panic a little when we're 45 minutes in and wish we had gone to the bathroom right before worship or skipped the second cup of coffee, to lose focus during the parts of the sermon that drag, and yet to wake up enough to laugh, to cry, to care. Because we need that, all of us.

"There are sounds we can feel. That indescribable feeling when the choir begins to sing. We go places we've never been before. Not just entertained, but somehow reborn together.

"We see dazzling images on the huge silver screen of our imagination: a world where an old man builds an ark when there's not a cloud in the sky, where a teenager kills a giant with a slingshot, where a young widow leaves her home country to take care of her widowed mother-in-law, where a young man marries a young mother whose child isn't his, where angels sing at the birth of the poor child, where 12 people drop what they are doing to follow him, where water turns into wine, and where the dead come back to life.

"Somehow heartbreak feels good in a place like this. Our heroes feel like the best part of us, and stories feel powerful. Because here they are." NFJ

—Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Nurturing FAITH™ BIBLE STUDIES

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

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

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

Thanks, sponsors! *These Bible studies are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!*

IN THIS ISSUE

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Jan. 1, 2023

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

It's Always Time

In 1961, a folk singer named Pete Seeger was writing a lot of protest songs, but his publisher wrote to complain that he couldn't sell them. Frustrated, Seeger responded by turning to Eccl. 3:3-8, rearranging some of the words, and pairing them with a melody.

Seeger recorded a live version of the song in 1962, but it garnered little attention until 1965, when the Byrds took "Turn, Turn, Turn" to the top of the charts. Ironically, with the Civil Rights Movement and tension over Vietnam in high gear, the tune still fit into the protest genre. If there was a time for everything, peace must be on the horizon.

The man who wrote Ecclesiastes 3 was protesting, too, but his complaint was entirely different: he was angry with life, and he found little comfort in thinking of it as ordered and predictable.

A Classic Poem (vv. 1-8)

The author of Ecclesiastes, who called himself Qoheleth, does not come across as a happy man. An old tradition identifies the author as Solomon, but David's son could hardly have written Ecclesiastes. It is likely that the author was a person of some means, but not the richest man who ever lived, though he pretended to be in a brief royal fiction designed to emphasize his frustration with life (1:12-2:26).

> *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... (Eccl. 3:1)*

Qoheleth began and ended his writing with a motto most familiar from the King James Version: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity" (1:2, 12:8). The word translated "vanity" is the Hebrew word *hevel*, which describes a breath or vapor that quickly disappears, as on a cold day.

Qoheleth was not your average wisdom teacher. He wrote beautifully, mostly in a sort of lyric prose that occasionally morphed into poetry. He began his loosely organized teachings with a reflection on the futility of life (1:3-11): generations of people, like seasons of the year, come and go. The sun comes up and goes down, while cycles of wind and weather repeat themselves year after year. All the streams run to the sea, but the sea is never full. People live only to be forgotten, he concluded.

The old sage followed that reflection with a story of a rich and powerful king who could do, have, or try anything he wanted. After various adventures in excess – the sort of things people might expect to make for a happy life – he concluded there was nothing new under the sun and nothing to be gained from human toil, for "all was vanity and a chasing after wind" (2:11).

That pessimistic note brought Qoheleth to the first formal poetry in his book. Whether he composed it himself or quoted a previously existing verse is unknown. The poem explores the notion of a time and season for everything (vv. 3-8). It consists of 14 antithetical pairs arranged into seven couplets in which the first and second lines are related. Each pair includes two things that seem mutually exclusive at any given moment, but all of which are common life experiences.

There is "a time to be born and a time to die," the poet said, "a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted" (v. 2). Like crops that are sown and later harvested, human life is marked with a beginning and an ending. No one is exempt.

Verse 3 reflects a reality of human culture in which conflict seems inevitable, so that there is "a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up" (v. 4). The terms for breaking down and building up are drawn from construction, especially the building or breaking down of protective walls (Isa. 5:5, 49:7; Ps. 80:12). Neither killing people nor destroying good walls is desirable, but in this world it happens.

Both weeping and laughter have their place and appointed time, often related to mourning and dancing (v. 4). There is much in this world to make us sad or melancholy, but also much to cause rejoicing. Neither puritanical seriousness nor excessive frivolity would fit Qoheleth's reality, in which both sorrow and gladness have their place.

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The imagery of v. 5 has given rise to much speculation. The poet compares times for throwing or gathering stones to "a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing."

Farmers typically cleared stones from a field to prepare for planting (Isa. 5:2), often using them to build a protective wall.

A war story in 2 Kgs. 3:19, 25 reflects a custom of ruining enemies' fields by throwing stones into them, but neither custom has an apparent connection with human hugs or the lack of them. Rabbinic interpreters took "throwing stones" as a euphemism for ejaculation during sexual intercourse, and "gathering stones" as a reference to periodic abstinence (*Midrash Rabbah Qoheleth* 3.5.1). The remainder of the poem avoids metaphors, but this interpretation offers an apt comparison to embracing another, or to refraining from it.

Verse 6 contrasts seeking and losing with keeping and throwing away. On the surface, both relate to personal property. If something has been lost, there is a time to seek it, but also a time to give it up as lost. As possessions of differing values or usefulness pile up in our homes, we must decide what to keep and what to discard. One might extend the truism to abstractions such as ambition or love: there is a time to go after something (or someone), and a time to let go. That may be beyond the poet's intent, however.

The opposing pairs of ripping/sewing and silence/speaking (v. 7) may seem unrelated, but it helps to recall that the tearing of one's garments was a public symbol of mourning (see Gen. 37:29, 34; 2 Sam. 1:11-12; 2 Kgs. 2:11-12; Job 1:20; and others). Clothes were handmade and not easily replaced: when mourning was over, torn clothing would be repaired. Perhaps the poet had in mind the loud ululations and other cries of grief that often accompany mourning: a time would come when weeping would give way to silence.

The poem concludes with a more obvious pair of antithetical behaviors: "a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace" (v. 8). We would like to live in a world where love and peace thrive, but the cold reality is that there are things that inspire hatred, and there are times when war is not only the lesser of two evils, but also what is necessary to preserve the liberty to enjoy peace and love.

An eternal puzzle (vv. 9-15)

While the poet's ponderings on time and human actions may be assuring to readers, it was no comfort to Qoheleth. God is not mentioned in the poem, but Qoheleth presumed that God had set the world and its realities in place, leaving humans to live in a situation they could not understand.

Human toil (v. 9) could be seen as a reference to the ordinary activities of going through life, "the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with" (v. 10), and Qoheleth wondered what gain or profit anyone could find at the end of it. While there was a time for everything, it was God who "has made everything suitable for its time," not humans (v. 11a). As in 1:4-11, where he bemoaned the cyclical nature of life, Qoheleth knew that he might bounce between mourning and dancing or tearing down and building up, but if it was God who determined the times, Qoheleth could see no gain in it.

The real kicker for Qoheleth, however, was that God "has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (v. 11b). The NRSV's "past and future" translates a word that usually means "eternity," and the phrase "a sense of" is not in the text, but is added for clarity. A more literal translation could be "eternity, too, he has put in their hearts, but so that humans cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end."

Perhaps Qoheleth's frustration was a belief that God had given humans an innate sense of eternity – of a divine reality beyond one's days of earthly toil – but had not given them an ability to understand what God is about.

This led the sage to find some comfort in the pleasures of life that he *could* understand: "I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (vv. 12-13; see also 2:24, 5:18-19, 8:15, 9:7-10).

Qoheleth's philosophy was not limited to "eat, drink, and be merry," but he firmly believed that God intended for humans to enjoy what pleasures they could, even if they could not understand the full meaning of their existence. Trying to comprehend God's work leads more to awe than to understanding (v. 14), for only God can stand in the present while seeing into the past and the future (v. 15). The human task is to reverence God and appreciate the lives God has given.

This may seem depressing, but Qoheleth was skeptical of the prophets, and lived long before the time of Jesus. If he had known the gospel message of eternal life through Christ that we learn from the New Testament, do you think he would have sung a different tune? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Jan. 8, 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9

Bringing Justice

We live in a world where people long for justice, but often disagree over what justice is. Some think "justice" means having their way, even if others suffer for their benefit. Others believe justice should focus on what is best for everyone. Today's text concerns a longed-for deliverer who would bring justice for the oppressed people of Israel – and more?

God's Servant

Events and life-situations described in the book of Isaiah reflect at least three distinct settings: its prophesies address issues in Judah during the 8th century BCE, in Babylon during the 6th century exile, and back in Jerusalem following the exile. As different challenges arose during this extensive period, two or three different prophets preached in the name of Isaiah, addressing needs that arose in their varying historical contexts.

Isaiah 42 falls within a section commonly known as "Second Isaiah." Isaiah of Jerusalem, responsible for much of Isaiah 1–39, preached during the 8th century, charging the people of Israel with abandoning God's ways and promising judgment if the people did not repent and change their ways. Judgment came to the northern kingdom in 722 BCE, when the Assyrians took over their land, and for the southern kingdom in 597 BCE, when the Babylonians conquered Judah and began sending waves of its citizens into exile.

> *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa. 42:1)*

A prophet in the model of Isaiah arose in Babylon during the latter years of the exile, offering hope to a bedraggled people who may have wondered if they would ever see their homeland again. Commonly known as "Second Isaiah," his message is found in Isaiah 40–55. His preaching included four poems commonly called "Servant Songs," the first of which is this week's text.

A song of justice (vv. 1-4)

People understand the power of armies, force, and control. When ancient prophets spoke of better days and a restoration for Israel, many imagined that a military leader like David would arise and lead them to conquer their enemies by force of battle. Some prophecies seem to speak of such a king, including some in Isaiah (chs. 9, 11). They speak of a coming king who would be great and would bring peace to the earth, but they say little about how he would accomplish the task. Many people assumed that the deliverer would be a military messiah.

They were wrong.

Isaiah of the exile speaks of a coming ruler as *God's* servant: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (v. 1).

This single verse tells us several things about the servant. First, he is *God's* servant. It was not uncommon for prophets to describe Israel as God's servant people, or to criticize them for being prideful and self-indulgent, rather than living humbly before God.

Hebrew poetry is based on repetition often using parallel statements for emphasis or explanation. Here, "my chosen" is parallel to "my servant," underscoring God's intentional choice of the servant. Likewise, "in whom my soul delights" parallels "whom I uphold." God not only supports the servant, but also takes delight in doing so.

The second couplet of the verse describes the manner by which God empowers the servant ("I have put my spirit upon him"), and the end result of their partnership ("he will bring forth justice to the nations").

The Hebrew word underlying "spirit" literally means "breath" or "wind." The scriptures speak of rare individuals who experienced the power of the "spirit of the LORD" (*ruah-Yahweh*): for example, Gideon (Judg. 6:34), Samson (Judg. 13:25), Saul (1 Sam. 10:10), and David (1 Sam. 16:13).

The spirit of the LORD came upon people such as these during times of oppression, empowering them to prevail over Israel's enemies and, ideally, to restore justice. The Hebrew concept of *mishpat* (justice) is more than a legal concept. True justice involves faithfulness to God and fairness toward others.

To bring justice is not just to make sure all people get what they deserve, but to ensure that everyone has what they need. The text literally says that the servant will "make justice go out to the nations."

While the first verse might lead hearers to expect a spirit-emboldened warrior-servant like David, the next two verses indicate that he will not bring justice through ruthless force, but with gentle tenderness toward the "bruised reed" and "smoldering wick," graphic references to people who are weak and downtrodden. They are like reeds that are bent but not dead, or a flame that is smoldering but has not died out (vv. 2-3). The servant will encourage them appropriately.

Those words would have been comforting to the people of Israel, who remembered proud traditions of having once been a great nation. As Isaiah of the exile proclaimed God's word, he recognized their weakened, wounded, uncertain condition. The servant would understand the needs of his people and bring justice coupled with tenderness.

Believers in our own time might become more compassionate people and more effective servants for Christ if we could begin to understand that justice involves far more than getting – or giving – someone what they deserve. God's justice is always tempered by grace to offer what people need most. Often, their greatest need is forgiveness. Sadly, even those who delight most in singing "Amazing Grace" can be remarkably stingy when it comes to extending grace to others.

One might think a servant who is characterized by gentleness might be weak or easily defeated, but Isaiah insisted that "He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth" (v. 4a). The servant would press forward, working in his own quiet way, "until he has established justice in the earth."

The promise of justice is good news for any people. The expectation that "the coastlands wait for his teaching" (v. 4b) extends hope that the servant's work would extend beyond Israel to the coastlands on either side, and beyond. In the ancient world, where few people traveled far, a seafaring journey to "the coastlands" expressed a thought not unlike "to the ends of the earth."

A call from God (vv. 5-9)

With v. 5, the divine speech shifts from a third person description of what the servant will do to a direct address from God. Some scholars see this as a wholly different oracle, while others perceive it as a continuation of the song. The God who has created all things (v. 5) speaks in v. 6: "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations …"

Who is God addressing in these verses? The pronoun "you" is singular, and some see vv. 5-9 as a direct address to the servant. John D.W. Watts has argued that the "servant" in this case is Cyrus, the Persian king who would soon conquer Babylon and set the Israelites free (*Isaiah 34–66*, vol. 25 of Word Biblical Commentary [Zondervan, 2005], 660).

Others judge that the oracle addresses the people of Judah and Israel. John Goldingay notes: "The last singular 'you' was Jacob-Israel in 41:8-16, who has presumably been the implicit addressee throughout. In other words, in verses 1-4 God was saying to Jacob-Israel, 'You know you are my servants? Well, this is what my servant is destined to be and do'" (*Isaiah*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series [Baker Books, 2012], 241).

Since neither Cyrus nor the Hebrew people fully carried out the commission given in vv. 6-7, later Jewish interpreters moved the message forward and pictured the one addressed as a future messiah. New Testament writers believed Jesus to be that messiah, one who came as "a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (vv. 6b-7). Note the similarity of this passage to Isa. 61:1-2, which Jesus cited as a sort of mission statement in Luke 4:16-21 – adding "recovery of sight to the blind" to the release of prisoners, a combination found in Isa. 42:7, but not in Isa. 61:1-2.

The passage closes with an affirmation of Yahweh's identity as the only true god, the one who controls the earth's destiny, and who can declare "new things … before they spring forth" (vv. 8-9).

The first Servant Song speaks of one chosen and empowered by God to bring about justice, not by rude power, but by gentle grace. It expresses a hope that begins in every hurting, wounded heart, and it extends as far as the mind can imagine.

The people of Israel saw this as a mystery wrapped in a riddle. The people of Christ see it as the foretelling of one who could die on a cross but not be crushed by it, one who would rise from the grave to establish justice through all the earth.

Though Christ-followers focus on the Suffering Servant they see in Jesus, there remains a corporate aspect to the text: if Christ's justice is to extend throughout the earth, it will be through the gracious and compassionate presence of Christ's persistent followers. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Jan. 15, 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7

Bearing Light

Do you consider yourself to be a gracious person? How far, do you think, should grace extend? Should everyone "get what they deserve"? That question has long troubled both Israel and the church. Is God's grace limited to a select few, or available to all? Isaiah's second Servant Song suggests that God's grace, light, and salvation are intended for everyone.

The servant as Israel (vv. 1-4)

Today's text is the second of four texts in Isaiah that are called "Servant Songs" because they speak of a servant of God who will bring deliverance, not just to Israel, but to all people. The first Servant Song (42:1-4, or possibly 42:1-9) speaks *of* the servant and possibly *to* the servant, but in the second Servant Song (49:1-6), the servant speaks for himself and of his relationship with God. That much is clear: identifying the servant is another matter.

The overall message of Second Isaiah assumes that the descendants of Jacob, the people of Israel, are called to be God's servants, living in faithful obedience and serving as an exemplary light to other nations (recall Gen. 12:3).

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> *It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. (Isa. 49:6)*

With the Hebrews unable or unwilling to live out their calling, however, the prophet raises the possibility of another who will do what Jacob-Israel has not done. In the second Servant Song, the prophet speaks for the nation and appears to identify himself as the servant, standing in for the people.

Two attributes contribute to the unity of the poem. First, it begins and ends with a reference to all peoples, from "coastlands and peoples from far away" in the opening words to "the end of the earth" in the closing line. These act as bookends, binding together what comes between and emphasizing the theme of God's grace to all people.

"Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!" addressed the nations beyond Israel (v. 1a). The word translated as "coastlands" (NRSV) is sometimes rendered as "islands" (KJV, NIV11, NASB20). It refers not so much to a beach as to the border of a land that touches the sea, a place where mariners put into port. From the very small perspective of the world known to ancient Israel, the reference would be to nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea. They could only imagine the "peoples from far away" who were beyond.

A second stylistic touch is that the first verse of each section of the song includes the idea that God's purpose for the servant extended from the womb onward (vv. 1, 5). The belief that God had a special relationship with some people "from the womb" is common in scripture (Gen. 25:23, Judg. 16:17, Ps. 22:9, Jer. 1:5, Luke 1:41). It is found with reference to Israel in Isa. 44:2, 24.

"The LORD called me before I was born," said the prophet/servant. "While I was in my mother's womb he named me" (v. 1b). And what was the servant's name? It is found in v. 3: "And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'" Perceiving the servant as the people of Israel may seem a bit troublesome, because we commonly think of the servant as an individual called to restore Israel, as in v. 5 of this same song. As we've noted previously, it is possible to understand the people of Israel and Judah as God's intended servant, though they had failed to become the nation-blessing witness God wanted them to be. Thus, we might perceive a singular servant being called to do on Israel's behalf what the people could not do for themselves.

Whether we see the servant's identity as individual or corporate, the self-description in v. 2 may seem surprisingly warlike, since other texts describe the servant as gentle and non-combative (Isa 42:3, 50:6, 53:7). In this text, however, the weapons are words and their targets are not to be killed, but converted. The metaphor of the mouth as a sword when filled with the word of Yahweh is also found in Jer. 5:14, 23:29; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; and Rev. 1:16. "In the shadow of his hand he hid me" suggests that God has waited until the appropriate time to "draw the sword" of the servant's speech.

Similarly, the servant is like a polished arrow, an archer's favorite and most accurate shaft. Again, the servant has been hidden away in Yahweh's quiver, to be withdrawn and unleashed with the message of salvation when the time was right.

In v. 3, any mystery about the intended identity of the servant is made clear: "And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'" That was the ideal, but Israel had not lived up to God's call.

The prophet, speaking on Israel's behalf, stated the people's case with apparent sarcasm: "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward is with my God" (v. 4).

Israel-in-exile voiced similar laments, as in Ps 137:1: "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion."

In the prophet's words, the people admit no guilt and acknowledge no failure. They see themselves as victims, claiming to have poured out their strength in service to God for nothing, since they remain in captivity. From this perspective, their conclusion is not so much a statement of faith as the wishful thinking of pious and self-interested pretense: "yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God" (v 4b).

The servant beyond Israel (vv. 5-6)

God responded to the servant's lament with an even greater challenge, one that extends beyond the tasks "to bring Jacob back to him" and to see "that Israel might be gathered to him" (v. 5a). The call would extend to all nations, and for this calling the prophet believed God would provide both opportunity and ability: "I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength" (v. 5b).

Restoring Israel alone might seem to be an impossible dream, but the servant learned that when God's grace is involved, restoring Israel alone was far too small a goal. Thus, God said "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v. 6).

Consider those words. God's grace, expressed through the work of the servant, shines as a beacon of light and hope to all the nations. Servant Israel's job was to quit blaming God for the nation's failures, stop pretending to have been faithful, and start proclaiming God's salvation.

Whether servant Israel would prove faithful or not, God's purpose remained – and remains – unchanged: "that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." In v. 5, the servant comes across as defeated, unable to do the "small thing" of restoring Israel. Israel had rejected God. Yet, God appears to have rejected the people's rejection. Neither God nor God's cause would be defeated. God *will* be glorified, the servant *will* be a light to the nations, God's salvation *will* reach to the end of the earth.

Could it be that God has in mind a salvation that goes beyond the limitations we typically draw around saving grace?

In Isa. 45:22-23, the prophet spoke for God:

"Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.'"

Matthew 18:14 credits Jesus with saying "Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost."

The testimony of Luke 3:6 is that "All mankind will see God's salvation." Especially interesting, given the emphasis upon light in Isa. 49:6, is the claim of John 1:9: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."

John's gospel also quotes Jesus as saying, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself" (12:32), and "I did not come to judge the world, but to save it" (12:47). Is it possible that God might reject even our rejection, as Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland argue in *If Grace Is True* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004)? "You did not choose me," John quotes Jesus as saying, "but I chose you" (John 15:16).

Contemplating such ideas can be unsettling or even downright disturbing for those whose basic view of soteriology is "accept Jesus – or else." Other biblical texts suggest differing destinies depending upon one's response to God, and they must also be considered. God's desire, however, is never in doubt: that all be saved.

It may be helpful to remember that just about everything Jesus said and did was unsettling and disturbing to the religious establishment of his day. In our time, when some who claim to be Christians seem intent on pulling in the stakes and narrowing the parameters of grace, it is refreshing to be reminded that God's purpose is for God's people to be a light to all the nations, "that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

We may not know exactly what those prophetic words mean, but we can hope they mean exactly what they say. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Jan. 22, 2023

Isaiah 9:1-7

Multiplying Joy

Have you ever lost power for a significant period of time? Hurricanes or violent thunderstorms sometimes leave communities without electricity for hours or days after a storm. When that happens, we don't just worry about food in the freezer, but when darkness comes, we long for light.

Our text speaks of people who lived in a dark time, when national oppression and personal depression clouded their vision and dimmed their spirits. What brought the darkness? Would they ever see the light? And does it matter to us?

A troubled time (v. 1)

Today's text moves back in time from the previous two weeks, and to understand Isaiah's message, we must take time to consider his historical context. We get a glimpse of that in 9:1, which follows directly on the final verse of the previous chapter (8:22). There, Isaiah speaks of a people so defeated that, whether they look upward to the sky or downward to the earth, they see only darkness.

The political setting of Isaiah 7–11 appears to reflect the aftermath of a devastating invasion by the Assyrians,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. (Isa. 9:2)

probably around 733 BCE. It speaks of "distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish," and the threat of "thick darkness" (8:22), all of which are likely metaphors of oppressive enemy action. These images carry over into 9:1, which surprisingly predicts better days to come: "But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish" was spoken to the northern tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, the first to be overrun and deported by the Assyrian forces.

Despite the gloomy conditions of Assyrian oppression, Isaiah saw light ahead, a "latter time" when God would "make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." These may be names given to northern regions by the Assyrians. "The way of the sea," also the name of the main north/south highway, may describe a province along the Mediterranean coast. "The land beyond the Jordan" probably refers to Gilead, located east of the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee. "Galilee of the nations" likely describes the central area around Megiddo. Its very title reveals how much its population had been mixed: the Assyrians not only sent Israelites away from the land, but also brought in people from other countries to resettle the area.

The use of Assyrian terms for those areas speaks to the extent to which Israel had lost them, yet Isaiah spoke of a day when things would change: the pervasive darkness and gloom would give way to light and hope.

A vision of hope (vv. 2-5)

The poetic oracle of vv. 2-7 has been described in ways ranging from a psalm of thanksgiving to an accession hymn to a royal birth announcement. However we might classify the text, it clearly offers a hopeful outlook to Isaiah's audience.

Verse 2 picks up on the contrast between darkness and light from v. 1, declaring that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined."

The verbs imply past action, though the prophet wrote in a time of darkness and appears to be speaking of future events. In a fashion typical of Hebrew poetry, the second line advances and intensifies the thought of the first: "darkness" becomes "deep darkness." But, the people "have seen a great light" because "light has shined on them." As the opposite of darkness, light promises the hope of salvation.

With v. 3, the prophet shifts from a third person observation to a second person address, praising God for having "multiplied the nation" and "increased its joy." The word translated as "multiplied" doesn't necessarily refer to a growing population; it could also mean "you have made the nation great" or "you have enlarged the nation," which may catch the meaning better.

Whether the "enlargement" is in people or in power, the result is rejoicing. Isaiah sees a nation walking out of darkness and into the light, celebrat-

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ing newfound strength and confidence. Two metaphors call up joyful images: successful farmers beaming at the sight of a banner harvest, and victorious soldiers dividing the booty taken from their vanquished enemies (v. 3b).

The military metaphor morphs into reality with v. 4, as the prophet proclaims freedom from Israel's foes, whose "yoke," "bar," and "rod" – all symbols of oppression – have been (or will be) broken in a victory as unexpected as Gideon's unlikely triumph over the Midianites (Judges 6–7). In the heady aftermath of victory, Isaiah predicts celebratory bonfires built of bloody clothes and battle boots (v. 5) – but such happy times are not yet.

How could the prophet's suffering hearers believe that such things would happen? What sign of hope might mark a turning point in the fortunes of Israel and Judah?

A child of promise (vv. 6-7)

As in 7:10-17, Isaiah finds hope in the birth of a child. Indeed, he speaks as if the child has already been born: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us …" (v. 6). Did Isaiah have in mind the birth of Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz who would later become one of Judah's most fondly remembered kings?

Whether or not Isaiah was thinking of Hezekiah, there is no question that he had in mind a descendant of David who would lead with authority and preside over an era of unprecedented glory for the nation. Even so, how do we reconcile the thought of an earthly ruler with the expansive titles he attributed to the coming king?

"Wonderful Counselor" raises no flags, for it simply implies something akin to "Extraordinary Strategist" or "Wise Advisor," an appropriate characteristic for a king in a time of war. But what are we to make of the name "Mighty God"? Although kings in Egypt and Mesopotamia sometimes claimed to be gods, this was not the case in Israel. Biblical coronation hymns suggest, however, a tradition that God "adopted" the king (see Ps. 2:7).

Many Hebrew names include God (*'el*) or Yahweh (usually *–iah* or *-jah*) as an integral element. For example, "Isaiah" means "Salvation of Yahweh," "Elijah" means "my God is Yahweh," and Hezekiah means something similar to "Strengthened by Yahweh."

The title "Mighty God" (*'el gibbôr*) is spelled as two words, however, and the same term is used in 10:21 with clear reference to God. This leads us to assume that the king in question, at the very least, bears a very close relationship with God.

The title "Everlasting Father" offers a conundrum for interpretation. It might be intended to express hope that the coming king, who would be in the Davidic line, would represent the everlasting dynasty promised to David in 2 Samuel.

Like "Wonderful Counselor," the term "Prince of Peace" raises few questions. People would naturally admire a king who brought peace and security for his subjects.

With v. 7, the prophet clearly turns to the future. He sees the coming king's authority and rule of peace growing continually, endlessly, a tangible fulfillment of the promise that David's descendants would rule over an everlasting kingdom.

The new king would bring more than security, however: he would rule with the ideals of justice and righteousness "from this time onward and forevermore."

Such promises sound too good to be true, don't they? Isaiah knew that his hearers would be skeptical, too. Thus, he concludes with the assuring claim that "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."

How do we interpret this text? We can see how it functioned as an exercise in hope for troubled Judahites in the 8th century BCE, but we are much more likely to remember it from quotations in the New Testament. Isaiah may have hoped that Hezekiah would prove to be a delivering king, but that did not happen. As time went by, later believers transposed his prophetic hope to a future messiah. When Jesus made his home in Capernaum, Matthew interpreted it as a fulfillment of Isa. 9:1-2, that light would shine on the people of Zebulon and Naphtali (Matt. 4:13-16). Surprisingly, the gospels do not attribute the titles in 9:6-7 to Jesus: perhaps they realized that the eternal reign of peace still awaits fulfillment.

This text challenges us to do more than celebrate Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's hope. Rather than simply spiritualizing Isaiah's message, may we remember that many people of our world also face days of darkness and gloom. Forlorn immigrants from war-torn countries long for light and security, for justice and righteousness that are not just a future hope, but a present reality.

As children of God and followers of the Prince of Peace, we are called to devote our best efforts toward bringing peace and justice – security and equality – to the world in which we live. What are specific ways in which we can touch the lives of others with grace, delivering them from oppression?

As we recall Isaiah's promise that "the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this," may we remember that we are counted among the hosts of those whom God has called to live as model citizens of the Kingdom, working for peace and justice throughout the earth. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Jan. 29, 2023

Micah 6:1-8

Defining Expectations

Expectations matter, and sometimes we may feel overwhelmed by them. Are you a person who expects a lot from other people – or from yourself? Do you change your desired behavior based on what others expect of you at work, at church, or in your family? Those questions are important, but a larger and more significant question looms: What does God expect of us?

A challenging lawsuit (vv. 1-5)

Fortunately, the Bible offers a very good answer. It is found in the writings of the prophet Micah, who lived and worked in Israel during the 8th century before Christ. Micah, like his contemporaries Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah of Jerusalem, often pointed out how Israel had fallen short of God's expectations for them.

In a speech that opens ch. 6, Micah portrayed a dramatic scene in which God called Israel to court with the mountains and hills, the "enduring foundations of the earth," as both witnesses and jury (6:1-2).

Acting as God's prosecuting attorney, Micah asked "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!" (v. 3).

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:8)

Although the people of Israel were being charged, Micah began by asking why they could possibly be complaining against God. Were they tired of waiting for an easier life, when their present troubles were their own fault? Was God not living up to their expectations of a carefree life?

Like other prophets, Micah pointed to the many ways in which Yahweh had been faithful to Israel. God had brought the people up from Egypt, providing Moses as their leader, Aaron as their priest, and Miriam as a prophet (v. 4).

When King Balak of Moab paid the pagan shaman Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel, Yahweh forced him to speak only good of the people's future (v. 5a). When the people were finally ready to enter the land of promise, God led them from Shittim, their last camp east of the Jordan, to Gilgal, their first camp in Canaan (v. 5b). Had the people forgotten these things?

A poor defense (vv. 6-7)

Micah believed the people had failed to appreciate God's blessings and had ignored God's guidance. He perceived that they had substituted religion for righteousness. They understood rituals, but not respect. They were quite accomplished at religion: they worshiped at the temple, sacrificed animals, and paid requisite tithes, but the way they lived was a different matter.

Micah saw through the trappings of 8th-century Israel's religious practices to recognize that the people had reduced their religion to a system of bribing God with prayers and sacrifices in hopes that God would adopt a positive attitude toward them, but it wasn't God's attitude that needed changing. It was theirs.

The people's only defense, which Micah quoted sarcastically in vv. 6-7, was locked into the categories of ritual and sacrifice. "What do you expect of us?" he portrayed them as asking. "How do you want us to approach you? With whole burnt offerings? With year-old calves? With thousands of rams, or tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall we sacrifice our firstborn children as payment of our transgressions?" (vv. 6-7).

Whole burnt offerings, the "'*ōlâ*" or "holocaust" sacrifice, called for an entire animal, usually a young sheep or goat, to be burned on the altar. These were offered less often than *shelamîm* offerings, in which God was offered the blood and visceral fat, while worshipers and the priests cooked and ate the meat. Did God want a higher percentage of whole burnt offerings, or for more of them to be year-old calves, which were more valuable than younger animals?

With increasing sarcasm, Micah imagined them upping the ante. Does Yahweh want *thousands* of rams? *Ten thousand* rivers of valuable olive oil? Would God never be pleased? Should they go all the way and sacrifice their first-born children to atone for their sins?

The answer, of course, was "No" on all counts. Child sacrifice was expressly

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forbidden by the law (Lev. 18:21, 20:2-5; Deut. 18:10), and the prophets strongly condemned it (Jer. 7:31, 19:5; Ezek. 16:20-21, 20:26; Isa. 57:5).

Micah understood that God was not interested in more ritual sacrifices or more religious acts. God wanted Israel to be righteous, not just religious, and that desire has not changed.

Christians are not called to religion so much as to a right relationship with God and others. As Ralph L. Smith put it, "So when we come before God, we must remember that it is not so much what is in our hands but what is in our hearts that finds expression in our conduct that is important" (*Micah–Malachi*, vol. 32 of Word Biblical Commentary [Zondervan, 1984], 51).

What God expects (v. 8)

And so, in God's behalf, Micah offered a remarkable response that countless believers have memorized as a guideline for life: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8).

We live in a world where people practice prejudice, love selfishness, and walk arrogantly as their own gods. But God expects these acts from us as we go out to put our stamp on the world: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before God.

Micah did not claim that this was any new revelation. "He has (already) told you," he said. The teaching of Moses, the 10 Commandments, and the proclamation of other prophets had declared the kind of attitudes and actions that God expects.

What does it mean to "do justice"? Micah used the word "*mishpat*." It is a term that could describe a legal decision or judgment, but more often referred to actions that are right and just for all people.

Amos, Micah's contemporary, preached along similar themes. In words that are more familiar to us from a speech by Martin Luther King Jr. than from Amos, he also called on Israel to stop putting their trust in elaborate religious rituals. Instead, he said, "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

It is so easy for custom and culture to blind us to injustice. In some communities, prejudice is in the air that people breathe. Popular "reality" television competitions depict settings in which lying, cheating, backstabbing, and betrayal are all okay because "that's how you play the game." But we know that life is not just a game, and others do matter.

Justice begins with respect for others, including those who look different, those who talk differently, and even those who have different ideas. As King famously said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Now what is our motivation for practicing genuine justice? Are we to go out on a limb and stand up for others just because God said so? Are principles and ideals of justice enough?

Of course not. Micah's audience had the law. They had a clear set of moral and ethical codes to live by, but they weren't following them. That's because real justice cannot be motivated by fear of breaking the law alone. Real justice starts in the heart. It not only respects other people, but also loves them and wants what is best for them.

That's why Micah goes on to say "to do justice, and to *love kindness*." That latter phrase can be translated in different ways. The familiar KJV and the NIV11 say "to love mercy." The NASB20, NET2, and NRSV have "to love kindness." The HCSB has "to love faithfulness." All of these elements are important; it is this kind of faithful, steadfast love that motivates real justice.

Justice and mercy grow directly from a daily walk with God. Micah reminds us that we are called not only to walk with God, but also to walk humbly, modestly, and attentively.

So many problems in our world could be overcome if more of us could learn the art of humility. Any time people are dead certain that they have all the answers, one can be dead certain that strife will follow.

When religious leaders of any persuasion think they have a handle on all truth, or when political leaders think their way is the only way, or when husbands and wives are unwilling to compromise, there *will* be strife. There *will* be hurt. There *will* be pain.

Unless we are willing to admit that we might be wrong about something, or that the reality of a situation might be bigger than we yet comprehend, there is no room for change or growth in our own life, or in our relationships with others, or even in our relationship with God.

We can't know all the answers *and* walk humbly with God at the same time. God is far beyond our comprehension, bigger than what is revealed in the Bible, surpassing our imagination. There is much God wants to teach us, but we cannot learn if we are not teachable, and we are not teachable if we do not have some humility about us.

We may wonder about many things, but we don't have to wonder what God expects of us.

We are called to *do justice*, to *love kindness*, to *walk humbly* with our God. If we can do that, we can be absolutely sure that our communities, our nation, our world will all be better for it – and that would be a very good thing. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

Feb. 5, 2023

Matthew 5:13-20

Demanding Action

Have you noticed how differently many people see and interpret the same events? We live in the same world, but we may have radically disparate understandings of life in that world. Our cultural biases, levels of aspiration, and general attitudes toward life are formed early and stay late – unless further experiences lead us to reevaluate. That may happen when we move to a different location, go off to college, enter the armed forces, spend time in a different culture, or come face to face with heartache or tragedy. Such things can shift our way of seeing the world.

No one has been a bigger world-shifter than Jesus. With his "beatitudes," Jesus turned traditional ways of thinking upside down. Who would think being poor, grieving, or meek could merit the term "blessed," which can also be translated as "happy"?

Teachings that follow in the Sermon on the Mount also put an interesting twist on the worldviews common to his time. This often put Jesus at odds with those who had a vested interest in preserving traditional views. Jesus' teachings were not out of touch with the heart of Judaism, but were designed to go higher and deeper into a new way of life.

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Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. (Matt. 5:17)

On being salty (v. 13)

In modern English, the word "salty" suggests coarse or vulgar behavior. Salty language is inappropriate for delicate ears. Jesus used the metaphor in a much more positive way, challenging his followers to remain faithful and make the world a better place. "You are the salt of the earth," he said (v. 13a). Salt can be used both to flavor food and to preserve it. In the ancient world, where refrigeration was non-existent, salt was so highly valued and necessary that compensation for Roman soldiers included an allowance for salt: both "salt" and "salary" are derived from sal, the Latin word for salt.

Egyptian, Greek, and Roman physicians used salt as a disinfectant or in healing ointments and poultices. Hebrew midwives or mothers sometimes rubbed newborn babies with salt (Ezek. 16:4), possibly to ward off infection and to symbolize a wish that the child would live a life of integrity. The Israelites thought of salt as a symbol of faithfulness and probity: they were to include salt in their sacrifices and offerings as a "covenant of salt" that called for faithful living (Lev. 2:13, Num. 18:19, 2 Chron. 13:5).

Jesus used the metaphor to challenge his followers to add a lasting and flavorful quality to their communities and the world. As they exhibited the love and character of Christ, they would make life better for all.

What did Jesus mean by the additional phrase, "but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" Today we can buy salt – cheaply – that is pure sodium chloride, often with a bit of iodine added as an easy way to prevent thyroid problems caused by an iodine deficiency.

In our experience, when salt dissolves, it disappears entirely. In 1st-century Palestine, however, much of the salt commonly sold on the street came from the Dead Sea, which has a salt content of nearly 3%, about 10 times more concentrated than ocean water. Less than half of the salt content in Dead Sea water is sodium chloride, however. And, whether collected from aggregates on the shore or evaporated from the water, the salt was typically mixed with sandy grains of gypsum.

Gypsum had the same appearance as the salt, but it did not dissolve or add flavor. Once the salt was dissolved, there might be a residue that had the appearance of salt, but it was not salt, and it was good for nothing other than to be thrown out.

Jesus was all too familiar with people whose faith was all show and no substance. He challenged his followers to be salt, not sand; to live out a faith that had real substance, not just show.

On being light (vv. 14-16)

Believers are to be not only genuine, but also visible. "You are the light of the world," Jesus said. "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel

basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house" (v. 14a, 15). Jesus' point was clear: there's no purpose in lighting a lamp if it's not going to be seen or provide illumination for a useful space.

Jesus lived long before the advent of electricity or even gas lamps. After dark, people lit their homes with small lamps that burned olive oil. The lamps were typically the size of a person's palm, so they could be carried easily from place to place and set on a table or into a niche in the wall. Oil was expensive and not to be wasted: no one would think of lighting a lamp and then hiding it.

John's gospel records Jesus saying, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5), but Jesus knew that he would not always be physically present. His light would need to shine on through his followers. That's why he went on to say "*you* are the light of the world."

As the lights of a hilltop city make it clearly visible to anyone who can see, so his followers were to shine as beacons of goodness and grace and hope. In case they had failed to understand by now, Jesus charged them: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (v. 16).

It's likely that Jesus was familiar with a religious community known as the Essenes, a Jewish sect whose members chose to live in isolation so they could better follow strict guidelines of purity. They sought to be righteous, but remained apart from others, keeping their light to themselves. Jesus wanted his disciples' faithful living to benefit someone other than themselves or even other Jews: they were the light of the world.

Modern believers who hear Jesus today might benefit from comparing the time we spend inside the church with our efforts to bring Christ's light and love into the world. Does our light shine only within the bushel basket of our church building? Others cannot see or experience the light of Christ within us and be inspired to turn toward God if believers do not carry their light – and their good works – into the world.

Jesus and the law (vv. 17-20)

Jesus' teaching often seemed at odds with the traditional laws of Judaism and rabbinic interpretations of the Pentateuch. Some hearers might have responded by thinking that Jesus had come to abolish the law, but that was not the case. Jesus wanted them to understand that his work did not dismiss the law, but fulfilled it in new ways (v. 17).

Jesus' statement that "not one letter or one stroke of a letter" (v. 18) would pass away does not imply that believers should slavishly follow every aspect of the Old Testament law, however: in the following verses, Jesus directly challenged some of those very tenets.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the true fulfillment of the law might involve doing away with or moving past some less important or culturally conditioned aspects of the law: otherwise, Christians would still be commanded to eat kosher and offer animal sacrifices for *yom kippur*, and the Apostle Paul would be spinning in his grave.

To fulfill the law is to understand and live out God's purpose in giving the law. The late Malcolm Tolbert explained it this way:

"God's purpose, as revealed in the Bible, is to create a people who will love and serve him and one another. This purpose was behind God's dealing with Israel, including his giving of the law, and it was brought to fruition in the life of Jesus the Messiah. In this way the law, seen in its totality, is fulfilled" (*Good News from Matthew* [Broadman Press: 1975], 43).

To fulfill the law is neither to be loose nor legalistic with its teachings, but to seek its true meaning through what God has done in Christ. Luke quoted Jesus as agreeing with an expert in the Jewish law that the essence of the law was to love God with all one's being, and to love others as oneself (Luke 10:25-28).

People of Jesus' day regarded the scribes and Pharisees, who sought to fulfill every requirement of an expanded law as being especially righteous – to the extent that they would tithe even from seasoning herbs grown in their gardens. Later, Jesus charged them with hypocrisy: "For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matt. 23:23).

Jesus told his followers that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, but how could one go beyond the legendary righteousness of Judaism's religious all-stars? To illustrate his meaning, Jesus threw out a series of illustrations of how the law had been interpreted in the past, and how the fulfillment of the law through his teaching and work might be different. We will focus on these teachings in the next two lessons.

In the meantime, today's text has given us plenty to think about. Are we bright and salty Christians more righteous than those who practiced professional piety? What are some practical ways we can be salt and light to the people in our lives during this coming week?

The world is waiting. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Feb. 12, 2023

Matthew 5:21-37

Getting Serious

How careful are you when talking with others? Do you worry about hurting people's feelings? You may know people who speak boldly and don't seem to care if they cause offense, while others are careful to leave delicate issues alone. Jesus was known for his compassion and care, but Matthew's gospel suggests that he did not shy away from troublesome topics that might cause consternation.

The collection of teachIngs Matthew has set into Jesus' famed "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5–7) begins with the encouraging "Beatitudes" (5:1-12) before moving to a charge for believers to be salt and light in the world (5:13-16). Jesus then prepared to launch into a series of challenges to current understandings of the law by insisting that his teaching did not violate or abolish the law, but rather established its true intent (5:17-20).

Along the way, Jesus addressed a variety of sensitive subjects: anger (5:21-26), lust (5:27-30), divorce (5:31-32), oaths (5:33-37), revenge (5:38-42), and love (5:43-48).

Today we consider the first four of those topics.

Buckle your seatbelts.

Murder and anger (vv. 21-26)

Everyone understood that murder was against the law (v. 21, Exod. 20:3), but

> *So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:23-24)*

Jesus explained that it was not enough to simply refrain from killing fellow believers. Holding on to anger or rage toward others was also sinful, Jesus said. There is a righteous kind of anger that Jesus would endorse, but this kind of interpersonal anger is not it. Bearing grudges against others may not end in murder, but it results in murderous and harmful feelings.

In the ancient world, where spoken words carried great significance, the act of name-calling was a more serious matter than today. There is nothing magic about using the word "fool" that will make one liable to judgment: the Aramaic word *raqa*' meant something akin to "idiot," in a particularly derogatory sense. Using it was wrong (v. 22).

Note that Jesus is speaking mainly of behavior within the community, toward brothers and sisters. Not being able to see beyond our own anger can escalate into insults and degrading words, and words are weapons. They can kill both reputations and relationships. If believers cannot act with love toward each other, how can they be a witness to the world?

In 1st-century Judaism, character defamation could make one subject to discipline from the local council or even the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Ultimately, Jesus said, hateful attitudes could lead to "the hell of fire." In this he was using hyperbole as a rhetorical device, not condemning angry people to everlasting torment.

Jesus understood that those who bear hatred or unresolved grievances toward others cannot truly worship God in good conscience. As Jesus would teach in "the Lord's prayer," we cannot expect God to forgive us if we do not forgive others. Coming to church and bringing our tithes is important, but resolving grudges or differences with others is even more important. Note that Jesus extends this responsibility to those who share reciprocal anger or are objects of others' wrath: we should take the initiative to be reconciled (vv. 23-26).

Adultery and lust (vv. 27-32)

Moving from murder to adultery, Jesus again showed that the core problem is one of the heart and mind, not just of actions. The prohibition of adultery was well known (Exod. 20:4, Deut. 5:17), and it could bring severe penalties for perpetrators, including death. Jesus insisted that believers are accountable for lustful thoughts in addition to adulterous behavior (vv. 27-28).

For ancient Hebrews, adultery referred primarily to a man having sex with another man's wife, rather than being a blanket term for extramarital sex. The sin, in Judaism, was against the husband or father of the woman, as it damaged someone who, though not exactly his property, was under his control and of considerable economic value.

The directives to gouge out one's right eye or chop off one's right hand rather than face eternal destruction are intended as hyperbole (vv. 29-30). Though such punishments were known in Jewish law, Jesus knew that lust is conceived in the heart and mind: one-handed or one-eyed people are at no handicap when it comes to lechery. The point is that we should take whatever actions are necessary to get lascivious thoughts under control.

Some consider the saying on divorce in vv. 31-32 as a separate antithesis, while others interpret it as a natural extension of the teaching on adultery (a similar teaching is found in Matt. 19:3-9). In Jesus' day, Jewish women could leave their husbands or pressure them for a divorce, but only husbands had the legal standing to authorize a "bill of divorcement." This is referenced in Deut. 24:1, which allows a husband to divorce his wife if "she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her." The rabbis interpreted this differently: the school of Shammai argued that the only sufficiently objectionable quality was sexual sin on the part of the wife. Hillel and his followers, in contrast, argued that a man could count it as "something objectionable" if his wife burned the dinner or failed to be as attractive as some other woman.

As Matthew relates it, Jesus taught that God intended for marriage to be permanent, and that divorce should be allowed only "on the ground of unchastity." This translates the word *porneia*, which described a broader field of sexual misbehavior than the typical word for adultery.

From the perspective of Jesus' teaching, men should not divorce their wives for selfish reasons, violating the law and putting their wives – and any future husbands – in the position of becoming adulterous according to the law.

Again, the problem is one of the heart. For either the husband or the wife, thinking so highly of one's selfish desires that they would desert a faithful spouse was considered a sinful and harmful act that falls far short of God's ideal.

Oaths (vv. 33-37)

Jesus next turned to the subject of oaths and keeping one's word. There was no Old Testament command that one should make oaths, though they were allowed, and the breaking of oaths was roundly condemned (Exod. 20:7, Lev. 19:12, Zech. 8:17). Unfortunately, many translations and commentaries fail to distinguish between oaths and vows, using the terms interchangeably when they were in fact two different things.

In the Old Testament world, continuing into the 1st century, vows were conditional promises made directly to God: one would ask God for a particular benison, and promise to give God something in return if the prayer was answered. Hannah, for example, asked God for a son, and promised to return the boy to God if the prayer was granted (1 Samuel 1).

An oath, on the other hand, consisted of a promise to do something, accompanied by a self-imprecation that invited God to bring punishment if the person did not fulfill the promise. King Jehoram, for example, pledged to assassinate Elisha, saying "So may God do to me, and more, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat stays on his shoulders today" (2 Kgs 6:31, NRSV). In most cases, the full form was abbreviated, and over time people came to swear, not only by God, but also by Jerusalem, by the temple, the gold in the temple, the temple's altar, or the gift on the altar.

This led to a practice of equivocating, as the rabbis distinguished between which oaths were binding, and which were not. Jesus took such interpretations to task, insisting that believers should not break their oaths, but live up to their word (v. 33). To those who sought to make impressive but non-binding oaths, Jesus reminded them that anything they swore by – whether the earth, Jerusalem, or even one's head – belonged to God, and therefore implied that the oath had appealed to God and was therefore binding (vv. 34-36).

It's better yet, Jesus said, to avoid swearing at all. Believers should live with such integrity that they need no oaths to reinforce the truthfulness of their word or the faithfulness of their promise. "Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no,'" Jesus said. This did not suggest a new form of swearing by saying "yes" or "no" twice, but was simply a method of emphasis indicating the sincerity of one's word. Feeling the need to swear by our mother's grave or anything else automatically implies that we are untrustworthy and subject to the temptation to break our promise.

Unlike some religious sects, we should not take this as a programmatic ban on submitting to an oath when testifying in court or being "sworn in" to public office. Jesus' challenge is that we should be people of our word who have no need to initiate an oath: his concern was not to create a new law prohibiting believers from participating in legal requirements of society.

Whether the subject is spiteful anger, endangering lust, or breaking one's word, Jesus' teaching goes beyond the law. The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart – and a willingness to follow the one who rules our heart. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Feb. 19, 2023

Matthew 17:1-19

Keeping Secrets

Do you have a favorite "superhero"? When I was a boy, there were fewer to choose from: I remember Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Spiderman, Aquaman, the Flash, the Hulk, and the Green Lantern.

The cast of superheroes has multiplied considerably since then. Characters have tended to become more complex, but many still shift between an everyday appearance and a "super" persona.

Our text for today describes the one man in history whose transformation was not just super, but supernatural. It suggests that those who choose to follow Jesus can be transformed, too.

A special appearance (vv. 1-2)

We often refer to the story as the "Transfiguration of Christ." Matthew's account is set near the end of Jesus' ministry, just before his final journey to Jerusalem. As if seeking to renew his strength for the journey – and to give instruction to his closest followers – Jesus led his 12 disciples northward to the territory near the city of Caesarea-Philippi, a beautiful and fertile area in the foothills of snow-capped Mount Hermon. Nearby was a temple dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperor, and not far away was an area devoted to Pan, a nature god. Jesus was about to show them who truly deserved their worship.

> *While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matt. 17:5)*

Three men among the 12 appear to have been closer to Jesus than the others (cp. Matt. 26:37; Mark 5:37, 13:3). Perhaps Jesus depended on them to learn some lessons first, and then explain them to the others. So it was that he took Peter, James, and John with him as they climbed the mountain in search of an isolated spot for a special time of prayer.

As they prayed, something totally unexpected happened. Jesus' appearance was suddenly – and radically – changed. Matthew and Mark describe it by using a Greek term that is the root of our word "metamorphosis." Jesus was *transformed*. Luke tells us that "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." Matthew says "his face shone like the sun." What the gospel writers seem to be suggesting is that Jesus, who had been disguised as a Galilean peasant, threw off his human image and reverted to his heavenly, glorified appearance. Perhaps his clothes shone so brightly because his body, like his face, was shining through. If the event took place at night, as we might suppose, the effect would have been especially impressive.

Jesus was *transformed*. Somehow, some way, something miraculous happened. God's eternal world and time bloomed into our ordinary world and time, and the disciples were granted a brief vision of something beyond.

Matthew expected readers to recall that Moses' face had also shone so brightly after spending time with God that it frightened the Israelites, and he had to wear a veil (Exod. 34:29-35). As the disciples looked at Jesus, "his face shone like the sun."

Special guests (vv. 3-4)

Suddenly, Jesus was not only transformed, but was also standing in the company of Moses himself, along with the prophet Elijah (v. 3). Luke says that Moses and Elijah appeared "in glory," suggesting that their appearance may have been much like that of Jesus. The Old Testament claimed that Elijah did not die, but was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs. 2:11). Moses' death was shrouded in such mystery that a rabbinic tradition presumed that God had also taken him directly to heaven.

The presence of Moses and Elijah carried significant symbolism. Judaism had strong traditions that Moses and Elijah would return to earth before the "Day of the Lord." Moses represented the Law, and Elijah the Prophets. These were the twin traditions upholding Israel's faith, but now the Law and the Prophets, present in Moses and Elijah, were upholding Jesus and giving way to him.

Of the three dumbfounded disciples, Peter alone had the wherewithal to speak, though he wasn't sure what to say. He knew the moment was special. He didn't know how long Moses and Elijah would stay, but he apparently felt an obligation to show

them proper hospitality. So, he spoke up in fumbling, embarrassed words and offered to cut down limbs from the trees to build temporary shelters for Jesus and Moses and Elijah (v. 4).

It's almost comical to think about it – the idea that Moses and Elijah, having "beamed down" from heaven in fiery, glorified bodies, would have any interest in taking up lodging in a hillside lean-to. At least Luke was kind enough to add, "he didn't know what he said." The suggestion, however, was not entirely inappropriate, because faithful Jews built similar shelters every year when they observed the "Feast of Booths," which celebrated the Exodus.

Special words (vv. 5-9)

If Jesus responded to Peter's request, Matthew does not record it, for as he was speaking, a bright cloud descended with surprising suddenness, enveloping them all (v. 5). The disciples, understandably, were terrified. In addition to the inherently spooky nature of the event, they would have remembered that in the Old Testament, when God appeared, it was often in a cloud. (See "The Hardest Question" online for more.)

Try to imagine the scene: When the cloud descended over Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and the three disciples, God was present. They could *feel* the divine nearness. And they were shaking in their sandals.

From the cloud came a voice – obviously to be understood as the voice of God – and the three awestruck disciples fell to their faces. When God spoke, the voice repeated the same words that were spoken at Jesus' baptism, with the addition of an injunction to pay him heed: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (v. 5).

As quickly as the voice had spoken, all was still and the cloud departed. When the bedazed and bedazzled disciples peeked out through their fingers, there was Jesus alone. Only Matthew says that Jesus came and offered a comforting touch and encouraging words: "Get up and do not be afraid" (v. 7).

"*This is my Son* …," God had said. "Listen to him!" Had they been awake, or sleeping? Was it real, or was it a dream? Matthew, alone of the gospels, called it a vision (v. 9). Whether visionary or real, the effect was the same. The disciples were overwhelmed with wonder.

That Jesus was left alone after the heavenly visitors departed underscored his supremacy to the law and the prophets, for Moses and Elijah were gone. Only Jesus remained (v. 8). Just as God's voice had spoken at Jesus' baptism, validating his call and his ministry, so now God's voice had spoken again to impress the disciples with the truth that Jesus knew who he was and what he was doing – and they had best give attention to his words.

One can imagine how excited the disciples were to have caught a heart-stopping glimpse of Jesus' true nature, and to have seen Moses, Elijah, and the voice of God from a cloud witnessing to his divinity. Surely, they would have been buzzing with exhilaration, anxious to tell others what they had seen. And, no doubt they would have been completely confused when Jesus instructed them to keep it to themselves: "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (v. 9).

Why would Jesus want them to keep such amazing news a secret? Because neither the disciples nor the broader coterie of his followers could yet comprehend what Jesus was about. Jesus knew how many people expected God to send a military messiah who would lead an uprising against Rome. He had trouble enough controlling that sentiment as it was, even among his own disciples. If word of Jesus' divine transformation and attestation became public knowledge, public clamor for Jesus to lead a political uprising could derail his mission.

Only after Jesus' death and resurrection would it be appropriate to reveal what the disciples had seen, reinforcing the divine intention behind the crucifixion and resurrection. In a sense, the transfiguration foreshadowed Jesus' ascension to heaven, which would also take place on a mountain (Matt. 28:16-20). In the meantime, the three disciples would have to sit tight on an awesome secret.

The good news of this story is that Jesus' transformation carries with it the promise of our own inner and ultimate transformation. It may be hard for us to believe this. The real world we inhabit surrounds us with family demands, financial concerns, work to do, and people to please. Yet, we are also privy to what the disciples saw as a touch of heaven come to earth, and the witness "This is my Son … Listen to him!" When we listen to Jesus, he calls us to be born again, to be transformed, to become new creations by his power.

That may not happen immediately, but it does happen. We can experience God's saving grace in a moment, but our transformation is a life-long process. As Paul described it to the Corinthians: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (1 Cor. 3:18).

Amazing. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Feb. 26, 2023

Romans 5:12-19

Unearned Righteousness

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. (Rom. 5:18)

On the heels of Epiphany and Transfiguration Sunday comes the 40-day season of Lent (Sundays aren't counted) leading to Easter. "Lent" derives from the Old English word *lencten*, which means "spring," and it may be related to an earlier word meaning "long," a nod to the days getting longer in springtime.

In church tradition, however, Lent has nothing to do with spring: it's about preparing for Easter, which just happens to come in the spring. Lent begins on "Ash Wednesday," a day devoted to recognizing our sins and entering a season of repentance. We would expect the lectionary readings to mark this season by selecting texts on the subject of sin and grace, and we are not disappointed. Several upcoming lessons, especially those from Romans, deal in one way or another with the issue of human sin and divine redemption.

Modern readers may find some problematic interpretive issues in today's text. Paul focuses much of his argument on what appears to be a literal understanding of Genesis 3. Must we read it the same fashion, just because Paul did? Many contemporary scholars and readers consider both creation accounts (Gen. 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-25) to be symbolic stories of faith rather than historically or scientifically accurate records. Similarly, the story of "the Fall" in Genesis 3 can be appreciated as a testimony that humans have sinned from the beginning while regarding Adam and Eve as metaphorical characters rather than literal people. (For more on this, see "The Hardest Question" online).

Jewish teaching considered each person to be responsible for his or her own choices, whether for good or evil. The prominent rabbis of Paul's day did not accuse Adam of dooming all persons to lives of depravity. Paul, however, saw in Genesis 3 a convenient theological rationale for his argument that humans were incapable of righteousness, lost in inherited sin that could only be redeemed by Christ.

Thus, Paul not only spoke of Adam as a literal person, the founder of the human race, but also as the one responsible for its proclivity to sin. Readers who share that view will not be troubled by Paul's arguments. Those who see Adam and Eve as symbolizing humankind (their names mean "human" and "life") can look beyond Paul's literalism and still appreciate his argument.

Paul clearly understood the point of Genesis 3: humans have sinned from the beginning, and sin has negative consequences. Whether one regards Genesis 3 as a metaphorical faith story or as a historical narrative, the pervasiveness of human sin throughout history is affirmed, and few of us would question it.

The legacy of sin (vv. 12)

The literary structure of Rom. 5:12-21 is exceedingly complex and subject to varying interpretations. Is there a logical progression, or is Paul repeating himself? Here's what seems to be the most likely way to understand how the passage works: Paul begins with a statement in v. 12 that he leaves open-ended, then launches into a series of parenthetical statements (vv. 13-17) before returning to his main thought in v. 18.

Paul begins his argument by saying that sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin (v. 12a). Lest we think that Paul lays all the blame at Adam's feet, however, we note that he adds "and so death spread to all *because all have sinned*" (v. 12b). Paul reasons that sin entered the world through Adam, but all humans since have followed his lead. This suggests a bit of a paradox: humans seem destined to sin, but they also sin by choice. In this part of his argument, Paul stresses the innate fate of inherited sin. But in other places, such as Romans 6, he puts more stress on sin as a personal choice.

The story in Genesis 3 expresses a belief that humans have sinned from the beginning, and that we've been prone to try avoiding responsibility from the start. The story credits both Adam and Eve with trying to "pass the buck" and blame their sin on someone else. Adam not only blamed Eve for giving him the fruit, but he also dared to indict God for putting her in his life. Eve, in turn, blamed the serpent.

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

It's always tempting to shuffle off our wrongdoing on someone else, but we cannot avoid personal responsibility for the choices we make.

The gift of grace (vv. 13-17)

As mentioned above, vv. 13-17 can be read as parenthetical statements in which Paul further builds on his differentiation between Adam and Christ. He does this through an excursus on sin, death, and the law in vv. 13-14, and a series of comparisons in vv. 15-17.

In v. 13, Paul begins with an obvious statement that sin existed before the law was given to Moses. He posits, however, that sin was "not reckoned" – that is, not counted as sin – when there was no law. Perhaps Paul means that sin could not be labeled as such until it was later defined, but the effects of wrongdoing were not different: he acknowledges that "death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses" (v. 14). In a world without a written law, someone may cheat, steal, and kill without officially breaking a legal dictum – but the deathly effects of those actions are no different.

The story in Genesis 3 is set long before the introduction of Mosaic law, but the account assumes that God had identified unacceptable behavior (Gen. 2:16-17). Other stories from the primeval history indicate that humans were held responsible for their sins long before Moses and the covenant law. Adam, Eve, and Cain all suffered consequences for their errors. The flood narratives begin with a claim that "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). While Paul might argue that sin was not officially a "transgression" until there was a law to transgress, his purpose is to show that Israel's possession of the law gave them an even greater responsibility for obedience.

God's gift of grace in Christ differs from our legacy of sin in Adam, Paul says, because the gift of grace brings life, not death (v. 15). Both have widespread effects. "Many died" through Adam's sin, but Christ's gift of grace "abounded for the many."

Expressing the contrast in more theological terms, Paul contends that the judgment following Adam's sin brought *condemnation*, while the free gift of grace in Christ brought *justification* (v. 16). By participating in Adam's legacy, we fall under condemnation due to our misbehavior. By accepting Christ's freely offered grace, we are justified (put into a right relationship with God) despite our many sins.

In more practical terms, the legacy of Adam brings the dominion of death, but those who receive the abundant grace Christ offers may exercise dominion in life through the power of Christ (v. 17). The power of death is a fearsome thing, but it is no match for the living Christ, who offers abundant and eternal life to those who live in grace. Paul emphasizes the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness to remind the reader that Christ alone is responsible for our redemption from sin.

The importance of choice (vv. 18-19)

In v. 18, we finally come to the closure of Paul's governing comparison. The first half of the verse repeats the thought of v. 12, and the second half finishes the comparison: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."

On first reading, this verse (along with v. 19-21) may seem very deterministic, as if Adam made everyone sinners, and now Christ has made everyone righteous. Paul is not teaching universalism, however. He is very careful in his use of verbal tenses and moods to show that the choice of sin is an accomplished fact, while the way of righteousness is a possible path – not a forced destination.

As James R. Edwards has noted, "This is not necessarily to assert universal salvation, however. In v. 17 Paul spoke of 'those who *receive* God's grace and righteousness.' Salvation by grace is not salvation by fiat, much less coercion. Grace is only grace where it grants the other freedom to receive – or reject – Christ's self–sacrifice for forgiveness at the cross" (*Romans*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series [Baker Books, 2011], 152).

Paul's message is clear. Sin came into the world as quickly as humans understood they could make choices about their behavior. Since that time, none save Christ have escaped its dominion.

Whether we're as comfortable as Paul in blaming the introduction of sin to a literal Adam, we all can acknowledge that wrongdoing is a universal phenomenon, and always has been. Now, however, though sin has persisted and increased, God's grace has abounded. Indeed, Paul says it has "super-abounded," adding as a prefix the Greek root of our word "super" (v. 21). Believers can be super grateful for that: those who choose to accept God's grace need no longer fear the death that comes through sin, but may anticipate the hope of eternal life. NFJ

Don't have a cow!

By Tony W. Cartledge

Last fall, the conservative *Jerusalem Post* reported the breathless news that five red heifers had arrived in Israel, courtesy of a fundamentalist farmer in Texas. The yearlings were flown to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport and greeted with enthusiasm.

Cattle rancher Byron Stinson leads an organization of Christian Zionists and Orthodox Jews called *Boneh Israel*, which is dedicated to preparing the way for the construction of a third temple in Jerusalem.

That can't happen, they believe, without a perfect red heifer, which they call "the key to redemption."

Here's the logic: Numbers 19:1-10a contains an obscure passage claiming that God told Moses and Aaron to have the Israelites bring them a perfect red heifer (a *parah adumah*) that had never worn a yoke.

A heifer, for the agriculturally uninformed, is a female cow that has not had a calf.

Moses and Aaron were to instruct a priest named Eleazar to take the red heifer outside the camp and slaughter it, taking some of the blood with his finger and sprinkling it "toward the front of the tent of meeting."

The heifer was then to be completely burned, including its skin, its flesh, its blood, and even its dung.

To the burning carcass, Eleazar was to add aromatic cedar wood, hyssop (an herb thought to have a cleansing function), and "crimson stuff" (the Hebrew word usually means "worm," but could refer to something red).

After the conflagration died down, a temple functionary would gather up the ashes and store them in a "clean place," also outside the camp, where they would be "kept for the congregation of the Israelites for the water for cleansing."

Why does this matter? The mixture of ash and water had to be available to purify someone who had become "unclean" by touching a dead body. Regular uncleanness could be remedied with washing or sacrifice, but dead-body-uncleanness was a special case.

Just about everyone would experience that at some point, for even being in the same tent or room with a corpse counted (Num. 19:10b-20). Priests can't function in an unclean state: hence the problem.

To bring back the Hebrew priesthood, a perfect red heifer must be found and burned to ashes to purify any putative priests. This is a major concern for a fringe group of Orthodox Zionists, including many American Jews who join illegal settlements in the West Bank,

They have long dreamed of building a third temple on Temple Mount — which would require tearing down the Islamic 'Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, which have stood for more than 1,200 years, far longer than any Jewish temple.

Fundamentalist Christians immersed in the pursuit of end-times prophecy support the effort, citing eschatological passages from Ezekiel to claim that the founding of the State of Israel in 1949 was a fulfillment of prophecy and a sign of the end times.

Donors have contributed huge sums to an organization called the Temple Institute, which has been preparing lampstands, altars and other equipment for a future temple, along with training men who claim descent from Levi to serve as priests.

The effort to locate an unblemished red heifer stretches back for decades. A calf born in Israel in 1997 and named "Melody" raised hopes for a while but sprouted several white hairs. Another hopeful candidate in 2002 proved equally unsuitable. Rabbis will be inspecting the five new heifers with magnifying glasses over the next two years.

A Jewish commentary called the *Mishnah* declared that a suitable red heifer must be at least three years old (interpreted to mean in its third year) before being slaughtered and burned. In addition to having no blemishes or diseases, it had to be perfectly red — even two white hairs call for disqualification.

Purely red heifers are so rare that the *Mishnah* claims only nine red heifers were immolated from tabernacle days until the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE.

Maimonides, an influential Jewish philosopher of the medieval period, taught that the next red heifer would be brought by the messiah. Many Jews still look for a messiah, and Christians focused on the end times are hoping for Jesus' second coming. Though working from different angles, both believe that building a third temple will usher in a messianic age of peace.

That can't happen without a perfect red heifer. Attempting to raze the two mosques atop Temple Mount would not lead to peace, however, but to violent warfare.

Most Israelis lead mainly secular lives and have little respect for groups such as the Temple Institute. It is highly unlikely that even the most radical Israeli government would sanction an effort to clear Temple Mount for an extremist group to build a temple.

Even so, let's pray that the latest crop of red heifers will soon grow enough white hairs to spare them from the flames lest their owners feel emboldened to spark a terrible war. Let them remain as unclean as their ambitions. NFJ

Dinosaurs, deception and defensiveness

By John D. Pierce

Dinosaur Ridge runs along an interstate highway just outside of Denver, Colorado. The convenient location provided both exercise and education one morning before an evening flight.

My colleague and hiking partner Bruce Gourley was along for the adventure. For many years we have explored miles and miles of ancient natural wonders — from steep mountain formations to deep glacier-carved valleys.

When doing so, we often work in a joking line about how impressive something is to be "just 6,000 years old."

That comment, of course, is tied to the continuing efforts of many fundamentalist Christians — despite evidence from radiocarbon dating and other reliable sources — to defend the idea of a young earth. These devoted believers choose to count the creative process in thousands rather than billions of years, as is widely accepted in the scientific community.

Of the many creative wonders that Bruce and I have explored — often in remote parts of our marvelous national landscape — nothing seemed more obviously ancient than the clear and multiple footprints of dinosaurs on this suburban ridge side.

From my own nonscientific perspective, it seems the weight of science overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that places the earth's origins somewhere around four and a half billion years old.

And from my theological perspective, it takes imposing a lot of distracting and unnecessary literalism on the Bible to provide an alternative.

Much of the current defense of a very young earth is rooted in the strong reactions of conservative Christians to the rise of evolutionary biology — particularly the 1859 book, *On the Origin of the Species*, by Charles Darwin.

The so-called Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 in Dayton, Tenn. — related to teaching evolution against state law — fueled the defensiveness of young earth creationists who saw their efforts as no less than a defense of God and the Bible as they understood it.

Those same defenders today root their beliefs in a defining commitment to a literal interpretation of the poetic creation account (though there are two accounts that vary) in the biblical book of Genesis. While the idea of science did not develop until long after these ancient stories, efforts are made to use the biblical text as scientific evidence.

Some of their "evidence," however, comes not from the biblical stories that present God as creator without specificity of method, but from notes added to some versions of the Bible.

Bishop James Ussher of Ireland, in the early 17th century, deduced that the first day of the earth's creation was Oct. 23, 4004 BC. The respected scholar did so by deciphering biblical chronology and genealogy — although the Bible is not particularly a book of history either.

While not the only one to advance this idea, his conclusion that the earth was formed in 4004 BC got inserted in the marginal notes of the King James Version of the Bible beginning in 1701.

However, my engagement with the natural world often puts me into moments when not everything has to be fully explained or understood. In fact, simply marveling at the mystery of creation evokes wonderment and worship.

Rather than theorizing creation, I'd rather offer a theory about young earth creationism. I believe it is a defensive measure to protect two things:

The first is a stubborn unwillingness to admit one might be wrong about any point of biblical interpretation. It is a fragile faith that fears just one crack in a long-held system of belief will bring down the whole house.

Sadly, such an inflexible, unreflective defense of a narrow understanding of the Bible can be used to justify both ignorance and evil.

The second aspect of my theory is that one gains a greater sense of significance by restricting the universe's existence to such a brief time in which one's own fourscore experience fills a larger percentage.

Oddly, however, discovering creation to be older and bigger than ever imagined doesn't have to bring insignificance. Often, I find that the overwhelming scale of nature makes me feel small but not disconnected or insignificant. But quite the opposite:

Rather than casting God as deceptive — one who seeks to confuse us by making things such as dinosaur prints look really old — it seems wiser and more faithful to acknowledge a creator whose mysteries are well beyond the finite minds of humanity.

Defensiveness has nothing over pure wonder. One can marvel at the footprints of ancient dinosaurs while seeking to walk in the ways of Jesus. NFJ

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Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation

1. Publication title: *Nurturing Faith Journal*
2. Publication number: 10641
3. Filing date: 09/30/2022
4. Issue frequency: bimonthly
5. No. of issues published annually: 6
6. Annual subscription price: $24 U.S
7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication:
   4008 Dornoch Lane
   Norman, OK 73072
   Contact person: Mitch Randall
   Telephone: (405) 761-2662
8. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office of publisher:
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070
9. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor and managing editor:
   Publisher: Good Faith Media, Inc.
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070
   Editor: John D. Pierce
   Good Faith Media, Inc.
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070
   Managing Editor: Jackie B. Riley and Bruce Gourley
   Good Faith Media, Inc.
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070
10. Owner: Good Faith Media, Inc. (nonprofit)
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070

   Renee Owen (chairman)
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070

11. Known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities:
   None
12. Tax status: The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes
has not changed during the preceding 12 months
13. Publication title: *Nurturing Faith Journal*
14. Issue date for circulation data below:
   09/27/2022
15. Extent and nature of circulation
   National and limited foreign
   Total number of copies: *5446 **4286
   Paid and/or requested circulation
   Paid/requested outside-county mail subscriptions stated
   on Form 3541: *5446 **4286
   Paid in-county subscriptions stated on Form 3541: — **—
   Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales and other non-USPS paid distribution: *— **—
   Other classes mailed through the USPS: — **—
   Total paid and/or requested circulation: *5446 **4286
   Free distribution by mail
   Outside-county as stated on Form 3541: *— **—
   In-county as stated on Form 3541: *— **—
   Other classes mailed through the USPS: *— **—
   Total free distribution: *100 **77
   Total distribution: *5546 **4363
   Copies not distributed: *250 **250
   Total: *5796 **4613
   Percent paid and/or requested circulation: *98 **98 %
16. Publication statement of ownership: Publication required. Will be printed in the January / February 2023 issue of this publication.
*Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months
**No. copies of single issues published nearest to filing date

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Part 1: 2017–2021

DONALD J. TRUMP

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Longing to re-enshrine white Christian dominance over America, politicized conservative evangelicals over some four decades created an anti-federal government, far-right infrastructure while searching for a political savior. The election of Barack Obama as the nation's first Black president heightened their anxieties.

Stockpiling yet more guns in anticipation of bloody conflict with minorities, many grew all the more desperate. Defeating America's inclusive democracy would require an authoritarian leader of biblical proportions, a warrior king who would take no prisoners.

Jesus of the gospels, inclusive and compassionate, would not do.

A LIE

Raised to project public strength to mask his inherent weakness and insecurities, New Yorker Donald J. Trump learned from his ruthless, unethical father how to bend people and institutions to his will.

Wealth and power were his goals. Lies, bribes and crimes: whatever it took would do. Initially, Trump — a malignant narcissist, corrupt real estate developer and television celebrity — sided with the Democratic party. Some Democratic leaders uneasily put up with his shady operation in hopes of reaping political benefits. Following Obama's election, however, the shaky alliance quickly unraveled.

Digital photograph, 2016. Library of Congress

For decades discriminating racially in his real estate businesses, Trump despised seeing a Black man as president. He seized upon a blatant lie — known as "birtherism" — propagated by white Christian nationalists.

These opponents of inclusive democracy and advocates of theocracy were equally enraged by Obama's election. He was deemed neither an American nor a Christian, the lie insisted. Instead he was cast as a Muslim born in Africa.

Relentlessly Trump parroted the lie. Every bit as fervently, millions of white Christians believed the lie. Then, in front of a live television audience on April 30, 2011, Obama turned the tables on Trump.

NO JOKE

The annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner in Washington, D.C., was in part a traditional occasion for the sitting president to roast his critics. Trump was in attendance.

Mere days before — in an effort to put the birther lie to rest — Obama had shown his Hawaiian birth certificate to the world. Now, Trump was among the targets of Obama's jests.

Jokingly, Obama declared that "no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than the Donald. And that's because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter, like: Did we fake the moon landing? What really happened in Roswell? And where are [rappers] Biggie and Tupac?"

Then President Obama changed direction, making fun of Trump's on-again, off-again stated aspiration of running for president. Interspersed with laughter from the audience, Obama conceded that Trump's experience as the host of television's *Celebrity Apprentice* entertainment show "would bring some change to the White House."

Unable to take a joke, Trump felt humiliated. Leaving the dinner early, he nursed a grudge. Again the New Yorker contemplated running for president. The thought of unseating Obama in 2012 animated him.

"I must leave all of my options open because, above all else, we must make America great again," Trump mused, inferring that America was not great under Obama.

In early 2012 he filed paperwork to create the "Make America Great Again Party." Although he decided not to run against Obama, the day following Obama's

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This is the 45th article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for *Nurturing Faith Journal*, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.

re-election Trump began publicly voicing the need to "Make America Great Again."

MAGA

Three years later, on Jan. 26, 2015, the real estate developer and television celebrity sat down for an interview with Breitbart News, a far-right online propaganda outlet. He complained about President Obama and criticized Mitt Romney for losing to Obama in 2012.

He declared his willingness to run for president as a Republican. As president he would "make America great again" by erasing Obama's signature achievement, "Obamacare," formally known as the Affordable Care Act.

By reversing the legacy of America's first Black president, he "would bring this country back to the highest level it has ever been. And I think I would make America great again."

With Obama in his sights, the New Yorker took the plunge on June 16, 2015. His announcement was vintage Trump. The setting was his own Trump Tower in New York City. An enthusiastic crowd of down-and-out locals were each paid $50 to hold up signs and cheer for him.

A bank of television cameras captured the moment as Trump lied about the size of the crowd ("thousands"), falsely slandered most Mexican immigrants as rapists, falsely claimed other nations were beating up on America, complained about America's military presence in the Middle East, and called Obamacare "the big lie."

On and on he went, praising himself as the only presidential candidate capable of solving America's alleged problems.

Observing the carnival-like scene, far-right conservative activist and white nationalist Steve Bannon blurted out the first thing that came to his mind: "That's Hitler!" He meant it as a compliment.

TRACTION

Later, others right to left would also compare Trump to Hitler and/or deem him a fascist, but in a disparaging manner. Trump himself did little to dissuade matters, telling John Kelly in 2018 that "Hitler did a lot of good things."

Ever the con man, Trump steadily fed his marks a diet of extremist cultural beliefs without apologizing for his immorality and crimes.

Hitler he may have admired, but Trump's agenda was primarily his bank account and power, according to Mary Trump, Donald's niece and a psychologist. He was a sociopath with no empathy for others.

Months passed, Trump's increasingly racist and xenophobic campaign gradually gaining traction within the far-right wing of the Republican Party, home of many conservative white evangelicals.

They had long identified with his hatred of Obama. They liked his pledge to build a "big, beautiful wall" on the southern border to keep brown immigrants out of America. He promised prosperity. Many approved of Trump's affirmation of white dominance, but his sexual immorality and shady business dealings yet made them wary.

Ever the con man, Trump steadily fed his marks a diet of extremist cultural beliefs without apologizing for his immorality and crimes. He seemingly understood that white, male, conservative evangelical leaders were more concerned about losing power in an increasingly inclusive and secular society, than they were about their own sexual sins. And the only crimes they were concerned about were those committed by people of color.

EVANGELICALS

A January visit to Jerry Falwell Jr.'s conservative Liberty University put Trump's campaign strategy — openly courting Christian nationalists — to the test. Falwell responded with gushing praise. He and Trump alike coveted power above morality. For moral failure Falwell was later outed and forced to resign from Liberty.

Although viewed as an atheist by many who had long known him, Trump became "arguably the candidate most resembling a televangelist," one reporter summarized in February 2016. Power-hungry, prosperity-driven evangelicals especially identified with the celebrity billionaire.

Trump and white conservative evangelicals — a hotbed of Christian nationalism — arrived at an agreement. Facing the common enemy of liberalism, most expressed a willingness — even an eagerness for some — to support Trump if he would grant their greatest wishes.

These included full access to the White House, the erasure of Obama's legacy, and the enshrinement of conservative Christianity in the nation's courts. The latter was most important.

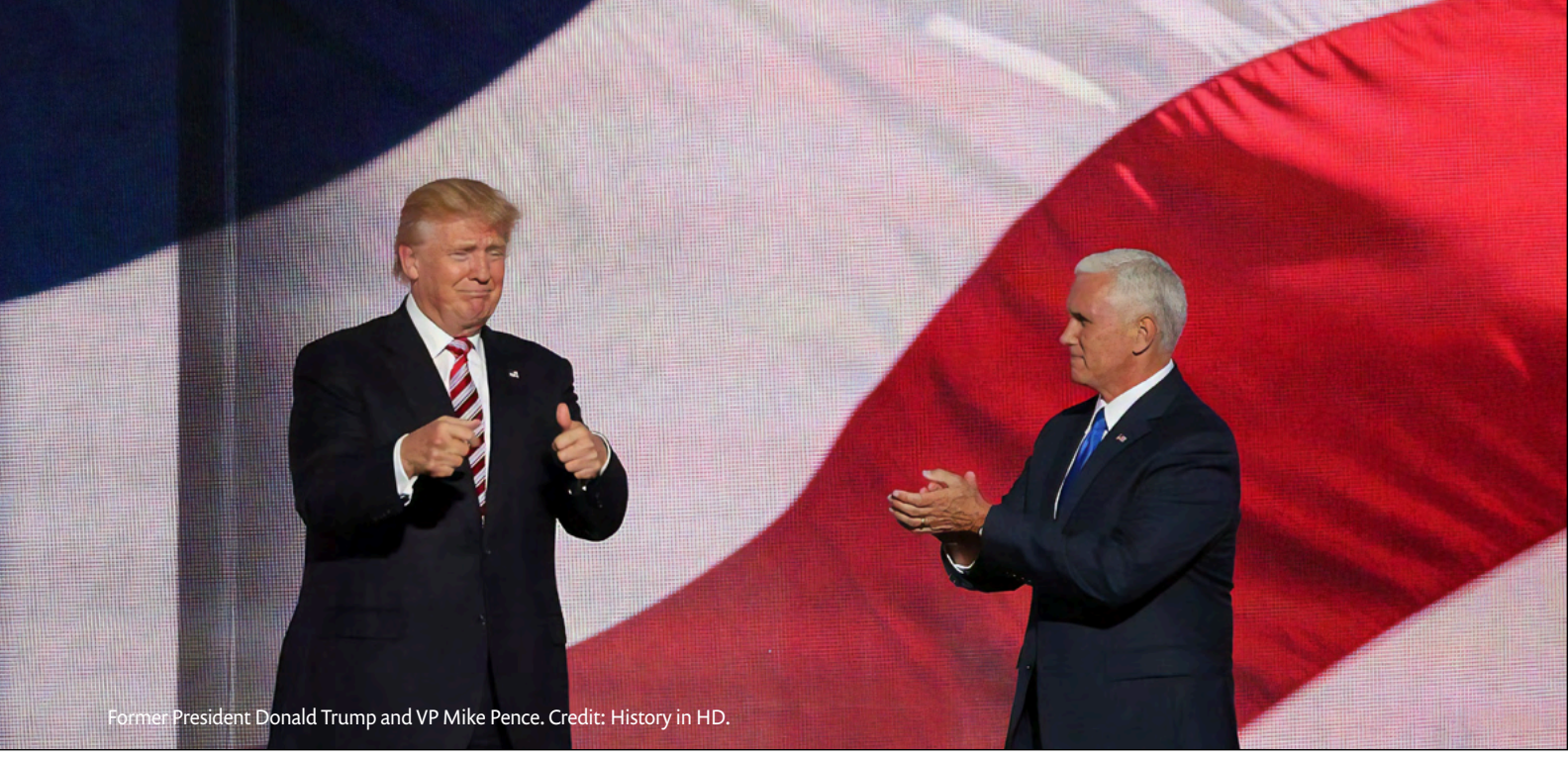
Through the appointment of far-right judges to the Supreme Court, the abortion-affirming 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision could be overturned, and the "rights" of conservative evangelicals to legally discriminate against others allowed in the name of their "religious freedom."

But what about Jesus, a brown Middle Easterner who had taught his followers to love and uplift — not hate and persecute — others? The Jesus of the Christian faith that centers on welcoming strangers and taking care of the poor, marginalized and disadvantaged?

Did white Christian nationalism's quest for ultimate political power include Jesus? "No!" exclaimed Texas Southern Baptist pastor and leading Christian nationalist Robert Jeffress.

Jesus was too weak, inclusive and compassionate. Jeffress said he would run away "as fast as he could" from any Jesus-like political candidate.

He and millions of other professing Christians wanted the "meanest, toughest SOB" in the White House, someone who would bring law and order, protecting white people from brown immigrants, especially Muslims. Trump would be their



Former President Donald Trump and VP Mike Pence. Credit: History in HD.

savior, a Rambo-Christ facing down their enemies.

SURPRISE

It proved to be an easy arrangement. Reeled out of their alleged enclave of righteousness by Trump's openly hateful campaign rhetoric, Christian nationalist leaders found cover for their own decades-long racism, xenophobia and lusts.

Declaring Trump absolved of his many past sins and preemptively pardoning him from future sins, they figuratively placed him next to the throne of their God. He was the chosen one who would save white America from liberals. When conscientious evangelicals objected, their concerns were dismissed.

Treating his Republican primary opponents with disdain and ridicule, Trump's unfiltered style ultimately won over most conservative evangelicals, their votes securing his nomination for the presidency. Democrats chose liberal, highly-educated Hillary Clinton as their candidate, certain that her experience and inclusiveness would prevail over the buffoonish and crass Trump. They were wrong.

Running as the underdog against the politically polished Clinton — formerly a U.S. senator from New York, Obama's Secretary of State, and longtime husband of former president Bill Clinton — Trump went on the attack.

Many conservative evangelicals, who for decades had falsely equated Clinton with evil, roared their approval. Many also cheered when Trump openly invited Russian leader Vladimir Putin, who espoused Christian nationalism, to interfere in the election by harming Clinton.

Putin obliged, sowing political and cultural discord in the U.S. via social media. This was bare knuckles, dirty politics on steroids. Soliciting a foreign agent to interfere in U.S. elections was also a constitutional crime.

Despite Trump's offensive and unethical campaign, and his alliance with evangelicals and Putin, Clinton remained the favorite. Until a controversial decision by conservative FBI Director James Comey emerged as an "October surprise."

Previously accused of storing copies of some classified documents on two unsecured computer drives, Clinton had been cleared by an FBI investigation that deemed her email practices "careless" but lacking "criminal intent."

The matter rested there until Comey abruptly re-opened the investigation 11 days before the 2016 presidential election, tilting away from Clinton a wavering subset of voters who disliked both candidates. A stunner of an outcome ensued when Trump — even to his own surprise — in a close contest emerged with an electoral college win over Clinton.

VICTORY

Trump's shocking presidential victory, despite losing the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by some 3 million votes, left Democrats reeling in disbelief while being mocked by jubilant Trump voters. Many Black and brown Americans felt their humanity had been rejected.

White Christian nationalists celebrated and praised their God that liberal America had been humiliated and roadblocks to theocracy lowered.

Demographically, Trump's victory represented a triumph for rural white America, lesser educated persons, and, most critically, conservative white evangelicals. But there was more.

A Brookings Institution analysis of a large trove of election data identified white racial resentment toward growing minority populations as the most common denominator among Trump voters.

Another extensive data analysis revealed that "racialized economics" — "the belief that undeserving minority groups are getting ahead while hardworking white people are being left behind" — further explained white support for Trump.

What would a Trump presidency look like? No one knew for certain. But those who knew Trump best — including his niece Mary — understood that he would readily abuse his new position as the world's most powerful man, straining the very fabric of American democracy for no other reason than he could.

In Steve Bannon's words, presidential decorum had been thrown out the window because Trump was "devoid of empathy, incapable of humility and unfamiliar with what it means to suffer consequences," thereby free to behave and speak "in ways most would never dare."

Settling into the world's most powerful office, Trump quickly surrounded himself with wealth. Gone was his campaign trail, populist anti-Wall Street rhetoric. He enlisted a cabinet of wealthy Americans while visions of ever greater riches danced in his head.

Conservative white evangelical leaders — who long ago had made a bargain with Reagan to enrich the rich in return for beginning the dismantling of America's secular government and replacing inclusive democracy with a theocracy — now had the right man in the White House to complete their mission.

DOMINION

Betsy DeVos, appointed by Trump as Secretary of Education, represented his alliance with both Christian nationalists and the wealthy elite. Public education, reviled by the far right since school integration in the 1950s and 1960s, was at the top of Christian nationalists' government enemies list.

For years DeVos, a billionaire, had worked to undermine public schools and force government to fund conservative Christian education in violation of constitutional church-state separation.

Public education had "displaced" churches as the center of communities, DeVos complained. "School choice" — the government funding of religious alternatives to public education — served as the tip of the spear in her envisioned "education revolution."

An advocate of Dominionism theology — an extremist school of thought dismissing the U.S. Constitution and calling for the dismantling of secular government, culture and society, and the implementation of an authoritarian theocracy — DeVos framed her efforts to "reform" public education as advancing "God's Kingdom."

Quickly and methodically she went about her task, proposing to cut billions of dollars from the Department of Education she now led, thereby crippling public K–12 schools. She also sought to reduce federal aid to public university students, refused to uphold laws protecting college students from fraudulent practices by for-profit colleges, and issued edicts penalizing non-heterosexual and sexually-victimized college students, while protecting rapists.

Randy Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, summarized DeVos' war on public education.

"We've had plenty of Republican as well as Democratic secretaries of education but none of them, even those who believed in alternatives to public education, actually tried to eviscerate public education," he noted. "Here is someone who in her first budget tried to eliminate every single summer school program, every single after-school program, and who has done everything in her power to try to make it harder for us to strengthen public [sector] schools."

DeVos, it turned out, had stirred a hornet's nest. Her anti-public, anti-higher education, pro-Christian and pro-for-profit education agenda provoked widespread outrage from parents, teachers and students, making her the most reviled member of Trump's unpopular cabinet.

Sued nearly 500 times in her tenure, the most ever for a Secretary of Education, her offenses primarily involved student loan disputes, violations of students' civil rights, refusal to enforce Title IX — a federal civil rights law prohibiting sexual discrimination, harassment, assault and dating violence in institutions of higher education — and the withholding of information from the public in defiance of the Freedom of Information Act.

One of many cabinet members and advisors who ran afoul of the law, DeVos nonetheless managed to stay in her position longer than most. Trump demanded that those closest to him obey him no matter the cost. Many were ultimately forced to resign due to misdeeds.

Some, horrified at Trump's disregard for ethics, remained aboard as long as they could, while institutionally opposing him. His White House became a revolving door, with most of Trump's 23 cabinet positions occupied by two or more persons during the course of his presidency.

'FOOLS'

While publicly supporting DeVos' Christian nationalist agenda, Trump dismissed Christianity as nonsense, and fawning evangelical leaders as "fools" and "schmucks" easily exploited.

"Can you believe that bullshit?" he once said privately to his longtime lawyer Michael Cohen following a laying on of hands — a ceremony of praying, praising and evoking God's blessings by evangelicals.

"Those f_____ evangelicals," he proclaimed on another occasion, marveling at their submission to him. Despite the mocking, many loved him.

"I really believe he was sent to us [from God]. From one to 10, he's a 10. He lives in a Christian world, and we needed a strong Christian … He speaks for us …", said one of his loyal followers, voicing the beliefs of many.

But if evangelicals were Trump's fools, Trump was evangelicals' fool, the political allies bonded by a lust for power.

Aiming for theocracy, Christian nationalist coalitions — extremist Tony Perkins and his anti-LGBTQ Family Research Council foremost — steered much of the White House's cultural and social policy.

The Trump administration's rolling back of human rights, blocking immigration from abroad — particularly from Muslim nations — and efforts to build a wall along the southern border emanated from and pleased racist and xenophobic evangelicals.

Also using the nation's highest office to enrich himself, Trump steered lucrative — and illegal — government contracts to his businesses. Tax cuts for the wealthiest of

Americans further lined the bank accounts of Trump and other billionaires while leaving the poor and middle class with leftovers.

Policies benefiting Christian nationalists and Trump alike included the reversing of the government's efforts to combat global warming. Executive orders rolled back Obama's restrictions on coal mining and aligned Trump with fossil fuel industry CEOs, pleasing evangelicals who believed climate change to be a liberal hoax.

An infatuation with canceling Obama's signature achievement drove Trump's and evangelicals' determination to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), legislation that provided affordable health insurance to tens of millions of Americans — including many minorities who previously could not afford it.

Nonetheless, many Christian nationalist-fostered White House attempts to discriminate against non-whites and punish liberals fell victim to the president's sloppy and chaotic manner of governing and disregard for law and order.

Time and again Trump ran afoul of constitutional checks and balances and into a buzz-saw of scandals and setbacks that mitigated his efforts to circumvent established boundaries. In some instances heroic individuals stepped forward to prevent Trump from further harming the nation.

Although he came close to repealing the ACA, Trump was thwarted when Republican Senator John McCain (AZ) in 2017 cast the deciding vote against killing the health care legislation.

TAINTED

On the international front Trump also upended America's progressive march. Reversing a long history of engaging with other nations in order to advance democracy, Trump instead expressed hostility toward Europe and nuclear treaties, while praising and embracing the worst of the world's authoritarian leaders: Russia's Vladimir Putin, Hungary's Viktor Orban, and South Korea's Kim Jong-un.

Upon the insistence of Christian nationalists, Trump controversially moved the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to the ancient biblical city of Jerusalem. Withdrawing the U.S. from the international Paris Climate Accord — critical to preventing the worst of global warming's future effects — furthered the White House's war on the environment.

Matching his chaotic foreign policy, Trump proved unable to curb his longtime penchant for dishonesty. All told, the norm-busting president told more than 30,000 documented lies, many in service of circumventing ethical boundaries and constitutional constraints on the nation's highest office.

Trump's criminally tainted and disorderly White House sucked in far-right ideologues with few scruples who often found themselves mired in legal trouble for carrying out the president's many questionable schemes. At least 11 Trump associates (aides and advisors) would be charged with crimes carried out on behalf of the president.

At the same time, Trump's racist bent further galvanized anti-government militia hate groups that earlier had grown from 42 to at least 300 by Obama's second term. With Trump's election, these groups re-oriented themselves to oppose groups that opposed Trump.

Neo-Nazis, white nationalists and Christian nationalists — overlapping groups largely united in perceiving God as being on their side — allied in a battle against inclusive democracy and for a white Christian nation. Increasingly they trained their ire on minority rights groups such as Black Lives Matter.

These hateful and harmful forces converged in a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Va., on Aug. 12, 2017.

"You will not replace us," the haters chanted, referring to "The Great Replacement" theory that blames feminism for white women no longer birthing enough children to prevent minorities from gaining a demographic upper-hand in America.

Stoked with anger, one white supremacist plowed his car into a crowd of people peacefully protesting against the rally, killing one and injuring 35.

Afterward asked for his comments on the terrorism of that day, Trump equivocated. Hesitating to call out hateful and violent acts committed or approved by his far-right base, Trump insisted there "were very fine people, on both sides" during the Charlottesville incident.

AUTHORITARIANISM

Scholars of authoritarianism gleaned from the election data that "right-wing authoritarianism played a significant role in the 2016 presidential election." As president, Trump encouraged and empowered the far-right belief that white people should dominate over other groups.

Charlottesville was but one of many far-right hate crimes during his White House term. A comprehensive study revealed that the "number of attacks by right-wing organizations quadrupled" in 2017 from the year prior, and by 2020 comprised more than 90 percent of all ideological attacks and plots in the U.S.

Two years into his truth-denying, chaos-infused, criminally-laced and hate-enabling presidency, Trump drew the wrath of enough American voters in the mid-terms that the U.S. House returned to Democratic control.

Effectively unable to pass legislation desired by his far-right base, Trump fumed as the Democratic House pushed back against his growing lawlessness.

In December 2019, House Democrats and a handful of courageous Republicans impeached Trump for abuse of power in soliciting foreign interference in the then-unfolding 2020 presidential election when he tried but failed to cajole Ukraine into meddling the election on his behalf.

He was also charged with obstructing justice by instructing administration officials to ignore congressional subpoenas for documents and testimony. Two months later the Republican-controlled Senate did Trump's bidding, refusing to convict him.

But if Trump's presidency seemed to be sinking beneath the weight of his crimes against the federal government, it was merely a mirage. NFJ

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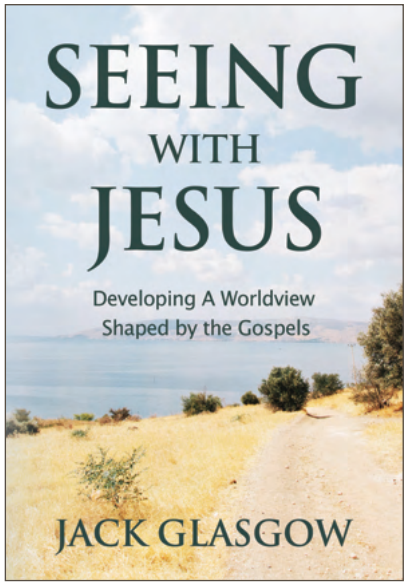

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DISTRUST & DIVISION

Navigating myths, political divides challenges leaders, truth-speakers

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

How does one speak truthfully and lead faithfully — especially within congregational and larger community life — in such a time as this?

That is, in an endless political season saturated by division and distrust — and spurred by growing theocratic efforts, increased hostility, widespread misinformation, demonization of vulnerable people, and threats to democratic norms as basic as the peaceful transfer of power?

And most challenging: Those creating this hostile climate — or at least supporting the architects of these efforts — are largely professing Christians who claim a high allegiance to God and biblical truth.

Extinguishing the fires of distrust and division is prohibited by their continuous fueling. Never has it been easier to express an opinion — about anything, at any time.

Social media provides an unremitting opportunity to opine with little to no knowledge of the subject at hand. And intentionally funneling untruths to spongelike minds rages on.

Dispensing intense, uninformed and unsharpened points of view has no closing time. And expertise is often less appreciated than passion and agreement with one's desired conclusions.

NOT KNOWING

Ryne Burge, a researcher and American Baptist pastor, addresses this modern condition in his book, *20 Myths about Religion and Politics in America* (2022, Fortress Press).

"When someone asks what we think and how we feel about something, we should often be inclined to state, 'I don't know enough about that topic to have an opinion,'" writes Burge. "In the 21st century, we can be too smart, too rich or too arrogant, but it's very hard to be too humble."

As a result, ignorant proffering and pontificating consume our public spaces — revealing how often those who say the most, or say it the loudest, have the least of significance to say.

Social media and coffee shop conversations — and, let's face it, Sunday School classes — are often filled with claims and even rantings without the moorings of knowledge. Certainly religion and politics consume a lot of this bantering, debate and resulting dissention.

Burge, who teaches at Eastern Illinois University, uses his social science skills to counter some of the widely assumed and broadly shared myths. His cobbling and analysis of respected research focus primarily on the interplay of religion and political behavior.

Burge is not detached from congregational realities. He is in his 16th year as pastor of First Baptist Church of Mount Vernon, Ill., an American Baptist congregation.

The 20 myths addressed in his book were drawn from what Burge discovered as "some of the common things people write online that I know are false because I have the data to back it up."

Likely, most of us have heard these myths offered as truth — if not divine truth.

MYTHS

Among the myths Burge debunks with data are those related to age, race, political affiliations and religious identity.

He demythologizes often-heard but incorrect assumptions such as: Evangelicalism is in decline; college leads young people away from religion; people return to religion late in life; and young evangelicals are more politically moderate than older evangelicals.

That latter myth, writes Burge, is one that media often get wrong. He notes, first, that the percentage of younger whites (ages 18–35) overall has dropped from 22% in 1990 to a current low of 1%. So the population share is decreasing.

While Burge's analysis includes exceptions, he concludes: "Looking over the past four election cycles … there's clear evidence that when it comes time to vote, young white evangelicals look more similar to their evangelical parents and grandparents than they do to other young people."

Burge notes the policy issues at play and expresses concern that continued political polarization will make governing by consensus more difficult as well as challenging to the Christian witness.

He also debunks the history-defying myths that "white Christians have always been conservative Republicans" and "America is much less religious today than a few decades ago."

With data analysis he also counters misconceptions that Black Protestants and Mainline Protestants, in general, are politically liberal.

And he disproves the common claim that "Donald Trump wasn't the choice of religiously devout Republicans." He notes the significant shift among white evangelicals regarding whether an official who commits an immoral act personally can behave morally in an elected role.

Only 30 percent considered this true in 2011, but that number rose to 72 percent in 2016.

"In essence, the simplest explanation is the best: religious conservatives changed their views to justify their preferred candidate," writes Burge.

ABORTION

Calling abortion "the most passionate policy debate in the United States today," Burge writes that he tries to avoid the topic as much as possible online.

In his book, he uses data to counter the two-part myth that "most Americans have strong views about abortion — but are willing to change their minds about it."

The first part of the myth, he writes, is the belief that the American public is highly polarized on abortion. His analysis of long-term opinion gathering on the topic concludes that "the American public is surprisingly practical about women's rights and abortion restriction."

However, the presented data and analysis predate the U.S. Supreme Court's June 24, 2022 decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Immediately, several states — especially those with higher concentrations of conservative Christians — began aggressive efforts to put tight restrictions on abortion and even criminalize patients and practitioners, and also persons who offer out-of-state transportation and other support.

Burge posted on Twitter a graph based on data from a PRRI study in March 2018. It showed that: 20 percent of white evangelicals said it should be completely illegal to have an abortion, 35 percent said it should be very difficult, and 30 percent said it should be somewhat difficult.

His Twitter feed (@ryanburge) is a good place to find additional information and look for opinion shifts after the SCOTUS decision and resulting legislative policies.

One posting regards a Gallup poll taken in May 2022 — after leaked information revealed the Supreme Court would likely overturn Roe. It showed a rise from 49 to 55 percent of the population at large identifying as pro-choice.

The rise was three times higher for women than men, and a significant rise (15 percent) was noted among persons ages 18–29.

Church-wise, the only group with a major shift toward identifying as pro-choice in that study was among those who attend services "yearly to monthly" rather than groups that attend more or less often.

In the book, Burge's "two clear takeaways" from his analysis are that public opinion about abortion has been remarkably stable in the U.S. since the early 1970s — and that few Americans hold a "truly black-and-white view of abortion."

Burge tackles a second (that's two of the overall 20 misconceptions he cites in the book) abortion-related myth: "Abortion is the most important issue for evangelical voters." His "overarching sense" from data suggests "abortion does not hold some kind of special place in the minds of white evangelical voters."

It will be interesting to note if and how opinions continue to change on the subject, however, due to repercussions from the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Questions that once were hypothetical now reach into the personal lives of many Americans — including those who profess to be "pro-life" Christians.

And, despite Burge's best efforts and ours, it will be impossible for most people to avoid the timely and divisive topic that indeed evokes much passion.

DIFFERENT PATH

Burge's debunked myth that might call for the most introspection for Christian leaders is: "Born-again experiences are common and dramatically change a person's life."

Burge, who grew up in Southern Baptist life, is well acquainted with this familiar conversion experience — noting how such churches take the Great Commission seriously. He even recalls extended appeals for salvation at the close of worship services that involved singing multiple verses of "Just As I Am" and "I Surrender All."

"I came to understand that salvation is a radical shift, that it produces dramatic changes in a person," he writes.

Yet Burge dared to ask if such experiences can "stand up to empirical scrutiny." And he concludes that data shows very little evidence of dramatic change in those who claim a born-again, conversion experience.

The first of his two key findings is that adults rarely report going through a conversion experience. Second, "in almost all cases, their religious behavior did not change in any meaningful way after they went forward and asked Jesus into their heart."

Of course, measuring the heart does not fit into statistical graphs and data panels. So these measurements are more related to church attendance — focusing on those who moved from self-identification as "not born-again" to "born-again."

Burge's goal in writing the book was not to stand in judgment but try to make sense out of the deep divide between what is widely believed and regurgitated and what polling shows to be true. While analysis is largely science, it involves some art as well — and, therefore, humility.

"My hope in writing this book is that I have given you more than a few reasons to reevaluate your thinking about religion and politics," Burge said in his concluding chapter. "You probably believe a lot of things about the social world that are not empirically true. I know I do."

A willingness to reflect on available, trustworthy information can be enlightening and bring one closer to the truth, he said. His practical advice includes asking good questions, not arguing on social media, and recognizing that you might be wrong.

"May we never stop learning, growing, being challenged, and changing our minds," writes the pastor/professor/researcher. "It's a difficult road, but aren't the most treacherous paths often the best ones?" NFJ

PURITY CULTURE

Faithfulness, not self-righteousness, marks Christian communities

BY MACHAELA MURRELL

In many ways, American culture in the 1990s was a nightmare for evangelical Christians. Premarital sex was rapidly becoming the norm, and the number of AIDS cases and teenage pregnancies skyrocketed.

As society became more secular and promiscuous, many Christian teenagers faced the daily pressure of conforming to societal norms that contradicted their church's teachings.

In response, "purity culture" arose in the early 1990s with the famous purity pledge, a personal commitment made by many young people to abstain from sex (and sometimes forms of dating) because "true love waits."

By the late '90s, "purity balls" became widespread events where fathers and daughters would attend together — with fathers often signing pledges to be good examples of purity in their daughters' lives.

Purity rings became popular symbols of abstinence not only within the church but even outside of it as young celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Demi Levato wore them proudly.

While the intentions were good, this culture of marketed purity proved problematic in some respects. This is mainly due to the misconceptions it caused, especially among young women.

When Josh Harris, author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, separated from his wife of 20 years, it shocked the Christian community. It also sparked criticism of certain underlying messages embedded in purity culture, and rightly so.

Many teenagers and young adults were taught a false narrative that sexual purity always results in a joyous and fulfilled marriage. This is what writer Katelyn Beaty has accurately called the "sexual prosperity gospel."

The truth is that celibacy does not guarantee a perfect marriage in the future. Marriages are held together by many other important components such as trust, compatibility and shared values.

Is there blessing in striving to honor God with sexual purity? Absolutely. But it does not guarantee a prosperous marriage, and it is certainly not the only relational aspect that Christians should address when seeking out potential partners.

Also, purity culture is often significantly one-sided. Christian girls are held to higher moral expectations than their male counterparts. This is especially true when it comes to clothes.

Christian girls are told that "modest is hottest." Revealing clothing is taught to be a stumbling block to men, who are seen as more visual creatures than females.

Authors Shaunti Feldhahn and Lisa A. Rice, in *For Young Women Only: What You Need to Know about How Guys Think* (Multnomah, 2006), identify the common narrative that "teenage guys are conflicted by their powerful physical urges" and "many guys don't feel the ability or responsibility to stop the sexual progression."

This narrative unfairly leaves young women with the responsibility of guarding not only themselves but also the men around them. It also sends a twisted message to girls that if a man is lustful or sexually aggressive, then it is the girl's fault.

Many women are victims of this mentality and struggle with feelings of guilt and shame after sexual assault or rape. This needs to change.

Paul admonishes the Thessalonians (4:3-8): "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that *each of you* should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable."

Notice how he says, "each of you." While we are all called to carry each other's burdens, none of us is meant to be the scapegoat for another person's wrongdoing. Men are as responsible for their actions as are women.

Perhaps the most overlooked problem within purity culture is the legalism and judgment it promotes. Christians are not called to sexual purity to showcase how righteous we are — because we are far from it.

In her book, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (2006, Brazos Press), Lauren Winner expresses eloquently that "...we cannot only think of our chastity in relationship to our bodies, but to the very way that we are forming and being conformed in our inmost being to the image of Christ as pure, faithful and chaste beings."

We practice purity in our daily lives not to simply abstain from premarital sex but to honor God with our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

However, we must avoid judging, ostracizing and condemning those who may have given into sexual temptation. Virginity is not salvation, and a promiscuous past is certainly not endless condemnation.

Let us choose the path of gentle correction, so that it is loving. Sexual purity is not a trophy of righteousness or a basis from which to judge others.

Purity culture started with the intention of promoting godliness but slowly warped into something that is sometimes more performative. As Christians, let us change that by promoting godliness and purity within our circles in order to show our commitment to Christ, not to our own self-righteousness. NFJ

-Machaela Murrell, a student at Meredith College in Raleigh, N.C., served an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Internship with Good Faith Media for the fall 2022 semester.

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'African' Before 'Baptist'

How Gullah Geechee slaves converted Southern Christianity

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Torn asunder for lust of money and flesh, humanity bled away in the rich soil and unrelenting toil of the plantation world.

On the Sea Islands and along the coastal plains of the colonial and then-United States of America, enslaved West and Central Africans and their descendants slowly, unwillingly, painfully created an expansive new world of wealth of which they were forbidden from partaking.

Not content to kidnap human beings, transport them far away from their homeland, chain them in bondage, break their bodies, steal their wages rightly earned and kill them at will — evils collectively among the greatest atrocities in human history — white slaveowners also imprisoned the minds and spirits of African Americans. Or so the oppressors thought.

Institutional Christianity and racist legal systems on their side, slave-owners denied African Americans the liberating power of knowledge by crafting laws preventing slaves from reading or writing. Determined to control the very conscience of the dark-skinned people they inherently feared yet depended upon, whites enacted edicts banishing African religious practices.

From every direction and in every way, evil ever assaulted and surrounded the African Americans who against their will transformed a land long home to indigenous peoples — Native Americans — into a dominant white civilization.

For generations homeless, penniless and broken in a strange land, Sea Island slaves defiantly nurtured lingering connections to a faraway past. Voiceless, bewildered, and bedeviled, they quietly endured.

Writer's note: As part of a research and writing project made possible by legacy funding from the former Whitsitt Baptist History & Heritage Society, in the spring of 2022 I spent two weeks along the Sea Islands and coastal plains of South Carolina and Georgia listening to voices and memories of the past in a region now recognized as the Gullah Geechee corridor.

Gullah Geechee refers to the centuries-old culture of west and central Africans kidnapped from their native homeland, transported across the Atlantic Ocean, and sold into slavery in the southeastern U.S. In slavery they retained much of their African spirituality, while many by the Civil War era also laid claim to the Baptist faith.

Their enduring stories during slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction speak uniquely and prophetically to the important issues of freedom of conscience and soul liberty to which the Whitsitt Society was dedicated. This article is the first in a series.

In small and discreet spaces away from plantation fields and masters' houses, they gathered together in simple ceremonies, nurturing the flame of their humanity amid a hellish existence. In those transcendent moments, Sea Island slaves soared across the ocean and beyond the reach of the white man's world.

Today that era of slavery is long gone, the plantations — or more rightly, forced labor camps — memories many would like to forget. Yet those who travel backroads across today's South and look closely may well see shadows of horrors past.

Neat rows of massive, aged oak trees towering over beautiful, arrow-straight driveways are a tell-tale sign. In some instances the big house at the end of the drive remains, a stately mansion — whether neglected or restored — seemingly at odds with the long-ago evil that simmered in the stillness of hot, sticky summer days, and wafted on restless evening breezes.

That dark time still ripples throughout the U.S., threaded in a vastly unequal America, denying African-American communities the same opportunities afforded white America. Slavery is America's original sin, and the fullness of redemption is nowhere in sight.

Yet amid this haunting legacy lives a remarkable people. Chained in bondage, they wrested salvation from brokenness. Set free during Reconstruction, they claimed their ground and against all odds remained upon it. And today the descendants of those forcefully resettled Africans are pointing America to a better future.

Living among the Sea Islands and coastal plains of the southeastern U.S., these descendants of slaves refer to themselves as Gullah (in South Carolina) and Geechee (in Georgia). This is the story of their ancestors prior to the American Civil War.

The "most singular and important region of the South," an April 3, 1862 *New York Times* article noted of the Sea Islands, stretched along the seacoast from "just south of Charleston, to Amelia Island, Florida."

Sons and daughters of Africa made it so, even as white slaveowners stripped away their names and treated their bodies like meat. But the connection to the slaves' homeland could not be severed.

As early as 1739 the word "Gullah" appears in written records, attributed as the name of a male slave. It is believed that the word derives from "Angola," the West African homeland of many Sea Island slaves, or perhaps Gola, a West African tribal group.

"Geechee" likely has origins in West Africa also, and/or perhaps Central Africa, although the provenance is unclear.

Arriving along the Sea Islands coast beginning in the 1700s following abduction and the long, cramped, dangerous ocean voyage westward during which many perished, chained West and Central

Built in 1738, Drayton Hall Plantation near Charleston is one of only a few plantations along the southeastern coast that survived the Civil War intact and remains standing in the present day. Pictured is the Drayton family's residence.

Africans disembarked upon a land strange yet familiar.

Forced into bondage because of their expertise in growing rice — an African coastal crop especially suitable to the mild coasts of the South Carolina and Georgia colonies — Gullah Geechee slaves understood the warm, salty climate and coastal marshes. The cries and calls of shore birds were familiar, the life-sustaining flesh of fish and shellfish similar to that of their homeland.

The language and rhythms of coast and sea they recognized, the language and hatred of their white overlords they could not.

Punished for speaking in their native tongues foreign to colonial planters, the transplanted sons and daughters of Africa developed a new creole language. Phonetically melding some 30 African dialects with English, the unique Gullah Geechee language still exists.

Present today also in pockets along what is now called the Gullah Geechee corridor are African cultural traditions brought to America in the 18th century, including basket weaving, cuisine, folklore, and spirituality.

Alongside language barriers, African spirituality also troubled white slaveholders. Often professing Episcopalian or Presbyterian Christianity but not typically devout, white planters owning large numbers of slaves — hundreds or even thousands and not infrequently spread across multiple plantations — vacillated on the best way to suppress "pagan" African practices that persisted despite prohibitive edicts.

Whereas Christianity had long been codified, African spirituality and religion remained fluid, diverse, veiled. From Islamic influences — derived from older middle Eastern Abrahamic traditions — of their native continent, many Africans believed in a singular, creator God.

This might have been a point of connection with Christianity, were it not for far older African traditions and folklore expressed in spiritual belief systems that had evolved to make sense of strange phenomenon, mysterious illnesses, and the puzzling and inevitable nature of death.

But for planters, educating slaves in the precepts of Christianity was out of the question. Should slaves learn to read, the liberating biblical story of Exodus and the inclusive nature of Jesus' teachings might crack open the door of freedom.

Struggling with the dangers of biblical themes of freedom and humanity yet determined to authoritatively place African slaves on the bottom rung of institutional Christianity's centuries-long construct of forced hierarchy, English slaveowners arrived at a compromise of sorts.

Stripping Holy Scripture of liberating elements, the 1807 publication of what became known as the "Slave Bible" reinforced white supremacy — an ideology actually absent the Bible, but no matter.

A much-abbreviated selection of scriptures, the Slave Bible notably did not include the Exodus story of God rescuing the Hebrew slaves from bondage, nor much of Jesus' teachings, instead focusing extensively on passages approving of slavery and commanding slaves to obey their masters.

In the misleading Slave Bible, whites became masters and Blacks their chattel. Soon circulating in the U.S., the Slave Bible became a pragmatic tool for controlling one's slaves. Paired with southern state laws prohibiting the teaching of reading and writing to slaves, planters and preachers' reading of the Slave Bible to illiterate slaves sought to quell any hopes of freedom that enslaved Gullahs and Geechees may have harbored.

From the Slave Bible to carefully choreographed preaching of racial hierarchy, white oversight of slaves' religion seemingly produced an orderly southern society. Increasingly some planters took certain of their slaves with them to Sunday church services.

Along the South Carolina coast many house slaves — those attending to the personal needs of planter families — sat in Episcopalian church balconies on Sunday mornings, segregated from white church members below.

Even so, slaves resisted. Formal church services catering to educated, wealthy white people made little impact, other than reaffirming the enormous chasm between Black and white. Instead, and far away from church, plantation slaves quietly practiced their own spiritual traditions.

Stripped of their traditional African musical instruments — especially drums — by slaveowners fearful of their "pagan" religion, Gullah Geechee peoples used sticks, hands and feet in "hush arbor" spiritual gatherings.

In moments of spiritual refuge and renewal apart from prying eyes, African

slaves sang, danced and prayed in their traditional rhythmical fashion.

Varying somewhat among the islands disconnected from one another and the mainland, ceremonies and celebrations of ancestral African spiritual beliefs nurtured and sustained a displaced people longing for freedom from the evils of forced labor camps and masters' sexual appetites.

Ultimately unable to suppress African religious traditions nor sufficiently endear their slaves to their learned and liturgical churches, planters of the Sea Islands and coastal plains cast their gaze toward the less lettered, more vibrant evangelical religion of Methodists and Baptists.

Persistently the soul-winning evangelicals, especially Baptists, had for decades petitioned planters to allow them to start churches on plantations in the vicinity of Savannah. In a few instances such requests had been granted, albeit with suspicion.

Despite evangelical preachers' assurances of seeking the salvation of souls only — not the liberation of bodies — the enthusiastic character and democratic nature of evangelical churches remained troublesome to planters, particularly the white evangelical training of Black preachers to be pastors, under white supervision, of plantation congregations.

But the casting of gazes went both ways, with white southern evangelicals increasingly coveting the worldly riches embodied by upper-class Christians. Tempted by and partaking of the riches of the southern slave economy, some evangelical preachers and lay leaders alike became slaveowners and began ascending the socio-economic ladder.

Ultimately an alliance emerged as preachers' focus on soul freedom only assured planters that evangelical religion could assist in controlling slaves. At the same time, slaves experienced — at least in some instances — plain folk white people who, although reinforcing slavery's rightness, did not personally harbor the evilest intentions common among planters.

Might Savannah's planters allow their slave congregations to travel to the city to attend Sunday church under white supervision? Evangelical queries were met with approval, enslaved Black Baptists increasingly gathering near, and then within, Savannah.

Originally referred to as a "Colored Baptist" plantation congregation, the church constructed a meeting house in Savannah and became known as the "First African Baptist Church."

Soon two additional African Baptist churches — Second African and Third African — also emerged in Savannah. Each of the city's African Baptist churches was supervised by white ministers who reaffirmed the godliness of African slavery.

Even so, white supervisors were not always present, nor all-seeing. From the beginning, Savannah's First African Baptist Church "developed a unique spiritual and cultural identity by blending African folkways and Christianity," according to Gullah Geechee scholar Philip Morgan.

African spirituality influenced worship services and, in some instances, slaves incorporated discreet symbols of African spirituality into church buildings — including Islamic tile work — whites none the wiser.

Years later arose a legend that Savannah's First African Baptist Church on the eve of the Civil War hid runaway slaves in a secret compartment under the church floor. Not so, according to Savannah's Vaughnette Goode-Walker — a remarkable and blunt Black woman who is a renowned historian and author, preserver of the area's African traditions, and formerly associated with the Savannah congregation.

While touring Savannah's slave sites with Goode-Walker, she stated that the story made for good publicity but, in reality, the Underground Railroad did not have a presence in Savannah.

A few blocks from the church, Goode-Walker pointed across a beautiful city park to an innocent-looking old brick building in modern times repurposed. There, she somberly said, African slaves were once imprisoned prior to being auctioned off on the very soil upon which we were standing.

We fell silent. On park grounds, families — white, black, brown — relaxed or strolled around, none seemingly the wiser to the evil that once hovered about.

Savannah was the most prominent example of the emerging African Baptist city church movement, but was far from alone. New Orleans' First African Baptist Church, founded in 1826, may have been the first.

In the 1840s the movement gained significant momentum. Prior to the Civil War other First African Baptist churches included St. Simon's Island, Ga.; Richmond, Va.; Louisville and Lexington, Ky.; and Nashville, Tenn.

Across the South, editors of white newspapers — religious and secular — often praised First African Baptist congregations deemed especially pro-slavery. In the South, by the time of the Civil War, the Baptist faith claimed predominance among denominations inclusive of slaves.

About the same time, according to some historians, slaves' ancestral spiritual customs and practices transitioned from hidden "hush arbors" to more visible "praise houses" — small wooden buildings (sometimes home of an elder spiritual leader) serving as a slave community's spiritual and cultural center.

The timing was not coincidental: Once planters' alliance with evangelicals proved profitable, they felt less threatened by persistent African traditions. Some planters went so far as to help in the construction of praise houses, unwanted assistance that slaves often rejected.

A growing African Baptist Church movement and the common, self-contained praise houses aside, many slaves were forced to attend white Baptist congregations in which pro-slavery theology and ideology were routinely preached.

Collectively in the many thousands, slaves sat in the balconies of hundreds of churches urban and rural throughout the South. Sundays brought constant reminders that God had predestined them to enslavement in service of the white race.

Having largely switched from rice cultivation to Sea Island cotton — a more valuable commodity than upland cotton — planters along the South Carolina coast boasted of their large plantations, massive slave labor camps numbering, in some

First African Baptist Church on Sapelo Island, Ga., formed in 1866, immediately after the Civil War. The original building is long gone.

The ruins of Savannah's Wormsloe Plantation, constructed in the 1740s.

instances, more than a thousand imprisoned human beings.

Anchoring this enormous wealth, the small and idyllic riverfront town of Beaufort, S.C. — home to rows of splendid mansions with well-manicured lawns — was among the South's most storied locales.

Within Beaufort's vicinity many thousands of slaves toiled six days a week, and on Sundays in the town's thriving churches, slaves vastly outnumbered white parishioners.

In Beaufort and beyond, planters and evangelicals alike convinced themselves that their chattel were sufficiently Christianized. And so it seemed to white eyes.

Ever diligent, slaves took notice. Participating in the white man's religion seemingly pleased their overlords. And although they could not understand much of the language and ritual of Christianity, at least some white Christians treated them more kindly than did their masters.

In short, Christianity empowered slave communities to a greater degree than previously experienced.

Having accepted Christianity, enslaved Gullah Geechee peoples created space to more freely celebrate their own African spiritual traditions away from whites and in their private praise houses.

The African spiritual "ring shout" — for generations having been forbidden by planters but defiantly infused into slave work songs, according to some historians — in its fullness became central in the praise house.

Rhythmic, ecstatic ceremonies consisting of music, singing and dancing performed in a moving circle, ring shouts were directed to ancestors and traditional gods.

In an ever-increasing tempo adults in a counterclockwise direction danced, called, clapped, and shouted throughout the night, children often watching in wonder. Shouting included an emotional call-and-response dynamic between participants.

In turn, African slaves' ancestral spirituality shaped Black American Christianity. Rhythmic movements, including music accompanied by dancing and swaying, became common in early Black church services and remain to the present day in black spirituals — along with blues and jazz, according to some historians.

Call-and-response migrated into antebellum Black church life as illiterate preachers, needing help from the congregation, would cry out "Read!"

A church member who had quietly acquired some learning — typically a house slave — would read or recite from a biblical passage, after which the preacher would freely expound before pausing to again shout, "Read!"

In time the congregational call-and-response evolved into present-day form, and is sometimes observed in white congregations.

As in most cultures throughout history, West and Central Africans' spiritual beliefs sought answers for the problems of human suffering and mortality.

Why did some people die young for no apparent reason, and some live to an old age?

Was human existence confined to the body? What happened after death?

Beliefs in a Creator God or gods offered no clear answers. Illnesses, dreams, visions, odd coincidences, and perceived patterns preceded bad happenings.

Deadly creatures large and small often emerged during twilight and dark hours. Confusion and fright marked daily existence. Life was difficult, death often sudden.

If humans had souls that could return to God upon bodily death, it also seemed that spirits of the dead — some good, some evil — hovered over the living, especially lurking during night hours.

Western Christianity also contended with many unknowns, but produced theological creeds, doctrines and catechisms to provide official answers to stanch questions, soothe fears, and place boundaries on community behavior and beliefs.

Slaves along the southeastern coast struggled to understand "the white folks' church," religion neatly packaged and seemingly detached from reality.

They also were unfamiliar with the ritual of baptism. As one formerly enslaved Gullah living on St. Helena Island in South Carolina recalled in an oral interview, years following his liberation from bondage, "*Slabe don't knownotting 'bout baptizing.*" Nor did Christians' Jesus have a parallel in African folklore or religion.

Even so, white ministers evangelized, converted and baptized many slaves. In

white Christians' eyes, they were enlarging the kingdom of heaven. But enslaved Blacks saw and experienced something different.

Aside from constant reminders that they were an inferior people in the white God's eyes, they also recognized that Baptists — predominant in the Deep South, often of modest means and limited education, and their churches characterized by informal worship and self-government — treated male slaves with more equanimity than did wealthy slaveowners and their churches.

Many white Baptist churches went so far as to encourage enslaved Black males, despite their lack of education, to preach if the "Holy Spirit" called them to do so.

The language of "spirit" bridged vastly different worlds. And simply being welcomed and included in the white man's church offered the empowering prospect of further advancement in the white man's world.

Enslaved women, cursed with an even lower lot in life than males, identified their own unique benefit from being associated with evangelical churches.

Their bodies belonging to white men who could and often did rape them at will, their children subject to being taken away from them at any moment, their daily lives marked by exhausting toil policed by flesh-cutting whips, and their men powerless to protect them, enslaved women existed in a never-ending world of humiliation and horrors.

Some modern women historians who examine slavery from the perspective of trauma note that these women interpreted Jesus not as the avenue to a blissful afterlife in a perfect heaven — a concept absent African spirituality — but rather as a divine figure of radical human suffering with whom they could identify.

As Jesus had been rejected, scourged, humiliated, and had everything taken from him, so had they. In Jesus, enslaved women saw themselves. In his teachings of heaven as a place of rest from suffering, enslaved women saw their own longings.

The white man's richly adorned heaven was a stretch, and in African spirituality death was no guarantee of a prosperous afterlife after death. But in Jesus, enslaved women especially could cling to the simple hope of a restful spirit life following their earthly sufferings.

Enslaved Gullah Geechee peoples also reimagined baptism in their own unique way. Puzzling over the practice, they embraced and reshaped the earliest and holiest of Christian rituals.

Water, symbolic in Christian baptism, was and is sacred in Gullah Geechee coastal culture.

"The waterway is our bloodline," observes Queen Quet, contemporary Gullah Geechee leader and founder of the Sea Island Gullah/Geechee Coalition. Water is life, sustenance, and ancestral connections.

Ibos, among West African peoples brought to the Sea Islands as slaves, have an old saying: "The water brought us here, the water will take us away."

Historically, Gullah Geechee peoples along the coast, upon taking ownership of Christianity initially forced upon them, baptized in running water — a connection to African spirituality and also symbolic of the washing away of sins.

Gullah Geechee peoples also reshaped the evangelical conversion experience leading to baptism.

Prior to the late 19th century in the white evangelical tradition, conversion was a journey that began with a concern about the fate of one's soul, extended through a long period of anxiety (from months to years), arrived at a point of "conviction" that the penitent could do nothing to save himself or herself from damnation, led to a "surrender" to God's will through a changed "heart," and ended with baptism.

Gullah Geechee slaves and their descendants, on the other hand, modified Christianity's conversion rituals, turning to their African roots for guidance and creating a unique rite known as "seeking."

Both spiritual and coming of age, "seeking" was mandatory on the part of young people for participation in praise house ceremonies, adult community, and Christian baptism. It was not an easy process.

Sent forth by a spiritual leader, the young person ventured alone into the wilderness on a prolonged quest for self-identity, trusting God for safety. It was a frightening experience, especially during the night hours.

Prayer marked seeking, and the seeker was expected to experience dreams and visions before returning from the wilderness. Upon completion of one's wilderness wanderings, one's spiritual guide helped the seeker interpret the dreams and visions.

Seeking remained common into the second half of the 20th century. Melvin Campbell, retired educator and Gullah Geechee leader on Hilton Head Island — once a place of massive plantations upon which many thousands of slaves toiled — remembers his seeking experience as a young man in the 1950s.

"It took me a long time," he recalls of the process that took months of plunging again and again into the wilderness until his spiritual leader became convinced of the sincerity of his dreams and visions. Standing in a wooded area of today's Hilton Head Island and remembering the dark nights through which he stumbled about more than half-a-century ago, Melvin seems to shudder.

"Snakes were everywhere," and alligators too, he recalls, speaking softly and staring introspectively at the ground near his feet as if he was seeing the deadly reptiles.

"You really had to trust God," he says, before lifting his head, his gaze sweeping the nearby — and now safe — woods and marsh, and his mood turning lighter.

"Now," he chuckles, "the snakes are gone. You don't need God anymore!"

The seeking he remembers well; his baptism afterward seemed anticlimactic.

Natural dangers and supernatural dreams and visions of the seeking experience of old served as a ritual to bring young Gullah Geechee into connection with their African ancestors. In today's world minus widespread wilderness and absent the ritual of seeking, some Gullah Geechee yet find direction in their lives through nature's elements serving as symbols of continuity with ancestors.

Patricia Elaine Sabree is a joyous and wise Gullah Geechee artist from "a small country town carved from the dark earth … in the low country of South Carolina" who sells her beautiful and colorful artwork in her inviting Savannah gallery.

Her art derives from "images she sees in her dreams" and visions, many of which involve water as a cleansing power or means of connection to ancestral homelands.

Ancestral spirituality is woven into her paintings, including images of self-baptism — sometimes in ocean waters, sometimes in an ocean of rice, the latter of which requires immersion in water for growth — a cleansing and connectional experience.

A similar theme was voiced by a Gullah Geechee leader on St. Helena Island near Beaufort, who referred to a hurricane that once ravaged her island as a cleansing of the land.

While fusing the central tenets of Christianity into ancestral African spirituality, Gullah Geechee peoples also historically incorporated numerous other religious and folk traditions into their individual and communal faith, including Islamic tenets and voodoo — the latter "root medicine" conjured by witch doctors, conjurers, and spell-casters.

The layers of spirituality run deep. The late Gullah Geechee historian Cornelia Walker Bailey of Georgia's Sapelo Island recounted the story of how her community, upon deciding to build a church, had a disagreement over whether the church should be Baptist or Islamic.

Differences between the two traditions were perceived minor, and elements of both were incorporated into the chosen tradition — Baptist.

On Sapelo and throughout the larger Gullah Geechee coastal corridor, Islamic influences in 19th-century Baptist church buildings are evidenced in structures facing east, the direction in which Muslims face when praying (and the direction to Africa), and afore-mentioned Islamic architectural touches, such as tile patterns in ceilings and emblems embedded in floors.

The influence of voodoo is especially evident in African-American cemeteries. Passing by a Gullah cemetery in a wooded area of Hilton Head Island, Melvin Campbell did a double take when he noticed some people wandering amid the unkempt place of the dead.

"They're not Gullah," he said, shuddering. "We stay away from cemeteries," he continued, a comment bringing to mind several neglected, overgrown and out-of-the-way slavery-era African burial places I had located only after traversing through remote woods.

Campbell went on to talk about good spirits and evil spirits, and the common Gullah tradition of "passing the baby" — handing a baby across the casket of a deceased relative, while telling the deceased, "This is your grandbaby" or "This is your grandniece" — so that the spirit of the dead would recognize the living relative and not visit him or her with evil.

Gullah Geechee cemeteries are places from which spirits and souls want to rise. Traditionally located within a relatively short distance to running water, whether an ocean or a river, the cemeteries provided an opportunity for the soul of the deceased — separate from the spirit, which remained nearby — to swim back to Africa.

Seashells, often placed atop graves, represent the common refrain: "The sea brought us, the sea shall take us back."

Other ordinary items — cups, bowls, soap dishes, spectacles, cigar boxes, etc. — also hearken back to Africa. It is believed the items will help trap underground the spirit of the deceased, keeping it from returning from the grave to haunt the lives of the yet living.

Back on present-day Hilton Head, Melvin recalled from long ago the fright that accompanied the death of a family member or acquaintance during his young years. Those still living at that time hoped that the spirit of the deceased would not reach out from the dead and claim another life.

"Deaths seemed to come in threes," he said, and "you were always looking over your shoulder."

He glanced over his shoulder, as if from habit. Looking around at the woods, he acknowledged that voodoo "still exists, but nobody talks about it anymore."

Historic African-American Christianity is both complex and defiant. "Gullah religion has been engaged as a tool of subversion … as a real-world engagement with the divine whose aim is not wholly apparent beyond the outsider gaze," writes African-American historian Elijah Heyward III.

"Religious subversion, the undercutting of the power and authority of a system or institution such as slavery, was used by enslaved Africans and their progenitors to fashion physical and spiritual liberation beyond bondage to accomplish the strivings of liberation theology."

Like many historians who have studied Gullah Geechee culture, Heyward discusses the Baptist faith more than any other denomination, representative of the dominant influence of Baptists in the South since the early 1800s among African slaves and their descendants.

African slaves' movement toward and into the Baptist faith was more a quest for self-empowerment — including the preservation of their own ancestral spirituality and culture — than the embracing of a white man's Jesus.

When in time they began bestowing names on their own independent and quasi-independent church buildings in the South, their placement of "African" before "Baptist" reflected the primacy of ancestral spirituality and identity.

Gullah Geechee slaves, it seems, perceived Baptists — a non-hierarchical, local-church-centric Christian denomination — as most suitable for their own purposes of quiet resistance, spirited defiance, and soul freedom beyond the constraints of pro-slavery white religion.

Even before slavery's end in America, African Baptists had converted southern Christianity into a spirituality beyond the reach of bodily enslavement, and a belief system transcendent of inhumane creeds and doctrine.

In praise houses their spirits soared far above and beyond lived reality, and at the end of their tortured earthly existence a once-suffering Jesus reached down from heaven and carried their souls to a place of eternal rest. NFJ

Christian nationalists do not exist

BY LARRY KINCHELOE

The term "Christian nationalism" is contradictory: "Christian nationalists" do not exist.

"No one can serve two masters at the same time," said Jesus. "You will hate one of them and love the other — or you will be faithful to one and dislike the other" (Matt. 6:24 NIRV).

Therefore, one can be a nationalist or be a Christian — but not both.

Christian nationalists focus primarily on internal politics such as passing laws that reflect their view of Christianity and its role in personal and social dimensions.

In the U.S., nationalists loudly support the presence of Christian symbols in public spaces and push for constitutional amendments to recognize the heritage of Christianity in America. They seek harsh restrictions on immigration to prevent a demographic change.

These nationalists claim the U.S. is and has always been a Christian nation — and they want to "take back" the country for God. Their American identity is completely fused with their understanding of Christianity.

It should be a wake-up call for all Americans when U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Green of Georgia proudly labeled herself as a Christian nationalist.

Christian nationalism, she said, will solve the problems of crime, school shootings and sexual immorality in America. Good luck with that.

U.S. Representative Lauren Boebert of Colorado stated, "The church is supposed to direct the government; the government is not supposed to direct the church."

Obviously, she missed where Jesus said, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give back to God what belongs to God" (Mark 12:17 NIRV).

It is common for Christian nationalists to treat Americans they regard as non-Christians (even many other Christians) as second-class citizens. Minorities and dissenters who do not conform to what is considered a properly established national ideal are controlled by force.

During the violent Christian insurrection (a term not used lightly) and occupation of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, many of the rioters proudly and loudly claimed they were Christians.

There was a large wooden cross outside the Capitol and Christian-themed signs — such as "Jesus saves" — throughout the crowd. One rioter carried a Christian flag into a legislative chamber, and Christian music was played loudly.

Another rioter — who had broken into the Senate chambers — knelt to invoke the name of Jesus Christ in his prayer. A common theme advocated by many of these participants was that American Christians need to be prepared to fight, physically, to preserve America's Christian identity.

After the January 6 riot, more than 400 evangelical leaders condemned the "heresy of Christian nationalism" — expressing their offense at the use of Christian symbols to justify violence. The movement, "Christians Against Christian Nationalism," was formed.

Their mission statement includes: "As Christians, our faith teaches us everyone is created in God's image and commands us to love one another. As Americans, we value our system of government and the good that can be accomplished in a constitutional democracy."

It notes that "whether we worship at a church, mosque, synagogue or temple, America has no second-class faiths. All are equal under the U.S. Constitution. As Christians, we must speak in one voice condemning Christian nationalism as a distortion of the gospel of Jesus and a threat to American democracy."

Even a group called "Heathens against Hate" took offense that several of the rioters had tattoos incorporating pagan symbols they hold dear.

Patriotism — the love of country — is different from nationalism.

Nationalism starts with the belief that humanity can be divided into distinct cultural groups held together by shared traits of language, religion and ethnicity. Each group, nationalists believe, should have their own government that should promote the identified nation's cultural identity.

A Baylor University study found that those who identified as strong Christian nationalists consider Muslims (62%), atheists (57%) and Buddhists (26%) to be threats to national unity. Also, 73% showed agreement with QAnon conspiracy theories reflected in much of Christian nationalism.

Gen. Michael Flynn, former U.S. National Security Advisor in the Trump Administration, who received a full presidential pardon for lying to federal investigators, said: "If we are going to have one nation under God, which we must, we have to have one religion. One nation under God and one religion under God."

That disturbing statement should be a warning for everyone — especially those familiar with the fictional *Handmaid's Tale*. Under the right conditions, the seeds of Christian nationalism grow easily into briars of Christian fascism.

A Christian is someone seeking to follow Jesus. Therefore, the key distinction between appropriate political engagement — which exhibits Christlike values and priorities — and nationalism — which exhibits power and control — is vitally important.

Therefore, "Christian nationalist" is an oxymoron. One who follows the teachings of Jesus cannot faithfully embrace the agenda of nationalists who equate love of country or political party with love of God.

Because no one can serve two masters. NFJ

-Larry Kincheloe, M.D., is a retired obstetrician-gynecologist in Oklahoma City.

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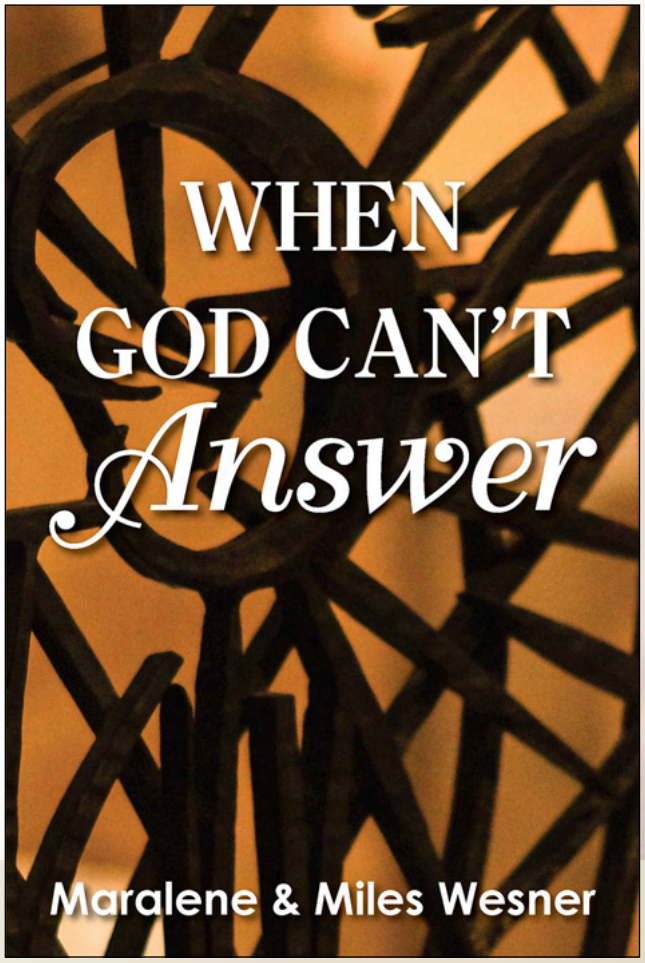

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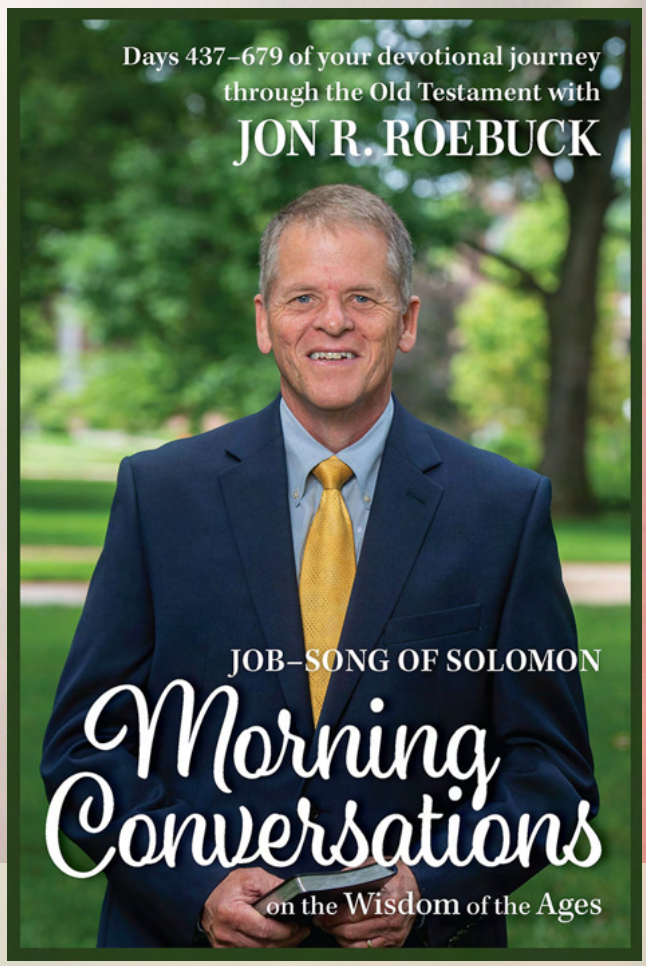

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Questions Christians ask scientists

How does scientific truth differ from religious truth?

BY PAUL WALLACE

In 1969 Johnny Cash recorded a witty song called "A Boy Named Sue." Written by Shel Silverstein, it tells of a three-year-old boy who's "given that awful name" before his father abandons the family.

The boy named Sue grows into a man named Sue. The moniker ensures that his "fists got hard and [his] wits got keen." So adult Sue roams from town to town in search of old Dad, looking for revenge.

Spotting him in a Gatlinburg bar, Sue throws himself onto his Dad with the stored-up fury of a lifetime. Just as Sue has his father in his gun sights, the old man smiles and explains that he gave him the name to make him strong.

Since he wouldn't be around to teach him anything, the father said he figured if is boy survived with a name like Sue, he'd be strong indeed.

In the last verse of the song Sue recalls getting choked up, dropping his gun, calling him "Pa" and his dad calling him "Son." Sue adds: "…and I came away with a different point of view."

But that appreciation only goes so far: "I think about him every now and then, every time I try and every time I win" — yet concluding with, "and if I ever have a son, I'm gonna name him Bill or George or anything but Sue."

The humor is delivered atop a dark urgency: There's more here than laughs. Or is there?

When captivated by a song such as "A Boy Named Sue," is it because it points toward the truth? About anything? About real fathers and sons?

If so, perhaps one small truth expressed in Cash's song is that fathers come to fear their sons. Freud may nod approvingly, but does this small truth stand on its own, independent of all else?

Or might it, if we dwell on it, take us to other truths — perhaps bigger, perhaps smaller — about the world? Or is it related only to mere neurons and chemical reactions in our brains so that it makes us laugh for a time but is ultimately about nothing at all?

What is truth? Science and religion provide different answers.

Science, taken alone, says that empirical facts and theories such as evolution, the big bang, neuroscience, geology, physics and so forth are all the truth we can know. Put another way, if one wants anything that goes by the name of "truth," then one must not venture beyond this circle defined by science.

If facts are what define that circle, stories are what is added to the facts. Stories take us outside of that circle.

In my use of the word, stories are *interpretations* of the facts. (Scientific theories, being interpretations, are themselves stories of a kind. But I am thinking of interpretation in the less radical, more colloquial sense of the word.)

What I propose is that no one lives, or can live, or has ever lived within the narrow circle of scientific truth, which is insufficient for the grounding of human life. We are *always* dealing with the question of interpretation. And that question is not *whether* to interpret, but *how*.

We cannot avoid believing in stories. We can only hope to choose the best ones.

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Here is a bad story about fathers, courtesy of blogger and biologist PZ Myers:

He tells Christians, Muslims and Jews that they have no heavenly father and that "the imaginary guy you are worshiping is actually a hateful monster and an example of a bad and tyrannical father, and you aren't even a very special child" — but rather "a mediocre product of a wasteful and entirely impersonal process."

He describes "the paternity tests" of the human species that has evolved from apes, "rat-like primates," reptiles, amphibians, fish, worms and single-celled micro-organisms resulting from chemistry. He concludes: "Your daddy was a film of chemical slime on a Hadean rock, and he didn't care about you — he was only obeying the laws of thermodynamics."

Now, this is a story just as surely as any other. Don't get me wrong: I don't for a moment doubt the basics of evolution and thermodynamics. I don't doubt scientific truth.

But Myers is not forced by the facts of nature into the belief that the facts of nature are all that is. Instead, he has done exactly what storytellers do: He has told us a story — which is not really a problem. The problem is that he tells a *bad* story.

Yet he insists he is not telling us a story at all. "Reality," Myers writes, "is harsh." His story is the story you must believe if you insist on not believing in stories. Therefore, his story is pure irony.

Here is a good story about fathers, courtesy of Jesus:

Once there was a father who, at his son's request, gave him his full inheritance early. The boy immediately squandered it, landed in the gutter, and ended up looking hungrily at pig food.

In the words of the late Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner, writing from the prodigal's perspective: "There wasn't anything to do that I had not done. There wasn't anything to see that I had not seen. There wasn't anything to lose I hadn't lost. I envied the pigs their slops because at least they knew what they were hungry for, whereas I was starving to death and had no idea why. So, I went back [home. And when I did] he held me so tight, I could hear the thump of his old ticker through his skimpy coat."

The prodigal goes home in shame and is welcomed as the beloved son, a guest of honor. In Jesus' story we learn this truth: We are loved by God as the prodigal is loved by his father.

Please note that you do not need to reject the facts and theories of science in order to believe this story, but you *must* reject this story in order to believe Myers' story. Religious truth contains scientific truth, but not the other way around.

Irony is magical in small doses. Johnny Cash, Jesus and all other great storytellers know this.

What could be more ironic than a steel-fisted fighting machine named Sue? What could be more ironic than a rich boy pining for pigs' food?

But irony is like curry or ginger, made to give a story bite and astringency, and can't be the whole meal.

Can we really believe the truth of Jesus' story in an age of irony? It is not easy for me, for it is reflexive of a scientist to pass it off as a sweet tale made to comfort us in the darkness of a cold and meaningless universe.

But, if I am able to check my self-conscious impulses just long enough, this story reaches me as an echo of a hint of something really real; of something true, but something that cannot be falsified or confirmed by science, which always stays safely within its self-prescribed limits.

More importantly, the narrow truth of science, taken alone, doesn't match life as I know it and live it. Nor, I dare say, does it match the life of anyone who has ever lived.

I am a Christian because I find the stories about Jesus *and* the stories (parables) he himself tells to be true — not in a scientific way, but in a way that does not contradict science.

These stories speak truth not only to my greatest joys and hopes but also to my frailties and fears. They resonate powerfully with what I believe to be my deepest self.

Scientific truth, as true as it may be, is unable to do so. But that does not mean I as a Christian must reject it. NFJ

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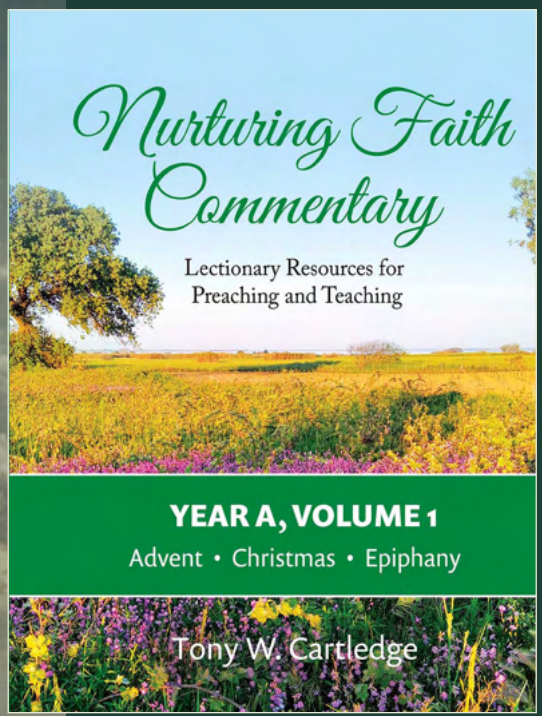

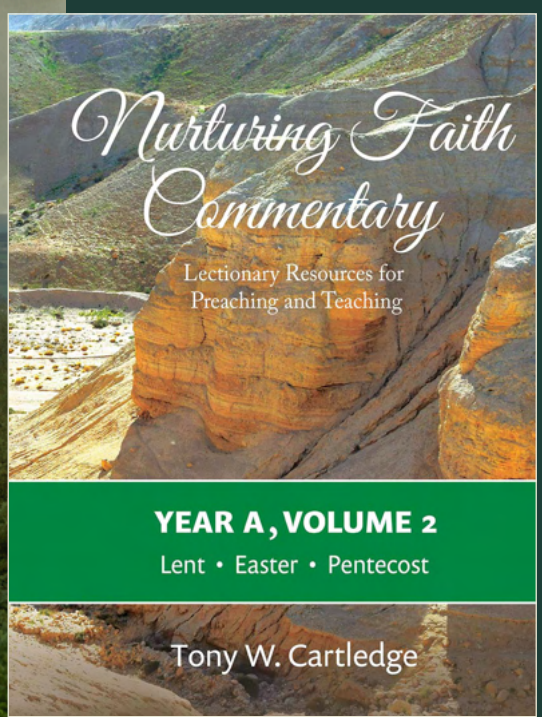

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