MAY-JUNE 2023

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

Before 'woke,' there was 'awake'

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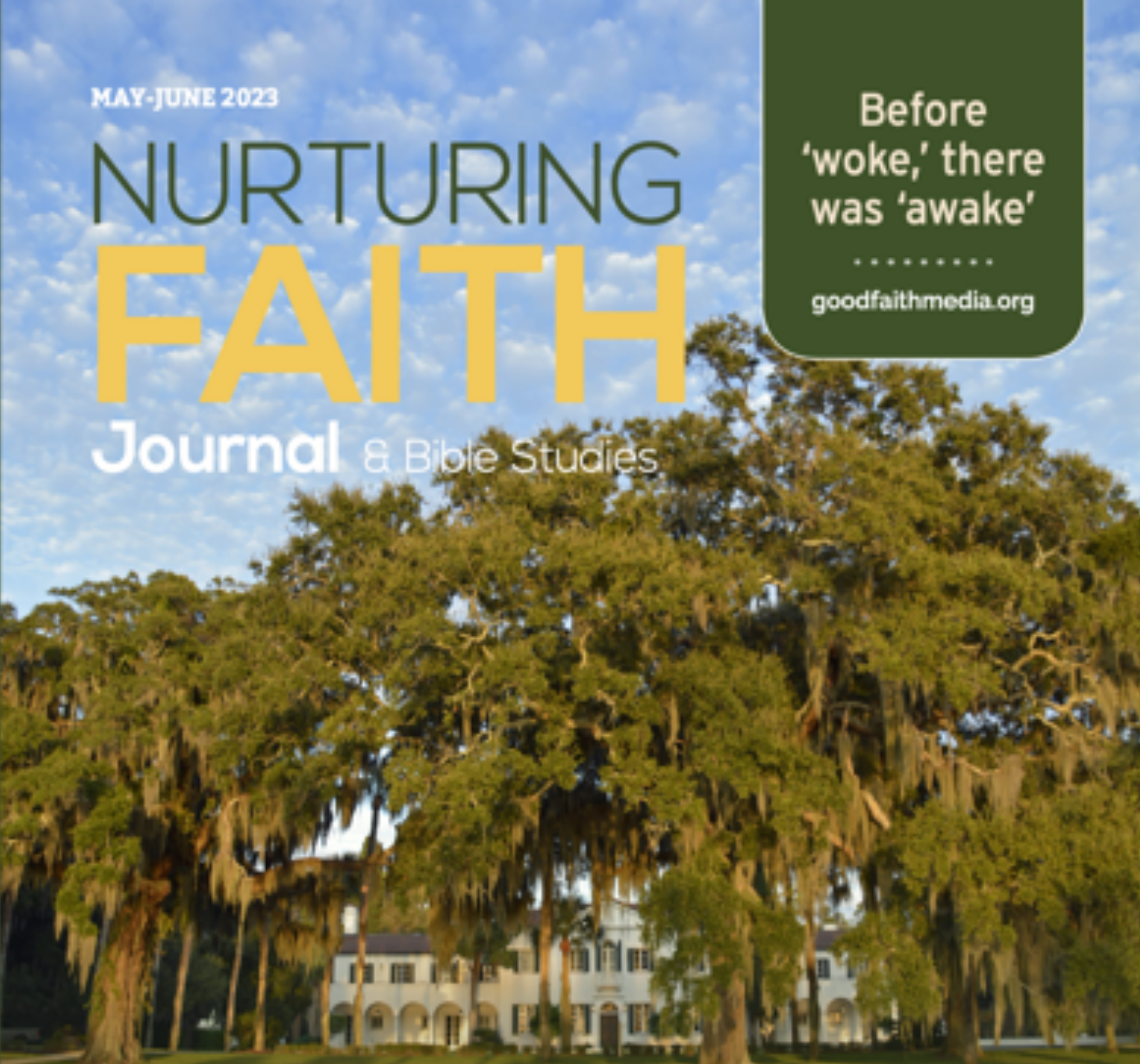


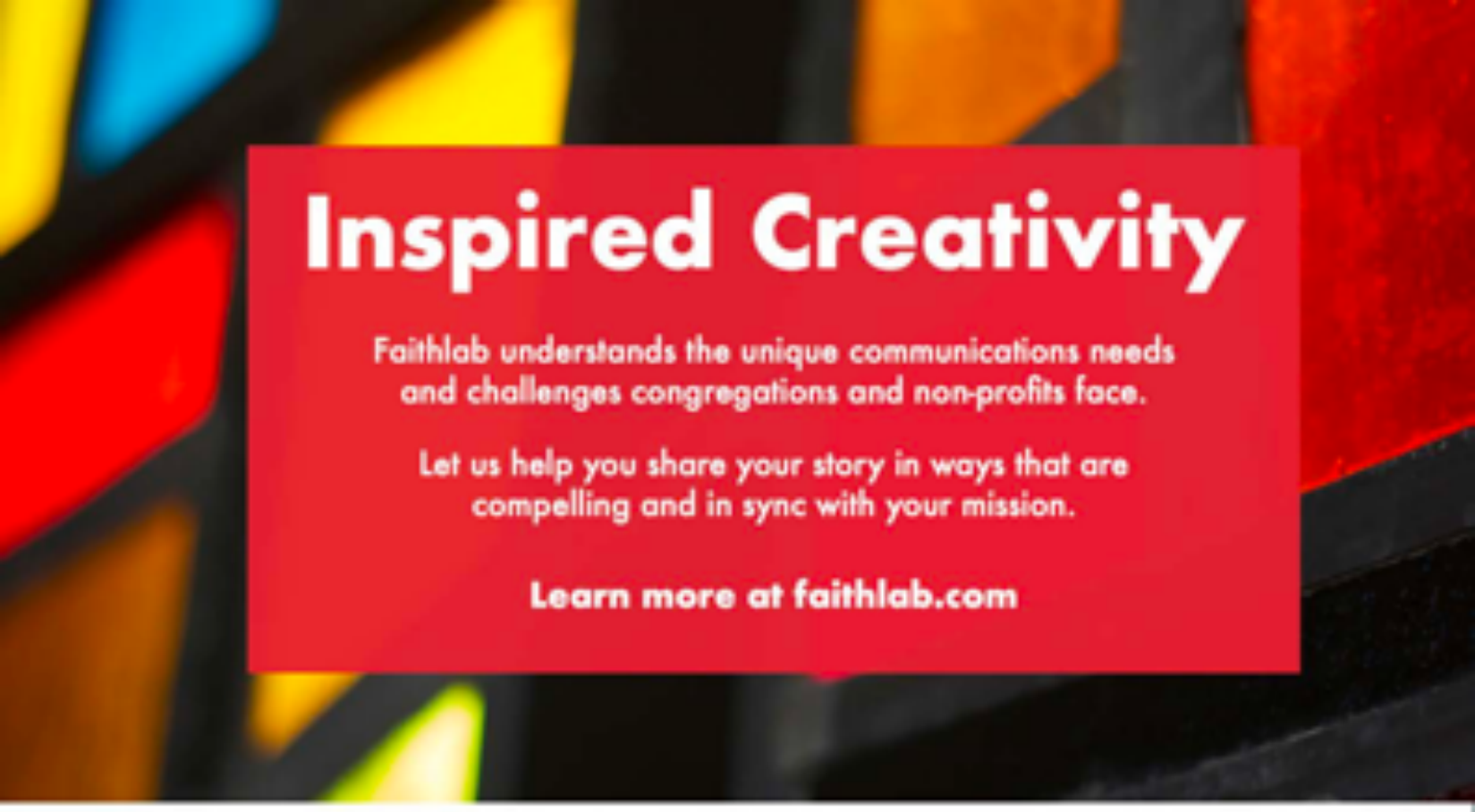
MUSIC & MORE
Mike Curb's life-shaping innovation and generosity

'GREATEST THREAT'
Heeding the warnings about Christian nationalism

'ALSO IN ME'
Journalist John Blake on finding grace amid hard relationships

WHAT IS GOOD NEWS?
Recognizing, refocusing and restating the gospel

A publication of Good Faith Media



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Editor's Letter

Conversations have been a large part of my work as editor of this journal. Such stimulating and insightful engagements add spice to life.

Often these conversations that lead to feature stories are my one-on-one exchanges with the person being interviewed. Sometimes, however, such conversations have taken place at events with an audience.

Two conversational-style interviews resulted in feature stories in this issue. Both have a media angle — one dealing with the music industry and the other about a recent book by a seasoned journalist.

Talking with music executive and philanthropist Mike Curb of Nashville was thoroughly enjoyable. His remarkable career has so many high points that there was no shortage of topics to address.

John Blake, an award-winning journalist with CNN, is someone I've known for many years. Yet his new, highly personal book, *More Than I Imagined: What a Black Man Discovered About the White Mother He Never Knew*, amazed me.

You'll find my conversation with John here as well. He talks about the discoveries of grace and better understanding that arose from pursuing challenging relationships with family members he never knew.

It wouldn't be *Nurturing Faith Journal* without a few things to push our conventional thinking. Veteran pastor and professor Dan Day does exactly that.

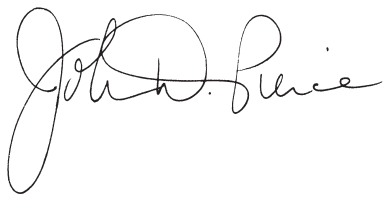
He thoughtfully probes the question, "What is the good news we are offering today?" Easy answers don't suffice.

In-house historian Bruce Gourley and political analyst Matthew Dowd don't plaster over the present danger of Christian nationalism. Theirs is a needed wake-up call.

Also, you'll find Bruce's final article in his multi-year series on Religion and the American Presidents. It has received as much praise and poo-poo as anything we've published.

Yet those who've read the series would likely confess to knowing more about these national leaders and their religious perspectives than before.

There's much more in this issue, so read on!



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OUR MISSION

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

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

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

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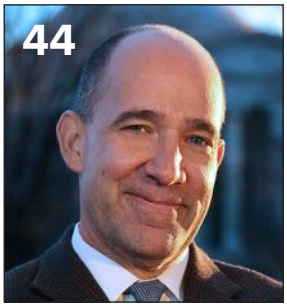

Greatest Threat

Dowd warns of Christian nationalism's danger to faith and country

By John D. Pierce

INSIDE

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MAY/JUNE 2023

FEATURES

THE LIGHTER SIDE

You don't have to wish you wrote this column

By Brett Younger **20**

'WHAT WAS IN HER, WAS ALSO IN ME'

A conversation with John Blake about racial identity, faith and change

By John D. Pierce

THOUGHTS

On the cover: Jekyll island Historic District, by Bruce Gourley.

WORTH REPEATING

"Congregations are at their best when they climb out on a limb and try something they're not sure they can do."

— Bill Ireland, executive leadership coach and an associate with Pinnacle Leadership (pinnlead.com)

"In obituaries where a religious community was mentioned, the person lived on average 5.5 years longer."

Researcher Ryan Burge on an Ohio State study of faith and longevity (Twitter)

"When you think of faith as a war to be won, you will see people as enemies to be conquered. When you think of faith as a world to be explored, you will see people as neighbors to be loved."

Author Jonathan Merritt (Twitter)

"Gentleness and humility are at the heart of Jesus' heart, and as a teacher they are his curriculum. They are the fruit of our becoming increasingly like him."

Speaker and coach Guy Sayles of Asheville, N.C. (fromtheinteresection.org)

"A religion that is healthy is made up of people who are willing to be loving critics and critical lovers of their own religion."

Pastor Shaun King of Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga., introducing his sermon series "Losing Our Religion

"I cover a lot of controversial topics in my writing, from racism to Christian nationalism, but nothing draws fire like drawing attention to sexual abuse and coverups in white evangelical churches. Nothing even comes close."

Kristin Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne* (Twitter)

"When a Christian adds, 'I'm saying this in love,' before saying something, you know nothing that follows is going to be loving."

Brendan J. Robertson, author of *Dry Bones and Holy Wars* (Twitter)

"My latest visit to the USA has confirmed this proposition: American evangelical churches are split between those who see Christianity as a prop in their white political culture and those who see Christianity as about service to Christ and his kingdom."

Aussie Anglican Bible scholar Michael Bird (Twitter)

"While most Americans today embrace pluralism and reject this anti-democratic claim, majorities of white evangelical Protestants ... remain animated by this vision of a white Christian America."

Robert P. Jones of Public Religion Research Institute on the finding by his organization and the Brookings Institution that two-thirds of white evangelicals are sympathetic to Christian nationalism (PRRI)

"[At] the peak of the sexual abuse crisis, what becomes most important is talk about whether or not a woman can speak on a Sunday in a Southern Baptist church. It has been the way we've seen problems dealt with before."

Beth Moore, whose memoir, *All My Knotted-Up Life*, reveals her father as her sexual abuser, on becoming a diversion for those who downplay and hide abuse in churches (NCPR)

Taking a closer look at Jesus' if-then statement about truth

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Jesus loves without conditions. Yet knowing the truth that sets one free — though well identified and widely available — is conditional.

The January-February issue of this journal — devoted to the theme of truth — led to an invitation to address a group of United Methodists on the topic. In my preparation, I took fresh notice of an important "if-then" clause used by Jesus in a familiar teaching.

An odd verse division breaks up this significant if-then statement that is clearly continuous.

Often, we hear the words of Jesus found in John 8:32 quoted as: "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free."

However, that is a part of a fuller statement. It is the hypothesis that begins with the often-omitted word "then."

"*Then* you shall know the truth…," said Jesus. Which should take one on a search for the preceding condition, launched by the word "if."

It is found in the preceding verse that is poorly divided.

Together, verses 31 and 32 tell us, "Jesus said, '*If* you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. *Then* you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

This goes to the core of what led to the formation and continuation of the Jesus Worldview Initiative that provides a lens for taking note of the frequent redefinitions of what it means to be Christian today.

Much of Americanized Christianity finds its versions of "truth" in fear-driven, self-serving, political ideologies rather than (and often in contrast to) Jesus' teachings by word and deed as he revealed God to humanity and set an example for abundant life.

There are favored methods for moving away from Jesus and creating one's preferred version of "truth." But these do not truly set anyone free.

A common methodology for keeping obedience to Jesus' teachings — summed up in a twofold command that he deemed "greatest" — at an arm's length or further is this shift:

Rather than sticking with Jesus' clear and primary invitation to "Follow me," an initiation rite calls for "accepting Jesus as personal savior" in order to secure a heavenly reservation.

Various personal disciplines and institutional support are then offered as validating signs of this commitment.

The emphasis then shifts even further from following Jesus — or holding to his teachings out of which truth arises, as Jesus said in John's gospel — to merely "believing the Bible" correctly.

At that point authoritarian leaders stand ready to dictate exactly what so-called "biblical" affirmations are essential — often making restrictive claims about the Bible that it doesn't make for itself.

These lead to doctrinal and ethical perspectives that allow for exclusive attitudes and behaviors at odds with the teachings of Jesus.

An authoritative "biblical" or "Christian worldview" with an expendable Jesus doesn't lead to the truth that sets one free.

Those who peddle these versions of "truth" often find a supportive, even if mangled, verse or two and proclaim, "The Bible is clear…"

Well, Jesus is clear in the Gospel of John about how one finds truth.

"*If* you hold to my teaching," said Jesus, defining a disciple, "*then* you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

We are not free to determine our own truth based on our preferences and prejudices. Such perversions of truth set no one free.

It is better to go to the source of truth than to those who abuse it for their own benefit. Sadly, truth is not highly valued among many who profess to be Christian today.

They consume a diet of more comfortable untruths — and would rather be continually conned by their favorite sources of religion and "news" than to admit having been conned.

Comfort over truth is hard to counter when truth is considered to be less important than a false sense of security. But Jesus didn't offer such a substitute.

The late Baptist preacher Bill Self would often smilingly preface a comment with: "Everything I tell you is true, but this is truer than most."

What Jesus said is truer than most truths; the truth that sets us free is not cobbled together by our own efforts but found in faithfulness to what he taught us to be and do. NFJ

We are not free to determine our own truth based on our preferences and prejudices. Such perversions of truth set no one free.

MUSIC & MORE

Mike Curb's life-shaping innovation and generosity

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The soundtrack of Mike Curb's life is one of faith, innovation and generosity.

Were it a well-grooved vinyl LP, side A would be filled with wide-ranging entertainment industry success — noted by his name on a star along the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

The flip side would be flowing with abundant opportunities for others to experience the music business and other forms of education — or to simply get their lives on track.

However, it would take another long-playing album to include his successes in other fields such as civic engagement and motorsports.

With decades of experience, Mike still heads Curb-Word Entertainment — with the two record labels making it the largest independent company in the music business.

"My company may be the oldest one that is still run by the original owner," he said of his longevity. "Next year will be our 60th year."

Associated recording artists over that time comprise a "who's who" list of well-known musicians from a variety of genres.

CONGREGATION

Those (like me) who've been around awhile might first associate his name with The Mike Curb Congregation, which performed weekly on the TV variety show, "The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour," from 1969 to 1972.

"We sang inspirational songs like, 'Put Your Hand in the Hand,' which we had put on album," said Curb of his singing group.

In the 1960s, Mike signed with Word — the Waco, Texas record company that launched what became known as Contemporary Christian Music (CCM).

The release of The Mike Curb Congregation's album on the Word label was just the start of his relationship with the company's leaders, Jarrell McCracken and Billy Ray Hearn.

"That was very transformative for me, because it allowed me to learn about the Christian music business, and all the time surrounding myself with people better than me," he said.

Curb entered into a business relationship with Word Records in 2003 and bought the label and library in 2016. His company has continued to grow with talented people on both the performing and business sides.

"The minute we want to take credit for something, we start running afoul of those who actually deserve the credit…," he said of his many coworkers and clients. "A certain amount of humility is biblical."

Mike said his idea of inspirational music was rather broad. And his own group began to experience some crossover success.

The 1970 movie, *Kelly's Heroes*, starring Clint Eastwood, featured two of Curb's songs — including the musical theme, "Burning Bridges," sung by The Mike Curb Congregation.

"I always thought it was kind of inspirational," Curb said of the song. "But it crossed over into pop."

The Congregation also backed Hank Williams Jr. on Curb's song, "All for the Love of Sunshine."

Williams' recording topped the country charts in the U.S. — as did Curb's "Burning Bridges" in South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.

"Our group was brought in by Disney to make the record, 'It's a Small World' (written by the Sherman Brothers), which became a top-10 hit," Curb recalled.

That recording became the first track on the 1973 album, "Walt Disney's Greatest Hits," which included Mike's group also singing such classics as "The Bare Necessities," "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" and "Winnie the Pooh."

The Mike Curb Congregation backed Lou Rawls on his 1971 hit, "A Natural Man," and Sammy Davis Jr. on "The Candy Man" that topped the chart in 1972.

They also lent their voices to country crooner Eddy Arnold on numerous songs, including "Red Roses for a Blue Lady," and sang with Tony Bennett, Sonny & Cher and others.

"These were really great artists during that period," he recalled. "It was such a great experience."

GETTING STARTED

"I started my business writing songs for movies and having my Mike Curb Congregation group — and wrote a couple of hits along the way," Curb recalled.

"In other words, I just started out as a writer and producer, with some success, and then started my own company just to put out my own records," he added.

"I would write a song for a movie and give it to them for free," he explained. "Then they would let me put out the soundtrack. So I've never had a partner."

Mike got into the music business as a young college student in the early 1960s. He penned a song, "You Meet the Nicest People on a Honda," that the motorcycle company used commercially.

"I met Bobby Darin and a couple of others who helped me," he recalled. An

agency paid him $3,000 for the rights to his song that was recorded by the Hondells and popularly known as "Go Little Honda."

Curb left his studies at San Fernando Valley College (now California State University, Northridge) to form Sidewalk Records, which has expanded over the decades into the current Curb-Word Entertainment.

In 1969, his company merged with MGM Records with Mike as president. He signed artists such as Kenny Rogers and the First Edition, Don Gibson, Mel Tillis, Gloria Gaynor, Ray Stevens and Richie Havens before selling that label in 1974 to focus on Curb Records.

His own company soon had five top hits on the Billboard Chart, including "Let Your Love Flow" by the Bellamy Brothers and Debby Boone's "You Light Up My Life" — the top-selling record of the 1970s.

Reflecting on his leap of faith into the entertainment business, Mike said: "I always thought maybe I would have stayed two more years [in college] if there had been a way to learn music business. But in those days that was not possible."

So he is ensuring students today that they can have such a learning opportunity.

"We now have the largest, stand-alone music business college in the country," he said of the Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business at Nashville's Belmont University. "We have more than 3,000 students."

He and wife, Linda, through the Mike Curb Foundation, have also established study programs at Mike's alma mater in California — "that reaches out to film and all kinds of entertainment" — and other schools including Daytona State College, Bethune-Cookman University, Rhodes College and Baylor University.

These are among numerous education-related endeavors they support.

LABELESS

While music labels are a big part of Curb's work, his life doesn't fit the easy labeling some might try to apply.

Mike said he grew up in a "pretty well integrated" community in Compton, Calif. Visiting in the homes of his African-American friends, he heard the recordings of Mahalia Jackson.

"She is still the gold standard when it comes to gospel music," he said. The music, in fact, motivated Mike to learn to play piano so he could write songs.

If someone wishes to put him in a box, Curb suggested the one marked "believer in Christ."

In San Francisco, he and his group shared their inspirational music as part of Billy Graham's evangelistic outreach. In the music industry, Mike found resistance due to his strong anti-drug messaging and pushback against musicians he considered advocates of drug use.

"A lot of the bands didn't like me speaking out about drugs because they were using them," he said. "But that's who I was talking to — 'You're going to influence young people.'"

Curb became friends with Nancy Reagan over their shared concerns about the damaging effects of drug use.

"My whole life I've fought that issue with people," he said. "How can we allow our kids to do drugs?"

It was the former actress' husband, Ronald Reagan, who urged Mike to enter politics.

Curb was elected the Republican Lieutenant Governor of California in 1978 and served alongside Democratic Governor Jerry Brown. For a while, Curb served as acting governor.

"I'm the only Republican to be elected lieutenant governor to a Democratic governor," he said. "And the last Republican in California to hold that position."

CCM

In its earliest years, Word Records signed artists who did "very devout Christian music," said Curb, including Southern gospel. "The contemporary Christian music didn't really start until the very end of the '60s."

Curb said he was pleased to have gotten involved in the early developing years of CCM.

"I was very fortunate to sign early contemporary Christian artists like Larry Norman, DeGarmo and Key, and Second Chapter of Acts," said Curb.

Learning to market that music was a challenge, he said. And he sought new artists.

His Saturday tennis partner, Pat Boone, who recorded Christian music on

Mike's label, had a couple of daughters that Curb signed.

He guided one of them, Debby, to the top of the popular charts — for a record-setting stay — in 1977 with "You Light Up My Life."

While that was happening on the West Coast, Amy Grant was recording in Nashville.

"You could put up an awfully good argument that she made some of the greatest records," he said of her groundbreaking Christian recordings followed by crossover success.

As a teen, Grant signed with Myrrh Records. Its parent company, Word, released her greatest hits in 2004 among other albums.

Others whose work has appeared on the Word label include pace-setting Christian artists Sandi Patty, Petra, Carman, and Evie as well as newer ones such as chart-topping For King + Country.

Curb credits Billy Ray Hearn of Word for expanding the impact of CCM when he moved to California to take over the work with these artists as Mike entered politics.

In 1992 the Curbs moved from California to Nashville and settled in quickly.

Mike says his wife Linda listens to Christian music each day — and that he still appreciates the way the music conveys faith to people of various backgrounds and generations.

Yet it is sitting at the piano and playing the familiar hymns of his upbringing that brings him peace and hope.

"I play hundreds of them on the piano," he said. "When my wife comes home and hears me playing the piano, she knows I've had a stressful day. That's how I relax — to play those great old hymns."

VALUES

"I just wonder why we sit in judgment when it's in conflict with what Jesus said over and over," said Curb, calling for understanding and tolerance of varied viewpoints.

"If I put 10 of my recording artists in a room, they would each say something different about their views," he added.

About a decade ago, Curb became more intentional about creating diversity among his artists.

"Our whole life has to be a search for what Jesus wants," he said. "And I'm in search of being a better Christian every day."

And he wants graduates who enter the field of music to possess both personal convictions and open hearts. "You better not have any prejudices," he said, noting the diversity of persons in the industry.

Mike said he has more intentionally reached out to African-American, Latino, Jewish and other communities, as well as LGBTQ persons, through both his business and personal life.

The Christian values Mike and his wife Linda embrace and espouse are reflected in the work of their foundation.

In addition to educational endeavors, they strongly support efforts in Nashville, and other communities near to the hearts of the Curbs — to ensure "all people can attain a high quality of life through access to housing, nutrition, health care, employment, education and culture."

Effective organizations are in place in Nashville and other parts of Tennessee, he said, to provide the infrastructure that only needs funding. Working with such groups, the Curb Foundation was able to feed the city's homeless population when the COVID-19 shutdown began.

In 2021, the foundation suspended support for new state projects over concerns that some legislative actions "would negatively affect and potentially discriminate against the LGBTQ community and other underserved and marginalized populations."

Preserving historical sites is also of interest to Curb, who has purchased and restored historic RCA Studio A and Studio B — along with other properties on Music Row in Nashville — and Elvis Presley's earliest home in Memphis.

Anti-discrimination, empathy, respect for diversity, integrity, collaboration, stability and inspiring generosity are values that guide the foundation's work.

These are rooted in Mike's faith that was nurtured by his family, including his parents and grandparents.

His father worked as an FBI agent and was a good role model. And his maternal grandmother was a Hispanic woman who persevered through difficult times.

In addition to his parents and grandmothers, Mike points to both grandfathers as spiritual influences: one a longtime YMCA director ("an amazing man") and the other a traveling Baptist preacher who led revivals in Texas and across Oklahoma.

It is this paternal grandfather who was honored by the creation of The Reverend Charlie Curb Center for Faith Leadership at Belmont University in 2016. It is led by Jon Roebuck, Mike's former pastor at Nashville's Woodmont Baptist Church. (See sidebar on page 9.)

"I find Mike to be very genuine," said Roebuck. "He is a shrewd businessman but with a soft kindness that few others in the industry possess."

He expressed appreciation for Curb's "absolute, unapologetic support" without seeking to control the center's work.

SOUNDS ABOUND

The creativity and connections from Curb's life abound — showing up, both noticed and unnoticed, in many places.

From 1969 to 1974, Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" show opened to an instrumental theme song Mike had written.

While never seeking the spotlight, he helps shape the careers of those who've done well there.

For many years he worked with Hank Williams Jr., helping the son of a country music icon find his own musical path.

"My big thing was to tell Hank Jr. how talented he was," said Curb. "He didn't need Mike Curb to write his songs, but he also didn't need to only sing his dad's songs."

A GRAMMY-awarded record producer and repeated BMI award-winning songwriter, Curb is well honored for his many achievements in the entertainment business.

As a producer he received top *Billboard* magazine recognition for the chart-topping hits "You Light Up My Life" by Debby Boone and LeAnn Rimes' "How Do I Live."

His company has had more than 300

number-one hits, and his artists have won dozens of GRAMMY Awards.

Writing both pop and country hits, his songs have been recorded by Roy Orbison, Irene Cara, Bobby Vinton, Andy Williams, Wayne Newton, Anne Murray, Roger Whitaker, T.G. Sheppard and many more.

He wrote the signature song, "It Was A Good Time," for Liza Minnelli's Emmy-winning "Liza With A 'Z'" concert film.

He has composed music for more than 50 movies, including early success with the film "Wild Angels" starring Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra. For Disney, he supervised the music for "Lassie," starring Jimmy Stewart and Mickey Rooney.

Also, Mike composed music for television including the animated ABC series "Hot Wheels" and "Cattanooga Cats."

While Mike has enjoyed working with many stars of the entertainment industry, he's never been a groupie who hangs around backstage, he said.

His mother, who died in 2016, told him he was the same person in his 70s that he was at age 5. It took Mike awhile to process that comment.

But he recalled going into his room as a child to play music in much of the same way he seeks solitude today.

He joked that his early recordings were sure to sell three copies — one each to his mother, grandmother and sister.

A motorsports enthusiast, Curb's cars have reached the winner's circle at both the Indianapolis 500 and at Daytona International Speedway. His NASCAR drivers have included legends Dale Earnhardt, Richard Petty and Dale Jarrett.

Married in 1978, Mike and Linda have two grown daughters, their beloved grandchildren and other family connections. While Mike carves out time for them and other priorities, the idea of retirement stays at bay.

"There are so many exciting things going on with our foundation and with Curb and Word records," he said. "I want to keep doing this and, thank goodness, I can." NFJ

FAITH LEADERSHIP

The Reverend Charlie Curb Center for Faith Leadership at Belmont University, led by Mike and Linda Curbs' former pastor Jon Roebuck, is named for Mike's grandfather who was a positive influence on his early faith development.

In the commemorative book, *Mike Curb 50 Years* (produced by Curb Recording Group with Grandin Hood Publishers), Mike recalled a childhood visit to Oklahoma City:

"One of those vivid memories is going to my grandfather's church, where I sat at the organ and he taught me to play the old hymn, 'Just As I Am.'"

Roebuck brought up the influential role of Mike's grandfather to him when the center was to be named.

"I think he was worthy of having his name on this wonderful faith leadership center," Curb said in his interview with *Nurturing Faith Journal*. "I'm really proud our foundation can support something in honor of my grandfather."

The connection with Roebuck has a deeper personal as well as pastoral touch.

"When Jon came in as pastor [at Woodmont Baptist Church] he reminded me of my grandfather…," said Curb. "It was almost eerie."

Mike helped fund weekly inspirational spots on the local CBS station, which Roebuck continues now as part of his ministry at Belmont.

"Jon's outreach programs have been so important to Nashville," Curb said. "The way he's reached out to the Jewish community and Jewish leaders has created a circumstance where Belmont has changed its policy to allow for professors who are Jewish."

With a sparkle in his eye, Mike added: "So we could allow Jesus to teach."

Roebuck traces the start of that outreach to his relationship with Rabbi Mark Schiftan, who served The Temple congregation in Nashville for 23 years before retiring in 2022 as rabbi emeritus.

Jon once asked his friend how often he receives hate mail. The rabbi replied, "Every day. It's a way of life."

That convinced Roebuck to invest more in Christian-Jewish dialogue. The two faith leaders coordinated an interfaith experience in Washington, D.C., including visits to the Holocaust Museum.

"That's really where we got to know each other," he said, adding that Rabbi Schiftan "has a great heart for interfaith dialogue and community engagement."

Roebuck said that was exemplified when The Temple was among the first to contribute funds to a mosque in nearby Murfreesboro, Tenn., that was vandalized in 2017.

Belmont's president at the time, Bob Fisher, encouraged continuing and expanding engagement. This led the rabbi and Baptist minister to lead a joint Bible study in which Jewish and Christian perspectives were offered.

An equal number Jews and Christians now meet weekly, said Roebuck, to explore the intersection of faith and culture.

"We've created a safe space for dialogue, trust and encouragement," he said. "People can ask deep questions and poke fun at one another."

Roebuck said an interfaith Habitat for Humanity home building and other projects have arisen. And a Christian-Jewish trip to Israel is set for this year.

Jon said the historically Baptist university's increasing openness is done so with the clear affirmation of its Christian identity and mission.

He quoted current Belmont President Greg Jones saying, "If you know who you are at your center, it gives you a lot of freedom to talk to people who are different from you… You can build relationships that allow good things to happen."

And a lot of good things are happening at Belmont, in Nashville, and well beyond — much of it flowing out of the expressed faith and generosity of Mike and Linda Curb. NFJ


A Good Faith Experience
ICELAND
JULY 17-24, 2023
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Overview:

Join Bruce Gourley, Tony Cartledge and John Pierce for an eight-day tour of magical Iceland. During this insider experience of Iceland, you will immerse yourself in the many wonders that this land of natural beauty has to offer.

We will daily be accompanied by an expert guide, as well as local tour guides at various sites as we travel.

Itinerary:

As a group we will fly into Reykjavik. A tour of this amazing city will follow prior to departing for a week of exploring national parks, UNESCO World Heritage sites, mountains, canyons, glaciers, waterfalls, coastlines, flowing lava fields, and Iceland's famed Icelandic horses and geysers.

Details can be found at goodfaithmedia.org.

Pricing:

Total cost: $4,979 per person for double occupancy, which includes airfare from Atlanta, transportation in Iceland, breakfasts, dinners and one lunch.

Deposit: $500 per person to reserve a spot.

Christian hospitality and the mission of God

By Larry Hovis

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, church growth experts encouraged congregational leaders to re-think their approach to newcomers on Sunday mornings. They offered many guiding principles, including these:

- Refer to newcomers to worship as "guests" rather than "visitors."
- Greet people warmly in the parking lot and in the sanctuary.
- Welcome people sincerely, but do not single them out and make them feel conspicuous.
- Share "welcome gifts" such as a coffee mug or a loaf of freshly baked bread.
- Provide quick follow-up contacts through the strategic use of letters, notes, phone calls and "front porch visits."

The goal of these efforts at "Christian hospitality" was to lead guests to join the church. A church I served as pastor implemented this approach very effectively.

We were blessed over a period of several years with many new members. Repeatedly, these new members said ours was the friendliest church they had ever attended.

Over time, in conversations with these new members, a theme emerged. Many of them were having difficulty establishing friendships beyond a surface level. They joined Sunday School classes but felt like outsiders.

It seemed our church was not as friendly as they were initially led to believe. Instead of offering genuine hospitality, we were actually performing customer service.

A few years ago, our regional Baptist organization conducted extended telephone interviews with church leaders exploring a wide variety of topics. We learned that most churches had established robust programs of local missions such as food pantries, clothes closets, handicap ramp building and mission trips to other states and countries.

While they were proud of these efforts, which extended Christian hospitality of a different kind, they lamented that rarely did these efforts result in deeper friendships or even occasional worship attendance.

Too often these ministries were more transactional then relational. Today, a new approach to Christian hospitality is needed, propelled by two factors.

First, housing costs have skyrocketed in many communities. Those who work in retail or service industry jobs cannot find a place to live anywhere near their work.

Second, many churches are using only a fraction of their property, though they are in prime locations in their city or town. For these churches, a new, more literal expression of Christian hospitality might be in order.

What would this hospitality look like? Increasingly it looks like using their property to provide their neighbors with a place to live.

Such an approach is already being implemented in North Carolina and other states through the Welcome House Community Network.

Churches are offering underused property, such as a parsonage or rental house, and making it available to refugees and other vulnerable groups. These efforts meet a physical need: housing.

They also enable church members to relate more intimately to these guests as they help them with other needs such as learning English, obtaining a driver's license, finding employment, and enrolling children in school.

Including the guests in worship, small groups and other expressions of congregational life, sometimes follows.

Two different but related initiatives are underway in western North Carolina.

Asheville, N.C., has the fifth highest housing costs in the U.S. There is a severe shortage of affordable housing. Not just service workers, but even those with higher income such as nurses, teachers and firefighters cannot find a place to live.

First Baptist Church of Asheville, which sits in a prime downtown location, is partnering with the YMCA to develop a portion of their property to provide affordable housing, along with childcare and other services.

About 20 miles away, in a small college town, Mars Hill Baptist Church is seeking to meet another housing need. When young people turn 18, they are released from the foster care system, but they are not legal adults until they turn 21.

MHBC is converting unused Sunday School space into apartments to house young men in this situation.

The church is called to pursue the mission of God in the world. This mission involves ministering to the whole person with the whole gospel by addressing physical, spiritual and relational needs. It involves extending genuine hospitality and Christian community.

A tremendous tool in the church's tool cabinet today is the property owned. Our call is to be creative and generous in exercising faithful stewardship over this property, welcoming our neighbors into our buildings and into our lives — not just one day per week, but every day. NFJ

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

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"Little darlin', it's been a long, cold, lonely winter. Little darlin', it feels like years since it's been here…"

Here comes the sun, we pray

By Mitch Randall

In 1969, The Beatles released one of the greatest albums ever produced, *Abbey Road.* With the Vietnam War raging and young people demanding justice, the world seemed to spiral out of control.

Hit songs from the album, such as "Something" and "Come Together," painted vivid images of realities. From singing about the future of unknown love to the perilous political environment of the day, The Beatles captured the essence of 1969.

However, one song on *Abbey Road* brought a glimmer of hope at the turn of a very tense decade. "Here Comes the Sun" offered a warm and bright future after a long, cold winter.

Remember George Harrison's words, "Little darlin', it's been a long, cold, lonely winter. Little darlin', it feels like years since it's been here… Here comes the sun, and I say, 'It's alright.'"

It's been a long, cold, wintry three years of a global pandemic, political turmoil, racial injustices, mass shootings, unjustified wars, natural disasters and a struggling economy. We all need a little sunshine.

The world was highly hopeful after COVID cases began to decrease. People were eager to return to "normal," but a new unfamiliar normal has emerged.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID resulted in the loss of more than 6 million lives worldwide. Economies have changed, marketplaces are different, and employment has taken on new meaning.

Likewise, injustices have been exposed, radical voices have become mainstream, and the world just seems different.

The WHO also reported that issues related to the pandemic triggered a 25 percent increase in anxiety and depression worldwide. Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus described such findings on mental health as "just the tip of the iceberg."

"This is a wake-up call to all countries to pay more attention to mental health and do a better job of supporting their populations' mental health," he concluded.

Ramifications of anxiety and depression related to the pandemic, directly and indirectly, are fostering severe concerns among mental health experts. There is no more significant example than the anxiety within the church, especially among the clergy.

Substantial evidence is emerging that shows how significantly clergy suffered as a result of the pandemic and world events. While anxiety does not always lead to depression, those suffering from depression often cite anxiety as a contributor.

Last year Lifeway Research cited that one of five (18 percent) pastors deals with depression to some degree.

The study concluded: "Pastoral struggles with personal mental illness (including depression) are on the rise. Pastors who affirmed having a diagnosed 'mental illness of any kind' rose from 12 percent in 2014 to 17 percent in 2021."

Stressors from the pandemic, anxiety over social issues, and the feeling of vocational and personal isolation have convinced many clergy to leave their profession in search of another existence.

According to a 2022 Barna report, 42 percent of pastors have considered quitting recently.

"Realizing they cannot hide behind the pulpit, some clergy are looking for the exits at their churches," noted Good Faith Media's Raceless Gospel Director Starlette Thomas. "After being called to ministry and attending seminary, they have decided to change careers despite the years of personal and financial investment required to train and prepare."

The church needs to come to grips with the devastation brought about by the long winter of the pandemic and social turmoil over the last several years. With evidence mounting, the church must think strategically about how to address the growing anxiety and depression within the body of Christ.

The psalmist proclaims, "May the Lord give strength to (the) people! May the Lord bless (the) people with peace!" (29:11)

Oh, how the church needs strength and peace during these trying days. And, as George Harrison's lyrics remind us, we need a new song that declares, "Here comes the sun."

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

While Jesus did not deny the presence of darkness around us, he promised that his light could penetrate the darkness so we might find a path forward.

Therefore, the church needs to acknowledge the severity of the anxiety and depression our colleagues, friends and family members face, and lean into the light of Jesus to find a path forward.

We need to be aware of signs of anxiety and depression, and help people get the mental health care they need. We need to provide support and kindness to those around us.

We must listen with our heart, speak with our voice, and extend a loving hand to those needing help. NFJ

—-Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.

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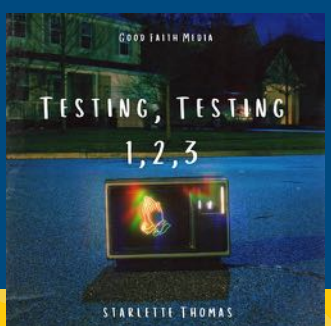


NOW AVAILABLE: *TESTING, TESTING 1,2,3*

"Testing, Testing, 1, 2, 3," is a limited series for Lent 2023 and named for the three wilderness temptations of Jesus. Each episode reminds Christians that they must have "ears to hear" what the Spirit is saying, namely that one's calling comes with testing. Hosted by Starlette Thomas.

7 good reasons to consider staying in ministry

By Barry Howard

Already concerned about the coming pastor shortage — due to fewer young adults choosing a ministry career and many veteran pastors planning for retirement — many of us were alarmed by new statistics.

A 2021 Barna study revealed that 46 percent of current pastors under age 45 are considering leaving ministry, compared with 34 percent of those over age 45.

Pastors are not exempt from the Great Resignation. In recent years, I have witnessed more pastor friends exit vocational ministry than at any point in my lifetime.

Major factors seem to be burnout, pandemic fatigue, political toxicity, hypercritical church members and health concerns (physical, mental and emotional).

I empathize with those who are considering leaving pastoral ministry and do not criticize their decisions. Pastoral ministry is more challenging now.

Pastors can work hard, serve faithfully, love their people, and lead with innovation, yet find themselves feeling frustrated, exhausted and ineffective.

While ministry can be messy and chaotic, there are good reasons to consider staying in a pastoral role.

St. Francis de Sales is attributed with the adage, "Bloom where you are planted."

Sometimes we have to plow up stumps, bring in extra topsoil, and plant a lot of saplings before new blooms appear and our ministry begins to bear fruit.

Here are seven good reasons to stay:

To fulfill your sense of calling. In every profession, there is a learning curve. There are moments when you think, "I didn't sign up for this."

Ministry is no exception. Yet your sense of calling compels you to stay with it.

To make a difference. Churches are composed of imperfect people who are at various stages in their spiritual journeys. There are no perfect pastors either.

Yet you can make a huge difference in the lives of your parishioners by serving alongside them. But here's the rub: You will likely not know the difference you are making until years later.

To be a part of the new thing God is doing. In Isa. 43:19, God says, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

As in Isaiah's day, I sense that God is birthing something new, and the labor pains are intense. Pastors get a ringside seat to this new thing, but have to hang around through the birthing process.

To maximize your gifts and minimize your regrets. Some pastor friends who transition from ministry find a less stressful, more fulfilling life away from vocational ministry.

Others feel incomplete and contend with questions about how different life would be had they stayed and guided a church through a turbulent time. Persevering through the grind of ministry may enable you to maximize your gifts and minimize your regrets.

Because perseverance is a powerful part of your witness. As pastors, we preach about the importance of perseverance during tough times. Romans 12:12 urges, "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

During this challenging season of ministry, we have an opportunity to demonstrate perseverance in our mission.

Because problem people don't have the final word. I have served wonderful churches through the years, and every one of them had high-maintenance people.

However, the perpetual complainers, self-appointed critics and church bullies are not as influential as they think. They do not have the final word on the direction of God's church.

Because coaching is available to help you learn new pastoral skills for changing times. In seminary I learned preaching, biblical interpretation, ethics, pastoral leadership and pastoral care. I did not develop other skills such as adaptive leadership, emotional intelligence, appreciative inquiry, conflict management, team building and healthy differentiation.

The Center for Healthy Churches is one of many groups that can help you enlist a coach to walk alongside you as you sharpen or upgrade your tools for ministry.

***

If Moses could continue leading after a meltdown, if Jonah could still serve after being swallowed up, if Paul could keep evangelizing after a shipwreck, and if Barnabas could remain in ministry after a sharp dispute, today's ministers might be empowered to continue service through a tough chapter of ministry.

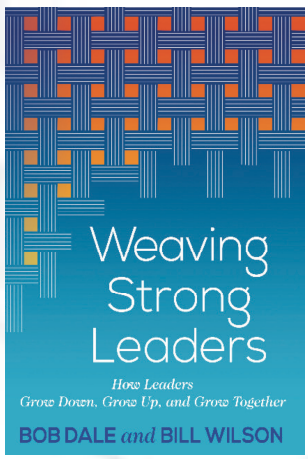
The Apostle Paul encourages us, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Gal. 6:9).

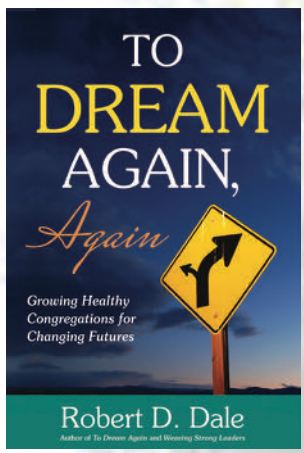
This is not only a challenging season but also an opportune and adventurous time to be in pastoral ministry. Just maybe, God has called you to stay with it for a time such as this. NFJ

—Barry Howard is pastor at Atlanta's Church at Wieuca and a leadership coach and columnist with the Center for Healthy Churches. He and his wife, Amanda, live in Brookhaven, Ga.

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

HEALTHY CHURCH RESOURCES





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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Doing greater things

By John R. Franke

As Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure in John's gospel, he doubtless startles them when he says in 14:12, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."

Later in John's gospel, after Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus sends the disciples (and the church) into the world to continue his mission in the way that the Father had sent him (John 20:21).

Based on the earlier promise of Jesus, this sending in John 20 is for the purpose of doing even greater things through the power of the Spirit. What might this mean?

In my last column I suggested that the church is called to follow Jesus by participating in the historical and political process of salvation and liberation for the people of the earth as an instrument and demonstration of God's love for the world.

Jesus did this by challenging the existing social order of the Roman Empire, a domination society that was politically oppressive, economically exploitative, and chronically violent in which the vast majority of the production of wealth went to only the top echelons of the population.

The gap between the few wealthy elites and the rest of the society had disastrous effects, condemning most people to short lives filled with hardship and struggle. In its place Jesus proclaims and enacts a new social reality that is consistent with God's intention from the beginning, a reality in which all people are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve as the beloved children of God.

This is the world God intended from the beginning. However, human beings rebelled against this vision of equity and inclusion. Instead of seeking the well-being of their fellow humans, those with power sought their own good at the expense of others and established oppressive communities.

In response to this rebellion, God made a covenant with Abraham and called a people to bless the nations of the world. Jesus is the continuation of the covenant, sent into the world to proclaim God's true intention for creation.

This led him into conflict with the ruling powers who had him executed for sedition. But his death is not the end of the story. Instead, it is the day the revolution begins, and the Kingdom of God is unleashed in the world.

Through his life and death Jesus institutes a covenant of vocation and commissions his followers to go and make disciples who will follow his way of life and, by the power of God, create the new social order intended by God, envisioned by the prophets of Israel, and embodied by Jesus.

The establishment of this new world and the activities that bring it about are the "greater things" spoken of by Jesus to his disciples. He has gone to the Father, but the church remains to continue his work and bring it to fruition throughout the world.

In his incarnation Jesus was located in a particular time and place. By the power of the Spirit, his followers have taken his message to the whole world.

Tragically, the church has often not been faithful to its calling and has frequently been co-opted by the very powers it was sent to oppose.

Indeed, the expansion of the church has frequently been an exercise in the extension of empire through a process of colonization using the Bible itself as a justification for this activity, beginning with the establishment of the church as the authorized religion of the Roman Empire.

This checkered past leads us to recall the ways in which Jesus found it necessary to challenge the religious leaders of his own time for their use of religion to maintain their own power and privilege. It also reminds us that just because a religious organization bears the name Christian does not mean it is faithful to the teachings of Jesus.

Even the interpretation of scripture was corrupted by the assumptions of empire. While all of the texts that would eventually make up the New Testament canon were produced on the margins, they came to be interpreted from the perspective of the powerful in the complicity that arose between the Christian church and Rome.

Those individuals and communities who truly believe in Jesus and follow him will be about the work of doing what he commands and participating in the greater things he envisioned for his followers, such as the eradication of systemic poverty and racism in our world.

In this way, we bear faithful witness to the lordship of Jesus in our lives and participate in the good news of a world where everyone has enough, and no one needs to be afraid. NFJ

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

The waters of baptism are not shallow

By Starlette Thomas

Have you heard about the "unbaptism" service? When I did, it reaffirmed my belief that there was something about wading in the water.

I have been studying ecclesiology and the implications of baptism while writing my thesis for the Doctor of Ministry program at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. I have titled it "'Take me to the water' — A raceless gospel as baptismal pedagogy for a desegregated church."

I was excited to write, and to cite my curated reading list. What I did not expect were the kinds of stories associated with baptism and the devil no less.

I had yet to connect Jesus' experience in the wilderness to his baptism, wherein Jesus is called "my beloved Son" and shortly thereafter, the devil calls it all into question.

Baptism was, of course, withheld from Africans who were enslaved throughout the diaspora upon the realization that their new Christian identity warranted manumission.

Africans who became baptized believers challenged and changed the nature of the relationship with their European oppressors. There was also fear of social unrest and that this newfound "freedom in Christ" would lead to slave rebellions.

Given its theological and social implications, laws were quickly enacted to water down the meaning of baptism and to ensure that it would not exempt enslaved persons from perpetual bondage.

The General Assembly of Virginia, citing King Charles II, passed an act in 1667 stating, "An act declaring that *baptisme* of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage."

Consequently, Africans could go down in the water, but they would come up with the realization that they were not "free indeed" as Jesus promised, but still bound to the conditions of American slavery (John 8:36).

"Why did the baptism of enslaved and free Black men and women engender such violence in an empire ostensibly founded on spreading Protestantism?" Katharine Gerbner asked and addressed in her book, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World.*

Sadly, for Africans in America and throughout the diaspora, baptism would be a controlled conversion experience. But these European oppressors are not the only ones who knew the importance of baptism.

Despite its name, the members of The Satanic Temple in Tyler, Texas do not believe in the biblical figure, and they treat baptism as a superstition. However, they felt compelled to hold a service to undo it.

According to the Temple's website, an "unbaptism" is an act in which "participants renounce superstitions that may have been imposed upon them without their consent as a child." It is an opportunity for members to publicly reject religious beliefs that no longer serve them.

It is also in keeping with one of their seven tenets: "One's body is inviolable, subject to one's own will alone."

They don't take baptism lightly, and neither do I. While I don't believe that one's baptism can be undone, it is a reminder of its powerful implications, the water binding us as members of each other and to Christ's body.

It certainly shouldn't be done without consent but also not for familial approval or a "fresh start." The waters of baptism are deeper than that, and this "unbaptism" service reminds me that the North American church has done a disservice to baptism if it has come to that.

Because what did we get ourselves into when we went down into the water, becoming followers of Jesus and, therefore, baptized believers?

When our bodies were laid down in the water, we died to all that takes away from our truest meaning, our communal well-being and the deepest sense of belonging, namely as the children of God and therefore, next of kin to all of humanity.

Jesus didn't come up from the water with an air of superiority or a claim of supremacy. Instead, God claimed Jesus as family, "This is my Son, the Beloved" (Matt. 3:17 NRSV).

Jesus also didn't call his followers to walk away from the marginalized and minoritized. Instead, as Walter Brueggemann writes in his book, *A Way Other Than Our Own:*

Jesus reached beyond his people, beyond his perceived mandate, beyond his tradition, extending himself to the 'other.' … All of us to some extent, hold the line against 'the other.' All of us, to some extent, know that our faith calls us out beyond that."

So, how do we get beyond that? How do we see beyond our racialized reality, and apart from social prescriptions that arbitrarily color in and then cart off human bodies based on these capitalist-inspired categories: beige (mixed race), black, brown, red, yellow and white?

The truth that the North American church is too often a reflection of the North American empire needs to be faced and confronted. There are solutions, and they will require work and that we "wade in the water" until the reality of race becomes troubling.. NFJ

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

You don't have to wish you wrote this column

By Brett Younger

Envy is an endless disparagement of others, but it is also an endless disparagement of self. We feel like have-nots and cannot see what we have.

The religious hermit is so Christian, so pure, and so holy that the evil spirits sent to tempt him end up defeated and discouraged. They cannot break him. They try all kinds of temptations. Every temptation fails.

Satan scolds the evil spirits: "Your methods are crude. Give me one minute."

Satan says, "Have you heard the good news? Your brother has been made Bishop of Alexandria."

"My brother, Bishop of Alexandria."

Oscar Wilde writes, "Envy sweeps through him like a tidal wave."

A psychologist asks a crowded auditorium: "Would you rather have a $50,000 salary when everyone else's is $25,000, or a $100,000 salary when everyone else is making $200,000?"

Half the crowd raises their hands for the smaller salary. They would rather have less, if it means they have more than others (*The Happiness Lab* podcast).

Our culture runs on envy. Facebook and Instagram are all about envy. The goal is to outdo our rivals, even when we pretend it is not. Twitter tears down anyone who accomplishes anything. We look for the dark side. No one gets to stay on a pedestal. A good person must be covering something. A good deed must have an ulterior motive. A good marriage must have hidden strains.

Professional jealousy is worst among equals. Lawyers are not jealous of speed skaters, but other lawyers. Preachers are the worst. When we hear someone else's sermon we rearrange it, critique the theology, and shorten it by five minutes.

We understand *schadenfreude* — pleasure at another's disappointment. We have a keen eye for others' flaws. We know, as Frederick Buechner describes it, "the consuming desire to have everybody as unsuccessful as we are."

We take satisfaction in others' difficulties. We read false motives into others' behavior. We talk behind others' backs. We resent the recognition others receive. We keep score.

The unfairness of almost everything makes us envious of almost everything. Why did your co-worker, who shows up at 9:30 and takes two-hour lunches, get the promotion? Why couldn't you have had your favorite aunt for your mother? Why is Kim Kardashian famous?

Envy may be the ugliest of the seven deadly sins. The other sins have some early payoff, but envy is miserable from start to finish. Envy is an endless disparagement of others, but it is also an endless disparagement of self. We feel like have-nots and cannot see what we have. Envy keeps us from being happy.

Victor Hugo wrote a poem about a character named "Envy" being offered whatever they wished on the condition that the other person receive a double portion. Envy replied, "I wish to be blind in one eye."

What would happen if we stopped comparing? What if we believed that we have value that does not come from devaluing others? What if we gave up envy in favor of love?

God loves us not because of our achievements, but because we are God's children. We do not have to find our self-worth in others' failures. While envy sees that God is generous to others, wisdom sees that God is generous to us.

We get past envy when we enjoy gifts that do not lend themselves to competition. Listen to music. Take a walk. Appreciate art. Be a real friend. Share a real conversation. Learn something. Look for the good in others. Do something kind and keep it a secret. Enjoy something good that does not feel diminished when you see that someone else enjoys it, too.

When we understand that we have been given what we need, we lose our fear of being shortchanged. We stop looking for what we do not have and start recognizing the love we share. We stop envying people and start enjoying them. We delight in others' beauty, success, and intelligence.

We spend less time figuring out how much money others have, and give more of our money away. We stop counting how many miles we have walked, and pay more attention to the fresh air that fills our lungs. We read fewer books in order to say, "I read this," and more for the sheer pleasure of the words. We spend less time comparing what is on the menu, and more time tasting the food. We stop pushing our children to be better than someone else's children, and enjoy the children we have. We stop comparing what we have to what others have.

Some days the Bishop of Alexandria envied his brother's less hectic life. We will always be able to find something to envy, but we have been given what we need to live with gratitude. NFJ

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

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

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

May 7, 2023

Acts 6:1–7:60

A Death-Defying Faith

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. (Acts 7:59-60)

Have you ever started a new job or project with great confidence, only to face an unexpected illness or other obstacle that threatened to derail your efforts? It can happen.

Our text is set in the early days of the Christian movement, which got off to such an amazing start that thousands of Jews decided to follow Jesus – according to Luke – and were baptized in a matter of days. A Spirit-empowered revival saw people devoting their lives to learning about Jesus and enjoying such close communion that they pooled their resources while eating, worshiping, and praying together. What could go wrong?

Trouble brewing (6:1–7:1)

The first hint of trouble within the emerging church is found in Acts 5:1-11, a dark and disturbing story of how two believers named Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and turned over part of the proceeds to the common treasury – but claimed to have given it all. Peter confronted them separately over the lie and both fell dead, one after the other, an apparent warning against attempting to deceive God.

Disquiet also surfaced through ethnic prejudice, for Jewish Christians who spoke Greek rather than Aramaic complained that their widows were being shortchanged in the distribution of food to the needy (6:1-6). The 12 apostles, who were doubtless stretched thin trying to orient so many new believers to the faith, called for the appointment of seven good people to oversee the food distribution while they focused on prayer and preaching. First chosen among the seven was Stephen, described as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit."

The move seemed to quell the incipient rumblings, and Luke reports that "the word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem" and even "a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (6:7). But there was more trouble to come, especially from other priests and their supporters who saw the Christian movement as a heretical threat to Judaism.

We soon learn that Stephen's work extended beyond the soup kitchen. Described as "full of grace and power," Stephen reportedly "did great wonders and signs among the people" (6:7). A contingent of outspoken Jews from various synagogues confronted Stephen over his new beliefs, "But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke" (6:11). Unable to defeat Stephen in a debate, they conspired to have someone falsely accuse him of blasphemy against both God and Moses, causing such a stir that Stephen was called before the Sanhedrin. There, false witnesses accused him of constantly "saying things against this holy place and the law" (6:13).

Despite the charges, Luke reports a tradition that Stephen's countenance "was like the face of an angel" (6:14) when the high priest offered him a chance to refute the charges. Stephen happily complied, launching into a sermon designed to demonstrate his firm grounding in Judaism and his belief that Jesus had come as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy, offering himself as the ultimate sacrifice and introducing a new means of relating to God through grace.

Trial by sermon (7:2-53)

Stephen began his sermon with a review of Israel's history that seemed calm enough, though his first words bristled: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me!" Like some modern preachers, he began in a low-key fashion, gradually warming up and setting the stage to answer their accusations in a fiery finish. He must have known that his words would stir resentment and anger, but he still pressed ahead.

Stephen began by reciting God's call to Abraham and the promise that his descendants would inherit the land, then shifted to their sojourn in Egypt before returning to the land of promise (7:2-7). Stephen's rhetoric was powerful, though his (or Luke's) recall of the traditions did not always match up with the texts he was quoting.

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Stephen's claim that God called Abram while still in Ur differs from the account in Genesis 11, which says that Abram's father Terah decided to move the family from Ur, but stopped in Haran and remained there (Gen. 11:27-31). The Genesis account says that Abram was in Haran when God called him to leave home and go "to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1-3). Perhaps Stephen imagined that Abram had first persuaded his father to move.

Afterward, Stephen recalled, God "gave him the covenant of circumcision," so that Abraham circumcised Isaac, who became the father of Jacob, the progenitor of the 12 tribal ancestors. Joseph's brothers sold him into Egyptian slavery, but were later saved from famine when Joseph gained Pharaoh's favor and brought them to Egypt (7:8-16).

Stephen then recounted the story of the Exodus, beginning with the birth and call of the Hebrew hero Moses and moving to Israel's deliverance from Egypt and the wilderness wandering, where the people rebelled by making and worshiping a golden calf (7:17-41). This led to the worship of other gods including the "host of heaven," a charge Stephen supported with a loose quotation from the Greek translation of Amos 5:25-27.

Knowing how important the temple was to his audience – and believing it had become too important – Stephen spoke of how Israel first worshiped at "the tent of testimony in the wilderness" before Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem. But God did not dwell in a house made by human hands, Stephen said, citing Isaiah's critique of people who focused on the temple while God had minimized its importance, saying "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?" (7:42-50, cf. Isa. 66:1-2a).

With his critique of the temple as a foundation, Stephen "quit preachin' and went to meddlin'," as we sometimes say, addressing Judaism's highest officials as "stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears," who were "forever opposing the Holy Spirit" as their ancestors had (7:51). Like their forebears who had persecuted "the prophets who foretold the coming of the Righteous One," he said, they had become "his betrayers and murderers," people who had received the law but had not kept it (7:52-53).

Is there any wonder that Stephen's audience of staunch temple leaders grew furious? "When they heard these things," Luke said, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen" (7:54).

Of course they did.

Visions and stones (7:55-60)

As Luke tells the story, Stephen appeared immune to the tempers flaring around him. Caught up in the Spirit, he declared "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (7:55-56).

Why would this be so objectionable that people in the crowd covered their ears and rushed to drag Stephen from the temple grounds (7:57)? Recall that Stephen had just quoted Isaiah's oracle when speaking for God: "Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool." He now claimed that he could see Jesus ("the Son of Man") in heaven, standing at God's right hand. That claim would have further inflamed those who saw Jesus as a danger. The Christian movement was a growing threat to Judaism as they taught it, and having people like Stephen claiming to see Jesus at God's right hand only made it worse.

Convinced that Stephen was a self-confessed heretic, the authorities dragged him out of the city without bothering to pass an official sentence, as Luke tells the story, and began the process of stoning him to death. The physical effort involved in such mob action can be seen in the note that the executioners removed their outer cloaks and left them in the care of Saul, a young but rabid supporter of traditional Judaism prior to his conversion (7:58).

In his dying moments, Stephen exhibited the same spirit as the Christ he worshiped. Luke says that he prayed "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" before crying aloud "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:59-60).

What do we do with a text like this? Should we feel badly because we don't see visions of heaven as Stephen did? Should we preach sermons or make Facebook posts that are designed to offend unbelievers?

We may have difficulty identifying with either Stephen or his angry accusers. Nevertheless, Stephen's challengers remind us of the danger inherent in allowing our loyalty to tradition or an institution to make us deaf to the voice of the Spirit.

How many of us have known people (perhaps even ourselves) who seem to care more about keeping things the way they've always been rather than being open to new possibilities for gospel outreach?

On the other hand, Stephen's example stands as a kind of sold-out commitment that may seem alien to us. We live in a different day and a different context. Rarely do we even think of facing a challenge to be faithful unto death – but are we willing, even, to be faithful unto embarrassment, or faithful unto behaving ourselves when tempted?

We're not called to be Stephen, but we are called to be the best version of ourselves that we can be. How is that going? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

May 14, 2023

Acts 17:1-31

Proclaiming an Unknown God

I was in Athens, studying philosophy. Don't be overly impressed: This was Athens, *Georgia*, where the University of Georgia campus was no less imposing to me than its Grecian namesake would have been to any ancient country boy who had come to town. My primary interest was science, but a course in philosophy was required.

On the first day of class, the professor confronted me with Plato's idea that there could be a difference between our idea of something and the real thing. Was I sitting in a desk, she asked, or just the *idea* of a desk? Having always assumed that my perceptions were accurate, that was a new approach: I thought it was nuts.

We all want to make sense of life, though some think about it more intentionally or deeply than others. In the ancient world, the Greek philosophers and their students were most articulate in expressing their views, but an itinerant preacher named Paul had no qualms about going toe-to-toe with the intelligentsia of Athens.

Familiar philosophies (vv. 1-21)

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> *For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. (Acts 17:23)*

Our text derives from Paul's second missionary journey, and requires some background not included in the lectionary reading. Having visited several cities in Asia Minor, Paul and his companions crossed the Aegean Sea to the region of Macedonia, where they spent a tumultuous period in Philippi before moving on to Thessalonica and Berea, winning converts along the way. When certain Jewish leaders mounted a campaign against Paul, he took ship and sailed to Athens, leaving Timothy and Silas to continue the work in Macedonia (17:1-15).

Upon his arrival in the city, Paul was distressed by the many images of gods, which he saw as idolatrous. He went first to the synagogues to debate with Jews and Grecian God-fearers, as was his usual practice, but he also preached in Athens' famous marketplace (vv. 16-17). The agora was at the city's heart: it featured several altars and temples, and it served as a gathering place for those who wanted to catch the latest gossip, socialize with friends, or debate with the various philosophers and teachers who frequented the place. The primary marketplace in Athens occupied a flat area below the soaring Acropolis, where magnificent temples stood watch over the city.

Some listeners accused Paul of teaching about foreign gods (note the plural), since he spoke of "Jesus and the resurrection" (v. 18). Ancient peoples often expected male gods to have female consorts, so Paul's hearers may have misunderstood his meaning, hearing *anastasis* (the word for "resurrection," which is feminine in Greek) as the name of a goddess, hence, "Jesus and Anastasis."

Some of Paul's conversation partners showed little respect: they called him a "babbler," literally a "seed-picker." The expression was used to describe birds who pick up and eat seeds in one place, then excrete them in others. The charge accused Paul of scattering useless thoughts.

Ever eager to hear new ideas, though, some of Paul's listeners took him to the Areopagus, not a place, but a council of elder officials who had some ruling responsibilities. They had originally met on Mars Hill, a rocky outcrop between the agora and the acropolis, but in Paul's day they met in the Royal Stoa, an open-air building near the edge of the agora (v. 19).

Luke notes that Paul entered a debate with the adherents of two competing schools of philosophy, the Epicureans and the Stoics. Both philosophies provided belief systems to explain how life should be understood. Loquacious locals enjoyed the bantering of ideas: Luke wrote that "all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (v. 20).

An unknown God (vv. 22-31)

The gospel Paul preached was clearly at odds with the teachings of the philosophers, in which deities played

only distant roles. Paul proclaimed the existence of a supreme God who sought an active relationship with humans.

As Paul began his defense of the gospel, he demonstrated a quick wit and a masterful use of oratory. He used gentle flattery to warm his audience and seek common ground: "I see how extremely religious you are in every way," he said (v. 22). Paul described walking through the city, so festooned with images of various gods, and said "I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (v. 23).

Paul probably knew that the philosophers generally regarded the Greek gods as either irrelevant or unconcerned with humans, but in a brilliant rhetorical move, he used the presence of an altar to an "unknown god" as the basis for a sermon on the God they had yet to meet.

The unknown god, Paul said, is "The God who made the world and everything in it." Furthermore, "He who is Lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things" (vv. 24-25).

The philosophers would have agreed that the gods did not need human temples. Still, Paul's statement stood in sharp contrast to the Epicurean argument that life is solely the result of random atomic movements, and the Stoic belief that the gods determine the fates without concern for humans. It also challenged the worship practices of other Athenians who may have thought it needful to leave food offerings or other gifts at the altars of their patron gods.

Athenians popularly claimed to have sprung from the earth as a separate race from other peoples, but Paul called that belief into question, arguing that all people are descended "from one ancestor" who had been made by God (v. 26a).

Paul's hearers would not have caught his reference to Adam, but they were familiar with the argument that all humans are related. Paul went on to insist that, for all peoples, God had intentionally "allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live" (v. 26b). Epicureans considered the gods irrelevant, and the Stoics saw them as impersonal, but Paul proclaimed a God who wished to be known and was always near to earnest seekers (v. 27). Paul believed the people of Athens held mistaken beliefs, but he gave them credit for seeking deeper understanding.

Philosophical systems search for the meaning of life, but Paul argued that people cannot find it apart from God: "For in him we live and move and have our being" (v. 28a). This would not have sounded strange to the philosophers, who were familiar with the idea that divinity is immanent in creation. Seneca, a Stoic philosopher known during that period, wrote "God is near you, He is with you, He is within you" (Epistle 41.1-2).

Having explored areas in which there might be some common ground, Paul moved toward a sharper critique of religions that value images of the gods. He began by quoting one of the Greek poets, who had spoken of humans as offspring of the gods (v. 28b). If the deity is powerful enough to create humankind, Paul argued, then surely any human attempt to portray a god in gold, silver, or stone was doomed to failure (v. 29).

Paul's implication was clear: those who thought human craftsmanship could represent a god were living in ignorance. God might have overlooked that in the past, but those who knew better needed to change their ways of thinking and acting. Paul used a form of the verb *metanoeō*, which means to change one's way of life as the result of changing one's thoughts and attitudes: it is commonly translated as "repent" (v. 30).

Paul's call for his hearers to move from honoring images to trusting in the true God was not just an exercise in right thinking: he argued that there were eternal consequences. All would face a day of judgment before Christ, Paul said, "the man whom he has appointed," who had come to reveal true righteousness and who had demonstrated his authority by being raised from the dead (v. 31).

The belief in resurrection, in judgment, and in a god who truly cared about humans would contravene both Stoic and Epicurean teachings. One might have expected the council to throw Paul out of town, and some sneered at his teaching, but others asked to hear him again. Luke records that a few people believed, including a member of the Areopagus named Dyonisius and a woman named Damaris, who must have been a woman of some reputation in the community.

What might a modern believer learn from this text? Paul's strategy shows that effective evangelism begins with finding common ground. If we hope to bring others into relationship with Christ, we need to meet them where they are, seek to understand their current beliefs, and look for points of connection before explaining why we believe Christ is the true way.

Paul's words are also an encouragement to all who live in a pluralistic world: Christian believers may be in a minority, but we can always trust that God is near to us, and that we are never alone, for "In him we live and move and have our being." NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

May 21, 2023

Acts 1:1-14

An Awesome Assignment

> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

Pentecost Sunday is coming, recalling the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send "another Advocate" (John 14:16) through the outpouring of the Spirit. In today's text, though, that time is not yet. The disciples are caught in a web of uncertainty following Christ's resurrection, wondering what would come next.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a similar position. Many people struggle to find themselves, to settle on a career, to adapt to life as a decision-making adult. Some have trouble making commitments or determining what they're willing to commit to. While these questions relate to our life as humans, our life at work, and our life in relationship, we also face spiritual questions. Is there a place for spirituality in our lives? If so, what shape will it take? Who are we willing to follow – and how far?

A promise of power (vv. 1-8)

In his gospel, Luke had written "about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen" (vv. 1-2).

Acts begins with Jesus' final post-resurrection appearance, as Luke emphasized that Christ remained the guiding force of the church, even after his resurrection and ascension. Thomas was not the only one who needed reassurance. So, Luke contends, "After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (v. 3). Other gospels describe resurrection appearances, but only Luke denotes a 40-day period.

During that time, according to Luke, Jesus' teaching focused on the kingdom of God as the eternal reign of God. Knowing that the task ahead would require divine help, Jesus instructed them to remain in Jerusalem and "wait there for the promise of the Father" (v. 4).

The promise would be fulfilled by the Spirit: "This is what you have heard from me," he said, "for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (v. 5, compare Luke 3:16-17).

The gospel writers were painfully honest in portraying how hard it was for the disciples to grasp the master's true intent. When they heard Jesus speak of power, the disciples imagined that Jesus would soon assert his authority and establish the messianic kingdom many had longed for. "Lord," they asked, "is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6).

Again, Jesus had to correct their misconceptions. He was not talking about the eschatological future, which was entirely in the Father's hands (v. 7), but about the present. The disciples' task was an assignment for their own time, and for a different kind of kingdom than they had long imagined.

They would be lost on their own, but God would provide the guidance and hope they needed, Jesus said: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8). That power would become evident on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit would fill the gathered followers with a life-changing sense of God's presence (2:4).

It's hard to imagine how the disciples would have responded to Jesus' promise and challenge. They were still in hiding during the first weeks after Jesus' crucifixion, keeping a watch by the door. Now Jesus expected them to go out into the streets and draw attention to themselves by preaching the gospel. That would be dangerous business, so perilous that the Greek word for "witness" (*martus*) gave rise to the English word "martyr."

Jesus expected his followers to witness not only in Jerusalem, but also throughout Judea, the homeland of Jewish power and influence. There would be opposition, antagonism, and danger every step of the way. Yet, Christ expected them to be faithful in their testimony.

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As if the Hebrew heartland were not threatening enough, Jesus' challenge extended beyond its borders. Samaria was geographically close, but culturally distant. Jesus' first followers were Jews who would have grown up in an atmosphere of prejudice against Samaritans. Would they have carried the gospel into Samaritan territory without a mandate?

Jesus concluded with a phrase that has rung in the ears of mission-minded Christians throughout history: "…and to the ends of the earth." The disciples had no idea how far the earth extended, but Jesus insisted that his message was intended for every part of it.

This is where Pentecost finds its significance. The disciples were confronted with many obstacles as they contemplated this mission. They would face external barriers of open conflict and physical danger in confronting the Jewish authorities. They would have to navigate the hurdles of their own prejudice as they traveled on to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Nothing less than the power of God could lead the first believers out of their hiding places and into the light. Nothing less than the Spirit of Christ could set them free from narrow provincialism and send them forth to proclaim grace to people they had been taught to despise.

Absence and presence (vv. 9-11)

The disciples would need constant help and encouragement, so Jesus assured them that he would always be present through the Spirit. And then, "as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (v. 9).

The disciples had seen Jesus crucified, buried, and resurrected. Now, Luke says, they saw him ascend into heaven. Modern readers are less likely to imagine a three-story universe in which Christ must ascend upward to heaven, but we understand Luke's symbolism. The disciples could no longer see Jesus in the flesh, but they could be sure that he was still alive and active and at work in them. He was out of sight, but not out of mind.

"Two men in white robes" suddenly stood by them, Luke said, asking a question that bordered on humorous: "Why are you looking up toward heaven?" (vv. 10-11).

What else would they be doing?

The angel's question implied that they needed to stop gazing skyward and start looking outward to the mission field that Christ had given them.

The advent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost fulfilled Jesus' promise to empower his disciples to do his will. Modern disciples need not expect to see a repetition of Pentecost, for the Spirit of Christ has not left the earth and does not need to be "prayed down" again. Those who know the power of the Spirit are not those who happen to be in the right place at the right time, but those who are humble enough to surrender their own power to the ever-present Lord.

Like the disciples, we need the power of Christ's Spirit to overcome our timidity, our apathy, our prejudice, and to become faithful witnesses. Jesus' challenge has yet to be fulfilled: as long as there are people in the world who have not experienced the love of Jesus, his followers will never be out of a job.

Next steps (vv. 12-14)

Tagging vv. 12-14 to the ascension story may appear awkward, but it reveals the first steps Jesus' closest followers took in responding to his last commands. Only here are we told that Jesus' last instructions and Luke's account of his ascension were set on the Mount of Olives, which he calls "Olivet," just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem.

The disciples returned to their upstairs gathering place in Jerusalem, and Luke makes a point of naming those who remained of the original 12: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James (vv. 12-13).

They "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer," Luke says (v. 14a), but they were not alone. Women disciples often get short shrift in the gospels, though we are told they were at the cross and the first to witness the resurrection. They would have been present as Jesus spoke prior to his ascension.

They were also part of the community devoted to constant prayer in the upper room, for the 11 prayed "together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (v. 14b). Modern readers may find it disheartening that, after carefully naming the 11 disciples who remained faithful, Luke says only that "certain women," along with Jesus' mother, were part of the faithful praying community.

We may understand the male-centered world in which first-century authors wrote, but we could still wish they had been more attentive to crediting the many devoted women who also followed Jesus along with the 12, often the ones who provided finances and provisions for the journey (Luke 8:1-3).

Luke's mention of both Jesus' mother "and his brothers" seems intended to show that they also had recognized that Jesus was more than an ordinary son, more than a sibling. They, too, wanted to be a part of carrying on his work.

The text challenges us to question whether we, too, want to participate in Christ's ongoing mission. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

May 28, 2023

John 7:37-39

A Pentecostal River

> *On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink." (John 7:37-38a)*

Pentecost: Christians observe it every year, some more avidly than others. Catholics, mainline denominations, and others following liturgical traditions switch their pulpit paraments and pastoral stoles to red, often with embroidered doves or flames to symbolize the Holy Spirit. Male ministers may wear red neckties, and women clergy may break out red shoes. It can be a festive day.

For churches on the charismatic end of the spectrum, Pentecost can be even more special. Worshipers may feel moved by the Spirit to stand, raise their hands, shout, dance, or even speak in tongues. Like the psalmists, their worship is often punctuated with vocal praise and bursts of applause, unlike those who follow the guidance of Hab. 2:20: "the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence."

Jews also celebrate Pentecost, though on the day before, seven weeks and a day from the second day of Passover. Greek speakers called it Pentecost (meaning "fiftieth") because it was held on the 50th day after Passover.

Observant Jews anticipate the arrival of Pentecost by counting the days, even as Christians may count the days of Advent, or from Ash Wednesday to Easter. Jews don't use the term "Pentecost," but *Shavu'ot*, meaning "weeks" (from *shev'a*, meaning "seven," since a week has seven days). The festival, also called "Firstfruits," once celebrated the spring harvest of winter wheat (Exod. 34:22). Israel's traditions combined an agricultural holiday with a cultural tradition: rabbinic calculations in the Talmud claim that God gave the law to Israel on Mt. Sinai exactly 49 days after the first Passover celebration.

So, while Jews memorialize the giving of the law on Pentecost, Christians commemorate the giving of the Holy Spirit. For both traditions, it's a celebration.

Living water (vv. 37-38a)

The setting of our present text, from John, is also during a festival, though it was not *Shavu'ot*, but *Succoth*, otherwise known as the "Feast of Booths" or "Tabernacles." That festival occurred in the fall, shortly after the solemn Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). It also combined agricultural and traditional elements, celebrating the fall harvest while also commemorating Israel's 40 years of wilderness wandering, when the people lived in tents.

Much of John's gospel is centered around Jesus' visits to Jerusalem, all of which coincided with Jewish festivals, which faithful Jews sought to celebrate in Jerusalem when possible. The early part of John 7 locates Jesus in Galilee as the Feast of Booths (*Succoth*) drew near. His brothers urged him to go on to Jerusalem, but Jesus knew it would be dangerous for him, so he insisted that they go on without him. "I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come," he said (v. 8).

Surprisingly, the narrator says Jesus later changed his mind and decided to go, though "not publicly but as it were in secret" (v. 10). After arriving incognito, Jesus apparently overheard much conversation and debate concerning him. He soon gave up his attempt at anonymity. By mid-week, he went to the temple and began to teach (v. 14).

People listening to Jesus expressed astonishment that he could teach so forcefully without being a trained rabbi, but Jesus insisted that his teaching had its source and authority in God, not the synagogues (vv. 15-18). When some people criticized him for healing on the Sabbath, he accused them of hypocrisy, noting that they circumcised on the Sabbath (vv. 19-24).

Jesus and the crowd also sparred over whether he should be understood as the Messiah. Jesus did not claim the title outright, but he insisted that people who knew only his human background didn't understand who he was and who had sent him. There was talk of arresting Jesus, "but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come" (vv. 25-36).

With v. 37 we finally arrive at today's short text, which again finds Jesus in the temple, this time on the last day of the festival. If his prior teachings

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had not created a stir, this one certainly would: "…while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink" (vv. 37-38a).

Some hearers, no doubt, would have been confused, not recognizing that Jesus spoke in metaphor. How could anyone drink from a man? Others, who understood the spiritual claim Jesus was making, may have been offended.

Jesus often spoke in puzzling ways. The Fourth Gospel also records Jesus speaking of himself as the bread of life (6:35, 48) and the light of the world (8:12, 9:5). His choice of water as a metaphor in this context was probably linked to a symbolic water ritual that accompanied the Feast of Weeks.

Tractate *Sukkah*, from a collection of rabbinic writings known as the Mishnah, describes an impressive water drawing and libation ceremony performed each day of the festival. A golden flask containing three measures of water was drawn from the Pool of Siloam, which was fed by the Gihon Spring, Jerusalem's primary water source. As the flask of water was brought into the city through the Water Gate, priests would announce its coming with three ceremonial blasts from the *shofar* (an instrument made from a ram's horn), blowing a *tekiyah* (a long blast) a *teruah* (a broken, toccata blast), then another *tekiyah* (*Sukkah* 4:9).

When the water cask was paraded into the temple, a priest would ceremonially carry it up the steps of a large altar on which were two large bowls (whether of silver or pottery is a matter of debate), one for wine offerings, and one for the water ritual. As the congregation watched, the priest would pour a measure of the water into the bowl. The water would then spew out through two small openings near the bottom, creating a fountain effect as the water washed over the altar.

The ceremony must have been imposing and accompanied by exuberant praise, for Sukkah 5:1 adds: "Anyone who has never seen the rejoicing at the place of [water] drawing, has never seen rejoicing in all his days."

The coming Spirit (vv. 38b-39)

The latter part of v. 38 presents a conundrum, for it claims to quote scripture ("As the scripture has said …"), but there is no Old Testament equivalent to what follows: "Out of his heart/side shall flow rivers of living water." As noted above, some interpreters take this as a reference to the believer, while others think the reference is to Jesus.

Most translations speak of the river of living water as flowing from the heart, as NRSV: "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (v. 38b). The word used is *koilía*, which normally means "belly," though it could also be used as a reference to one's insides in general. Some interpreters take it as a general reference to the body: NET2 has "From within him shall flow rivers of living water."

Some commentators have suggested that the quotation was shaped by the tradition that a Roman soldier had pierced Jesus' side with a spear during the crucifixion, and that "blood and water came out" (John 19:34).

Whatever the interpretation, the intent is clear: Jesus invited all who were spiritually thirsty to come to him, and the act of "drinking" from Christ was connected to belief. In other words, Jesus recognized the human longing for spiritual wholeness and extended an invitation for people to quench that thirst through him, observing that only believers would take advantage of the offer.

The story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria reflects a similar thought. When Jesus offered her "living water," she did not understand. He then explained, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14).

Water may be the image, but the real subject is the Spirit, for which the "water of life" is a metaphor. When we come to v. 39, the narrator adds an obvious editorial comment: "Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

The NRSV translation is unfortunate, as a casual reader might take it to mean that the Spirit did not yet exist. A better reading is "for the Spirit was not yet, for Jesus had not been glorified." Some ancient copyists added "had not been given" in hopes of clearing up any misunderstanding. The point is that while Jesus was still physically on earth, the Spirit had not yet come upon believers. Only after Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension – when he had been fully "glorified" – would the Spirit be given to the church.

The memorable Pentecost experience described in Acts 2 became the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that those who came to "drink from him" would receive the Spirit in abundant and overflowing ways.

All believers are invited to have a "Pentecost experience" of sensing the presence of Christ's Spirit within. Tongues aren't required — only thirst, and belief. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

June 4, 2023

Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Beginning to Begin

Every culture has a creation story. Whether it is the Cherokee account of a water beetle bringing up mud to build earth in the primeval ocean, or a scientific portrait of the Big Bang, humans have sought to explain our beginnings.

The Hebrews had several creation stories, but just one of them constitutes our text for today. Others are found in Gen. 2:4b-25; Prov. 8:23-31; Ps. 33:6-7; 104; Jer. 10:12-13; Isa. 40:21-26; and Job 38-39. All describe creation in different ways, and all of them rely on the language of metaphor.

The first story portrays creation over a seven-day period. In the first three days, God creates a substrate or framework for animal life, like an artist who sketches an outline as the foundation for a painting. During the next three days, God fills in the canvas with colorful creations of light and life. On the seventh day, God rests.

Creation: round one (1:1-13)

In the first creation story, the author portrays God as being high and remote, creating all things by the spoken word alone. All that existed before creation was a watery chaos called *tohu wabohu*, a "formless void" (NRSV).

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:31a)

Many ancient peoples, including both Hebrews and Mesopotamians, imagined creation emerging from a dark and watery tumult. The writer envisioned God's Spirit as brooding over the chaos waters.

The first thing needed was order, and order needs light. Thus, the Bible's first record of God speaking is "Let there be light."

And there was light, the writer says. Light was said to be created even before the sun and moon to emphasize that the whole idea of light began with God, not with sources of light.

It was important for the author, probably writing during or after the exile, to distinguish Israel's creation account from familiar stories told by the Babylonians and other ancient peoples who considered the sun, moon, and stars to be gods.

With light bringing a sense of order, God spoke again, and day two was marked by the creation of a solid "firmament" to separate and to protect a safe place within the waters of chaos, like a giant bubble in the waters where life-giving air could exist.

The Hebrews could only interpret the world as they saw it. The writer of Genesis 1, like others of his day, envisioned a three-story universe in which the earth existed within a primordial sea as a disk-like land mass with supporting pillars below and a solid, dome-like firmament above. The sun, moon, and stars ran on fixed courses across the firmament, moving beneath the earth at night and re-emerging during the day.

Having created a space for life to exist, God spoke again on day three, and dry land drew apart from the oceans, providing a substrate for earth-bound life. With another divine word, land-based plants emerged.

The emergence of plants offers a clear reminder that the order of events was designed for theological and rhetorical purposes, not as science or history. By introducing green plants before warmth or light provided by the sun, the author attributes life's existence to God alone and moves the celestial bodies further down the list as a subtle way of pointing out that in Israel's belief system, they were not gods.

Creation: round two (1:14-27, 31)

Having established sky, sea, and dry land with vegetation in place, God was ready to fill in the lines. The ancients knew that the sun's warmth and light were essential for continuing life, but the author wanted to affirm that the sun was merely one part of God's creation.

Thus, when God spoke and the heavenly bodies appeared, the author carefully avoided naming them. He described the sun and moon as "the greater light" and "the lesser light" rather than using *shemesh* and *yarih*, the Hebrew words for them. The Babylonian sun god was named "Shamash," an obvious cognate to the Hebrew word for "sun" (*shemesh*), and the writer wanted no confusion: he added "and the stars also" as if their creation was an afterthought. The intent was to emphasize that the

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heavenly bodies were objects created for God's purpose, not deities.

On the fifth day, animal life came to the fore: God spoke, and creatures of the sea and sky appeared to bring life to the oceans and the air, joining plant life on the dry land.

This is a good place to notice that the author has arranged creation in two corresponding, sequences of three. Light on day one is followed by creation of the heavenly bodies on day four. Creation of the sea and sky on day two corresponds to the birds and fish that occupy them on day five. We can expect, then, that the creation of the dry land and plants on day three will be matched by the emergence of animal life on day six.

So, when God speaks again, creatures of *terra firma* emerge. Insects and worms that creep and crawl join larger animals that feed on the pre-existing vegetation. Although humans do not yet exist, the writer distinguishes between wild animals and those that would be domesticated.

With all else in place, God spoke humans into being, male and female together, as the crowning glory of all creation. With the creation of humankind, a literary shift describes God as being more personally involved. The word *bara'*, which refers to God's creative action, is found in v. 1, but does not appear again until v. 27, where it occurs three times. The author thus emphasizes God's personal role in human creation.

According to the story, God said "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness … (v. 26a, NRSV). This comes as a surprise. Who is this "us," and what does it mean for humans to be made in God's image?

Some readers have imagined a reference to the Trinity, that God the Father/Creator was speaking to the pre-existent Son and the Holy Spirit. This notion would have been completely alien to the writer.

People throughout the ancient Near East imagined that the earth was ruled by a heavenly council of divine beings. In Canaanite belief, the chief god El held council on Mount Zaphon with lesser gods such as Baal, Dagon, Mot, Yam, and Asherah. In Babylonian thought, Marduk presided over a council of lesser gods that met each year to determine the fates of humankind.

Hebrew religion had no place for multiple gods, but imagined that God also ruled over a heavenly court of supernatural beings called "sons of God" (see Job 1–2) who served God in various ways. Hebrew tradition thought of them as angels: other religions might call them lesser gods.

The writer was too theologically precise to suggest that humans could be created in God's exact image, but believed that we share something of God's image, perhaps a step down from the heavenly court.

Creation: round 3 (1:28-29, 2:1-4a)

The creation of humankind did not come without instructions. As the highest order of creation, humans have a responsibility to care for the earth, sea, and sky – and for the creatures that inhabit them.

God instructed humans to "have dominion" over creation (v. 28). The word does not imply exploitation, but proper stewardship or management. Humans are put in charge of the earth, but not just for their own benefit.

Some may be surprised to learn that vv. 29-30 call for both humans and animals to eat a plant-based diet. Only after the flood, according to the primeval stories, were people authorized to eat meat, and then only with respect and care (Gen. 9:1-4).

Having created the earth and given it over to humans to enjoy and to manage, God rested: "So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it …" (2:3a). The text does not instruct humans to follow the same pattern, but the author clearly considered it as a model for humans to follow. A priestly commentary on the commandment to "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" (Exod. 20:11) connects it with the first creation story, recalling the order of creation and adding, "therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it."

The emphasis on the Sabbath day, which is not present in any of the other creation stories, is a clear indication that the first creation story derives from a priestly writer. As we contemplate his imaginative account, we can recognize that it is clearly metaphorical rather than a literal account of creation. More than anything, it is designed to make the theological claim that God created all things, that God created them good, that humans are called to join God in the ongoing work of caring for creation, and that humans are to regard the seventh day as holy.

As we go about our daily lives, most of us are in far closer contact with the earth and the concerns of physical life than we are with God. The majestic story of creation we find in Gen. 1:1–2:4a reminds us that we can't fully separate the two. Our text declares that the earth upon which we stand, the air we breathe, the vistas we enjoy, the water we drink, the food we eat, and even the rest we take – all are gifts of a loving God.

Responsibility of caring for this magical creation is the first biblical word of God to humankind. That's something worth thinking about. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Reminder: the password for online teaching resources is ***learning***

June 11, 2023

Genesis 12:1-9

A Man for All Peoples

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. (Genesis 12:2)

Have you ever watched an episode of a TV series that included so much conflict or violence that you couldn't wait for it to end, hoping the next episode would bring resolution or happier days?

The story of God's call to Abraham is not unlike that, appearing like a bright light at the end of a long tunnel. The first 11 chapters of Genesis (often called the "Primeval History") begin with two marvelous stories of creation, then shift to a downward spiral of human rebellion and divine cursing … but then there was Abraham.

A radical call (v. 1)

We are familiar with the idea that Abram – Abraham's name prior to it being changed in Gen. 17:5 – grew up in "Ur of the Chaldees" before his father decided to move the family to Canaan, but settled instead in the northern Mesopotamian city of Haran (11:31-32).

Haran was a large city by the Balik River (now in southern Turkey). Rather than going on to Canaan, the family remained there until Terah died. Afterward, according to the text, God spoke to Abram and called him to renew the trek to Canaan, promising to bless his family in remarkable ways.

We don't know how Abram, raised among worshipers of the moon god Sîn, would have perceived the call of Yahweh, but we presume God would have little trouble communicating. Yahweh instructed Abram to leave his country, with its many deities and attendant cultural practices. In doing so, he would leave his kindred, the large tribal unit to which his family belonged. Finally, God told Abram to leave his father's house, his own immediate family.

Thus, God called Abraham to leave behind all that was familiar to him – without telling him where he was to go. There was just this: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Abram's immediate and apparently unquestioning response to such an ambiguous call is testimony to tremendous trust. It is no wonder that we, like the writer of Hebrews, look to Abram as a model of faith (Heb. 11:8-16).

The story leads us to wonder how we would respond in a similar situation. What would it take to convince us that the sense of calling was really from God?

Radical promises (v. 2)

God offered impressive promises in response to Abram's obedience. First was the promise to show Abram a new land, which also implied continued protection and guidance along the way. Abram was assured that God would travel with him and show him where to go.

God also offered promises that were more explicit and remarkable in their scope. According to the story, God told a 75-year-old man with no children that "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (v. 2). The reader already knows that Abram's wife Sarai was "barren" (11:30), so this seems an unlikely outcome indeed. How could Abram become a great nation when his wife was apparently unable to bear children?

God did not tell Abram how the promise would come to pass: that Abram trusted God while knowing so little about what God expected is a further testimony to his faith. God had promised both guidance and blessing, and that was enough.

The narrator says that Yahweh also promised to bless Abram with a great name. That may be a purposeful contrast to the preceding story, in which the builders of Babel set out to "make a name" for themselves (11:4). Despite their many resources, their prideful effort resulted in a scattering of the people and a loss of their name. Abram had little with which to build, but countless generations have looked up to "Father Abraham" as the progenitor of Israel and a model of faith.

A radical blessing (v. 3)

God's intention was not only to bless Abram, but to make him a blessing to others (v. 2). The thought is expanded in v. 3: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will

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curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Abram would become a channel of blessing to all the families of the earth. Those who recognized Abram as the servant of God and the source of blessing could experience the blessing of knowing God, too. In contrast, those who opposed Abram were also opposing the work of God, and they would experience the consequences that accompany such rebellion.

Some modern versions translate the last phrase of v. 3 as "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (RSV), meaning that Abram's name would be used in blessings, but most translations (including KJV, NRSV, NRSVue, NIV11, NET2, NASB20) favor the interpretation that Abram would become a source of blessing to all persons.

The promised stream of blessing would become evident in many ways. Lot, Abraham's nephew, was richly blessed through their association. Laban (a descendant of those who remained in Haran) was later blessed through his affiliation with Jacob, Abraham's grandson. Other nations also prospered, according to the story. The Egyptian official Potiphar prospered from his association with Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson, as did the nation of Egypt.

Prophetic hopes centered on a day when all nations would come to Jerusalem to seek God's wisdom and blessings (Isa. 2:2-4). The greatest blessing to the world, in time, was the birth of Jesus Christ, born as a descendant of Abraham.

The Apostle Paul later interpreted the life and work of Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to make Abraham a blessing to all people (Gal. 3:6-14).

Are there ways in which we have seen God continue to bless others through the heritage of Abraham today?

Radical Obedience (vv. 4-9)

"So Abram went," the text says, "as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him" (v. 4a).

Surely Abram must have had many questions, but the text says nothing about them. It tells us only "So Abram went …." The note that his nephew Lot came along (v. 5) will become significant later on, as Lot plays a role in several stories that highlight Abram's character and faith.

A brief itinerary follows: in Canaan they came first to Shechem, in the central hill country. A note adds "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (v. 6). Indeed, the Canaanites never left the land: Despite a few hyperbolic claims in the book of Joshua, the indigenous peoples were never driven out. Israel lived among various Canaanite groups throughout the Old Testament period, even as modern Israelis live among Palestinians, despite continuing efforts to drive them out and take over their land. The ruins of ancient Shechem are now surrounded by the Palestinian city of Nablus, one of the largest in the West Bank.

Though the land was occupied by Canaanites, the narrator asserts that God would one day give the land to Abram's offspring, and Abram responding by building an altar to commemorate the promise, and perhaps to lay some sort of claim to the territory (v. 7).

From Shechem Abram moved his family further south, where they camped for a while between Bethel and Ai. There Abram built another altar "and invoked the name of Yahweh," an indication of worship and claiming Yahweh as his family's God (v. 8).

So, the text says, "Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb" (v. 9). The Negeb was the large area comprising the southern part of Canaan. Though desert-like now, it was a populous place of pastures and small cities during the Middle Bronze Age, the era in which the patriarchal stories are situated. It was a suitable place to provide pasturage for Abram's considerable flocks, and so it became his home.

Abram's travel "by stages" suggests a helpful lesson for those who pay attention. He did not reach his destination immediately, or even know in advance exactly where he was going, but he made steady progress, figuring it out along the way. This is the way life works: we grow through stages of childhood, youth, young adulthood, and greater maturity before reaching our senior years. Every stage of life calls for continued learning, continued growth – and continued openness to God's leadership along the way.

What happens when we look at this text through the lens of Jesus' life and teachings? Through Christ, has God not also called us to follow him in lives of obedience and service? Our text insists that God did not tell Abraham in advance where he was going, but challenged him to go in trust "to the land that I will show you."

When Jesus called Peter and James and John, he didn't tell them all that lay ahead, but said only "Follow me." When the spirit of Christ appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, he gave the crusading rabbi no hint of all the places he would go. When saints through the ages have heard and responded to God's call, they did so without knowing where that would lead.

Have any of us been given a detailed map of how our life would turn out when we responded to Christ's call to repentance and faith and following? No, but we can trust that when we choose to follow Jesus, we are not alone. The Spirit goes with us, leading us to places of blessing and growth. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

June 18, 2023

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

Not Dead Yet

Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son. (Gen. 18:14)

Have you ever gotten news that seemed too good to be true – news so good that you could only laugh in disbelief? Maybe you won a prize, or received an unexpected honor, or got a promotion with a raise. Perhaps someone gave you an extravagant gift, or you learned that your first grandchild was on the way.

Today's lesson tells the story of a couple easily old enough to have great-great-grandchildren, but they were being told that they would soon conceive their first child. No wonder they laughed. I suspect we would have giggled, too.

An abandoned hope

Genesis 18 is part of the extended story of Abraham and Sarah, which begins in the latter part of Gen. 11:26 and extends through Gen. 25:11. After spending much of his life in northern Mesopotamia, Abraham (then known as Abram) received a call from Yahweh, instructing him to leave his home behind and go "to a land that I will show you." The call was accompanied by an expansive promise that the LORD would bless Abraham and make of him a great nation, blessing others through him (12:1-3). Abraham was already 75 years old, but he pulled up stakes and moved on, even without knowing his destination.

God led Abraham to the land that would later become Israel, repeating or expanding the promises at several points along the way. In 13:14-18, God promised to make Abraham's offspring like the dust of the earth, and to grant "the length and breadth of the land" as their dwelling place. This made it clear that the promise involved both progeny and property.

Despite God's promise, years passed with no babies in sight. The narrator says that Abraham so despaired of having children that he prepared to designate Eliezer, his steward, as his heir (15:1-3), but Yahweh appeared again to assure Abraham that he would have a child of his own. Leading him outside, Yahweh said "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be" (15:4-5). Abraham responded with faith, according to the story, "and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (15:6).

That promise was followed by a spooky night-time ritual of covenant making. God instructed Abraham to cut in half a three-year-old heifer and a three-year-old goat, placing the halves across from each other, along with a dove on one side and a pigeon on the other, with a path between them. As evening approached, Abraham fell asleep, "and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him." Yahweh again insisted that Abraham's descendants would inherit the land, and Abraham watched as "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch" passed between the two rows of animal parts as a sign of God's commitment to following through.

Still another promise is found in 17:1-22, where God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah (both are dialectical variants of the same names, which mean "Exalted Father" and "Princess"). Speaking to Abraham, God promised specifically that Sarah would have a child, after which Abraham could have texted "ROTFL." For modern texters, "Rolling On The Floor Laughing" is an exaggeration, but the story says Abraham was literally on the floor: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" (17:17).

While Abraham was laughing, God was serious. This story, from the priestly writer, contained a new stipulation that Abraham must obey: he was to begin the practice of circumcision and require his children to maintain the custom throughout all generations (17:9-14).

A hospitable man (vv. 1-8)

When we come to Gen. 18:1-15, God's promise of progeny is repeated, but this time in a more personal manner. Abraham had been in the land for more than 20 years. Some years before, at Sarah's urging, Abraham had fathered a son by Hagar, his wife's handmaid (16:1-16). He seemed satisfied enough for Ishmael to be his heir (17:18), but God had other plans.

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The story has Abraham encamped at a favorite spot called "the oaks of Mamre," which was near Hebron, in a hilly area west of the Dead Sea. As he sat napping in the doorway of his tent in the heat of a dry afternoon, the old man looked up to find three men standing nearby. The trio must have been impressive in appearance, for Abraham ran to meet the visitors, bowed with his face to the ground, and begged them to rest in the shade and take refreshments before passing on, "since you have come to your servant" (vv. 1-5).

Hospitality was, and remains, an honored custom among Middle Eastern peoples. Even enemies could receive hospitality and protection if they sought it. We are not surprised, then, that Abraham received his visitors with warmth and generosity, but for these guests he put on a particularly extravagant display. Though pushing 100, Abraham ran to meet the visitors, hurried to ask aged Sarah to bake an abundance of bread, and again ran to the herd to select a choice calf to be slaughtered. He then organized a lavish and hefty meal with dishes of fresh bread, beef, milk, and curds (a form of yogurt). Treating the visitors as honored guests, he "stood by them under the tree while they ate" (v. 8).

A wonderful promise (vv. 9-15, 21:1-7)

At some point during or after the meal, the visitors asked "Where is your wife, Sarah?" (v. 9). Had Abraham told them his wife's name, or was their knowledge of her name the first indication of their supernatural identity? Abraham answered that Sarah had remained in the tent. This does not suggest that she was hiding or showing pique: it was customary for men to eat together, and for the women to remain apart when not serving.

One of the guests – presumably Yahweh – then declared: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (v. 10). If Abraham had yet to guess that his visitors were not ordinary people, that statement should have made it clear.

Sarah's tent was close enough for her to overhear the conversation. At 90 years old and long past menopause (v. 11), she had given up any hope of bearing children, but had not lost her sense of humor: "So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'" (v. 12). The thought of enjoying sex and getting pregnant by Abraham in their old age must have seemed ludicrous.

The notion was not at all absurd to Yahweh, however. "The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son'" (vv. 13-14).

Yahweh's response comes across as incredulous, as if God couldn't believe that Sarah would doubt. A more literal translation would be: "Why, this? Sarah laughed, saying …" Yahweh's description of Sarah's statement is more expansive than previously reported. The narrator had said Sarah laughed at the thought of knowing pleasure, but Yahweh quotes her as saying: "Indeed, truly, will I bear a child when I am old?"

Yahweh went on to ask, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" The word translated as "wonderful" (NRSV) comes from a verb meaning "to be extraordinary" or "to be amazing." Since wonderful things can be remarkably hard to accomplish, it can also mean "to be difficult." Thus, NET2 has "Is anything impossible for the LORD?" and NIV 11 has "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" In context, this is probably the better sense.

The answer, of course, is that nothing is too wonderful, amazing, or difficult for Yahweh – even the gift of a child to a 90-year-old woman and her centenarian husband.

Fearing that God might be angered by her doubt, Sarah denied having laughed (v. 15), but she did indeed have sexual pleasure as well as a son, according to 21:1-7, where the text says that God remembered the promise, and that Sarah conceived and bore a son in her old age – just as Yahweh had predicted (21:1-3).

Abraham was 100 years old when he circumcised his new son (21:4-5), and laughter was again the order of the day. Previously, both Abraham and Sarah had laughed in the relative privacy of their tents, but when the boy was born, they happily named him "Isaac" (*Yitzhak*), which means "he laughed."

"God has brought laughter for me," Sarah said: "everyone who hears will laugh with me" (21:6). The proud new mother could not resist stating the obvious: "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age" (21:7).

Who would have said it? God would have, according to the story, and more than once.

Today we may still laugh at the prospect of God granting a baby to a nonagenarian, but Christian descendants of Abraham can rejoice even more in remembering how God, many years later, granted another miracle baby. This child was not born to an old woman past the age of childbearing, but to a young woman who remained a virgin.

And that son brought joy to the world. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

June 25, 2023

Genesis 21:8-21

Not Long Alone

Have you ever faced a major setback that led to a surprising leap forward? Sometimes we complain that our progress in life feels like "three steps forward and two steps back," or even worse, "two steps forward and three steps back." Yet, sometimes those reversals lead to unexpected growth.

Today's text describes a mother and son who were cast from a comfortable camp into a desert wasteland. On the verge of losing all hope, they discovered that they were not alone, and that an impressive future lay ahead.

Trouble in the camp (vv. 8-13)

The book of Genesis recounts multiple predictions that Abraham would become the father of a multitude, but he struggled to become the father of one. In time, his aged wife Sarah lost all hope of bearing a child of her own and decided to offer up her Egyptian handmaid as a surrogate birth mother. She encouraged Abraham to inseminate Hagar, the plan was successful, and Hagar became pregnant (16:1-3).

Last week's text presented Sarah in a favorable light. This one does not. We often fail to consider the implications of the story, for Hagar, an Egyptian slave, was forced into sexual service in a scene no more appealing than accounts of plantation owners raping slave women.

> *So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. (Gen. 21:14)*

Can we blame Hagar for harboring such deep bitterness that she "looked with contempt on her mistress" (16:4)? Sarah had instigated the violation of Hagar's body, but her pregnancy revealed capabilities that her mistress lacked.

Sarah had resentments of her own. She treated Hagar so harshly that the slave girl ran away, fleeing to the wilderness (16:5-6). There, Hagar's misery was interrupted when the "angel of the LORD" appeared, announcing that her son would grow into a "wild ass of a man," the progenitor of uncounted offspring, though he would live at odds with his kindred (16:7-12).

Israel's story held that God intended for Sarah to have a child, however, and Gen. 18:1-15 recounts a personal encounter in which God visited Abraham's camp and promised it would be so. They both laughed at the idea, but despite the odds, Sarah gave birth to a boy. They named him Isaac, meaning "he laughed," and Sarah declared that "God has brought laughter for me" (Gen. 21:6).

Sarah's good humor did not last.

In their earlier encounter, God had told Hagar to return obediently to Sarah's service (16:9), and the text implies that she did. We read nothing more of their relationship for more than a decade, until the day when Abraham and Sarah held a feast to celebrate Isaac's weaning, which typically happened near a child's third birthday.

The happy celebration turned sour when Sarah found fault with something that Ishmael, who would have been a teenager by then, was doing. A literal reading of v. 9 could be "Then Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had borne to Abraham, playing." The interpretive problem lies in the last word, a participle from the same verb at the root of Isaac's name.

The participle comes from an intensive stem that can indicate nuances ranging from "he laughed," to "he played" to "he mocked" (laughing derisively). The NRSVue assumes that Ishmael was innocent of ill will, so that Sarah only saw Ishmael "playing with her son Isaac" (adding "with her son Isaac" after an early Greek translation). The NET2, on the other hand, chooses the more critical shading: "Sarah noticed the son of Hagar the Egyptian – the son whom she had borne to Abraham – mocking" (see also NIV11 and NAS95).

Apparently, Sarah could not bear the thought of Hagar's son being on a par with Isaac. Refusing to call them by name, she insisted that Abraham "cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (v. 10). We are not surprised to read that this "was very distressing for Abraham on account of his son" (v. 11), for he loved Ishmael and did not share Sarah's insecure jealousy.

Nevertheless, the narrator says God told Abraham to go along with

Sarah and send them away, promising that Ishmael would become the father of a nation of his own, while the people to be known as Abraham's descendants would be descended from Isaac (vv. 12-13).

Deliverance in the desert (vv. 14-21)

Abraham acceded to Sarah's demand, sending Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with nothing more than a small supply of bread and water. They went miles to the south "and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba." It would not have taken many days for both food and water to run out, and soon Hagar despaired for their lives. The narrator does not record any speech from Ishmael, though he later says that "God heard the voice of the boy."

Ishmael would have been in his teens, according to the canonical chronology, but the story speaks as if he were much younger, using a term typically employed for a small child ד After their scant provisions were exhausted and thirst had taken its toll, Hagar "cast the child" under a bush and then went "about the distance of a bowshot" away, unable to bear watching the child die (v. 15-16).

The NRSV's translation gives the impression that Hagar tossed a small child she had been carrying into the shrubs. The verb is used only in the causative stem, and usually means something akin to "throw" or "fling." It's the same word used to indicate that Joseph's brothers threw him into a pit (Gen. 37:20, 22, 24), that the Israelites threw down the king of Ai's body by the city gate (Josh. 8:29), and that a group of priests threw Jeremiah into a cistern (Jer. 38:6, 9). In this sense, we might also use the word "dumped." Ishmael would have been too big for Ishmael to fling away from Hagar, but we have the impression that the boy, having grown weak, may have been leaning on her for support, and she dropped him in the shadow of a bush.

Hagar "lifted up her voice and wept," the text says (v. 16), and we assume Ishmael must have been crying, too, for comfort arrived when "God heard the voice of the boy" and an angel assured her that God understood their plight (v. 17). Hagar had hidden Ishmael from her own sight, but he was not hidden from God.

The angel instructed Hagar to help the boy up and lead him by the hand, "for I will make a great nation of him" (v. 18). He then "opened her eyes" to a nearby well, from which she could refill the water skin and revive her son (v. 19).

Both God and Hagar looked after Ishmael as he grew, according to v. 20: "God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow." While they lived in the wilderness of Paran, south of the Negev and close to Egypt, Hagar arranged a marriage for him with an Egyptian woman (v. 21) – and that's the last we hear of Hagar.

It is also the last we hear from Sarah. Surprised?

A tale of two mothers

We would not expect Sarah to appear in chapter 22, the story of how Abraham came close to offering Isaac as a burnt sacrifice. If she had known what Abraham was up to, it would surely have been the death of her. Indeed, the next chapter begins with Sarah's death in Hebron, though much time had passed, for Isaac was then 40 years old.

The narrator portrays Sarah with ambivalence. He admires her beauty and her willingness to play along with Abraham's occasional deceit, but he also sees Sarah as the first to give up on the promise by resorting to surrogate motherhood rather than trusting God to grant her a child. Given Sarah's age, we can understand why, but in the narrator's mind, she succumbs to a shadow that darkens as she turns against both Ishmael and her handmaid.

The narrator also shows mixed feelings about Hagar. She obeys her mistress and accepts her role as a surrogate mother, but adopts a resentful attitude toward Sarah after becoming pregnant. When treated harshly, she runs away, only to return and bear the child, then be forced to leave the camp with no more thanks than a bag of bread and a skin of water. In the wilderness, she dumps Ishmael under a bush and retreats, leaving him to die alone rather than staying to comfort him in what she expected would be his last moments.

Despite Hagar's weak moments, she is granted two conversations with God. In the first encounter, God speaks to her, and she speaks to God. Indeed, she assigns to God a new name – El Roi – the only person in scripture said to have done so (16:13). In the second encounter, Hagar does not speak, but God provides water and again promises that her offspring – like Abraham's – will multiply beyond counting.

While biblical tradition asserts that the Israelites were descendants of Abraham through Isaac and then his son Jacob's 12 sons, it likewise assigns to Ishmael 12 sons who became progenitors of their own tribes. As Jews look to "Father Abraham," Arab Muslims also consider Abraham to be their ancestor, but through his firstborn son, Ishmael.

Unfortunately, many Christians look at Muslim people with disdain similar to Sarah's attitude toward Ishmael. We would do well to remember that Ishmael was also blessed by God.

NFJ

2021-current

Joseph R. Biden Jr.

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

"This is a life-changing election. This will determine what America's going to look like for a long, long time. Character is on the ballot. Compassion is on the ballot. Decency. Science. Democracy. They're all on the ballot. Who we are as a nation, what we stand for. Most importantly, who we want to be, that's all on the ballot."

Spoken by a native Pennsylvanian from a modest working-class family and saddled with a lifelong speech impediment, these grave words spoken at the 2020 Democratic National Convention came from the heart of America.

Born in the Keystone State city of Scranton on Nov. 20, 1942, in an era when the U.S. faced a similar existential crisis, Joseph Robinette Biden Jr.'s earliest moments were framed by hardship.

Prior to his son's birth, the senior Joseph Robinette Biden, a successful businessman, had enjoyed a life of wealth and luxury, "sailing yachts off the New England coast, riding to the hounds, driving fast cars, flying airplanes." Then came World War II.

In 1941 Biden Sr. married Jean Finnegan, also of Scranton. Amid the backdrop of a world dramatically transformed by the second World War, Joseph Jr. was their first child.

This is the 46th article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for *Nurturing Faith Journal*, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.

WARTIME

Soon millions of Americans served in the nation's armed forces. Civilians patriotically complied with government rationing of commodities in support of U.S. troops. Government appropriation of industry enabled the nation to rapidly produce military weaponry and equipment to fight the authoritarian Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Japan.

In this war-time economic landscape, Joseph Biden Sr., having lost his golden job, found a silver lining in a position with a company that manufactured sealant for merchant marine ships, his work contributing to the war effort.

Even before the Dec. 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor galvanized the nation to enter the war, Nazism had roiled America.

Leading up to the war a massive far-right, pro-Hitler, anti-Roosevelt, anti-Jewish, white Christian Pro-Nazi movement — led by charismatic Catholic and Protestant preachers, embraced by many German Americans, and abetted by national hero and aviator pioneer Charles Lindbergh —threatened to destroy the nation's democracy.

Pro-Hitler radio programs and newsletters preaching white Christian nationalism reached tens of millions. Pro-Hitler, self-perceived Christian propaganda organizations existed in small towns and large cities, including in the Bidens' home state of Pennsylvania.

Across the country Hitler-saluting Nazi camps, allied with the far right "Christian Front," trained Storm Troopers. Pro-Nazi gun clubs, citing the Second Amendment, stockpiled weapons in preparation for a war against the federal government.

Twice America's Nazis filled Madison Square Garden to overflowing capacity, saluting Hitler while flying the American flag alongside the swastika. Not until Pearl Harbor did America's Nazi movement subside and then cease to be a threat to democracy.

Hitler's Germany, meanwhile, was busy persecuting and ultimately murdering millions of Jews.

UPBRINGING

During Joe Biden Jr.'s toddler years, his nation literally fought a war abroad against evil and for character, compassion, decency and democracy, while simultaneously struggling to contain a widespread pro-Nazi movement on the home front.

Enabled by courageous soldiers — white and Black — and scientific advances in the fields of technology and medicine, an ideologically divided America ultimately righted its democratic ship and played a pivotal role in saving the world from authoritarian domination.

Many historians have concluded that the experiences of the more than one million Black soldiers serving in World War II — the first U.S. war in which Black

soldiers served in significant numbers — led to the Civil Rights movement.

Not old enough to join the battle for democracy raging in his earliest years, Biden would one day overcome personal challenges to become President of the United States at the very time that his nation was once battling anti-democratic forces abroad and at home.

Biden's childhood was anything but promising, buffeted by family financial struggles and bullying at school. As Biden Sr. failed at several post-war business ventures, his wife and children moved in with Joe's maternal grandparents.

A severe stutter he developed early in his childhood carried over into his school years, where the young boy was bullied in kindergarten and grade school. When speech therapy failed to alleviate the speech impediment, Biden responded to the bullying by fighting back.

Amid his struggles and those of his parents, the family's Catholicism kept Joe grounded. In Scranton, young Joe and his family faithfully worshiped at St. Paul's Church.

His early school years were spent enrolled at St. Paul's School, a Catholic institution. Years later, reflecting on his life in his 2007 book *Promises to Keep: On Life and Politics*, Biden wrote: "My idea of self, of family, of community, of the wider world comes straight from my religion."

DELAWARE

Seeking better employment opportunities, the family moved to Wilmington, Delaware, in 1953, where Joe's father took a job as a car salesman. In a new town and attending a new high school, Joe once again encountered bullies.

Seeking to deflect attention from his speech impediment, the highschooler earned respect from his classmates due to his natural athletic abilities. Publicly excelling as a star halfback for the football team, at home he quietly worked to overcome his stutter. All along, he remained a faithful Catholic.

Joe's father, turning his fortunes around in Wilmington, offered simple advice that stayed with and guided his son throughout his life: "Champ, the measure of a man is not how often he is knocked down, but how quickly he gets up."

Completing high school and with his stuttering under control, Joe began college at the University of Delaware. Aspiring to a higher plane, he dreamed of becoming "an esteemed public figure."

Summers during college found Joe working as a lifeguard at a public swimming pool near a housing project — the lone white person among a team of lifeguards otherwise African-American college students from historically Black colleges.

While lifeguarding he learned, according to his memoir, that "Every day, it seemed to me, Black people got subtle and not-so-subtle reminders that they did not quite belong in America."

DETERMINATION

Graduating from the University of Delaware, Biden next studied law at Syracuse University in New York, where he met and married Neilia Hunter, a high school English teacher, in 1966. Over the next five years the couple had three children: Beau, Hunter and Naomi (Amy).

Graduating with a law degree, Biden first worked for a large corporate firm, but soon became dissatisfied. Changing directions, he became a public defender, his clients almost exclusively African Americans from Wilmington's thriving but-still-disadvantaged East Side.

There, performing a public service, he yearned to make a bigger difference still in ordinary people's lives.

In Biden's Catholic upbringing alongside his experiences in a divided America, the future president absorbed a common man's worldview of economic status, a commitment to human dignity, and a determination to make a difference in the world.

Turning to politics, in 1970 Biden won election to the New Castle County Council in Delaware. Two years later, he ran for the United States Senate, surprisingly defeating two-term Delaware U.S. Senator J. Caleb Boggs.

Only 29-years-old at the time, Biden by law had to wait until his 30th birthday to be sworn into office. Displaying the respectful demeanor that would characterize his political career, he referred to his defeated opponent as "a real gentleman."

But just as Joe Biden's future seemed brighter than ever, tragedy struck. During a festive Christmas shopping trip on Dec. 18, 1972, a tractor trailer plowed into the family station wagon, driven by Neilia and carrying the Biden's three children.

Instantly Neilia and Amy were killed, and Beau and Hunter seriously injured. Grieved and despairing, Joe camped out in the Wilmington Medical Center at the bedsides of Beau and Hunter. His deep religious faith helped him cope in those darkest days of his life to that time.

With Biden's sons' lives hanging in the balance, politics faded to irrelevance. He considered giving up his Senate seat before even taking office.

Only at the insistence of his Democratic and Republican colleagues did he decide to continue with his political career. At the medical center Biden was sworn in as Delaware's newest U.S. senator, with his parents and remaining two sons at his side.

SENATOR

In time, Beau and Hunter recovered from their injuries. Afterward, freshman Senator Joe Biden embraced his new position with both savvy and ambition.

Focused on the needs of his constituents, he set the tone of his political career as an advocate for working-class Americans and a legislator sensitive to the needs of the underprivileged.

On the national political front, he criticized President Richard Nixon's lawless behavior and President Gerald Ford's pardon of Nixon. The young senator also contemplated his own future. Acknowledging his lack of experience and background, he nonetheless indicated that one day he would like to be president.

As his national political career unfolded, Biden's commitment to his family remained. Commuting to D.C. and raising his two remaining sons, he eventually remarried, wedding Jill Jacobs — who had grown up in Pennsylvania and was then working as a high school English teacher in Delaware — in 1977. Four years later the couple celebrated the arrival of daughter

Ashley. Eventually Jill earned a doctorate in education.

By now, Biden had been re-elected to the Senate, where he would remain for 36 years total, serving the needs of his constituents, being in a lead role on the Judiciary and Foreign Relationships committees, and becoming a leading statesman in the chamber.

As a Senate leader, he sometimes made national headlines, including during Reagan's presidency when Biden presided over the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of controversial, far-right Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork, who failed to obtain appointment to the Court.

Biden also garnered media attention during the presidency of George H.W. Bush, opposing the nomination of another far-right Supreme Court candidate, Clarence Thomas, but doing so in apparent ineptness.

Chairing a hearing about sexual harassment allegations lodged against Thomas by multiple women, Biden seemingly lost control of the hearings as Anita Hill — who had formerly worked with Thomas — testified against Thomas, after which the senator chose not to call for testimony from three additional women who were prepared to testify.

Despite the allegations of Thomas' sexual crimes, the Senate elevated him to the Supreme Court. Although Biden voted against Thomas, he received criticism for failing to fully investigate the sexual harassment allegations against Thomas. Later he accepted responsibility for his mistake and became an advocate for reducing violence against women.

BACKTRACKING

It would not be the first time Biden would feel compelled to backtrack. During the Clinton presidency the senator led the passage of a 1994 federal crime bill that expanded the presence of police on America's streets, funded new prisons, and toughened penalties on criminals.

Later the bill would be criticized as heightening mass incarceration of and discrimination against Black Americans. When running for president in 2020, Biden struggled to justify the bill that he once referred to as the "Biden Crime Bill."

Serving 11 years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as chairman or ranking member, Senator Biden played a significant role in America's response to both the post-Cold War era and a subsequent rise in terrorism.

He approved of international humanitarian efforts on the one hand, yet displayed a mixed record on war resolutions, in 1991 voting against authorizing the first Iraq war under President George H.W. Bush, then voting for the 2002 Iraq war under President George W. Bush.

Biden later called the 2002 vote a "mistake."

In 2008, as Barak Obama's running mate, Biden achieved the vice-presidency of the United States, where he served from 2009 to 2017.

A senior statesman alongside the newcomer Obama, Biden heavily influenced the president's domestic decision-making and foreign policy.

At Obama's behest, speaking on behalf of the president on many occasions, Biden became one of the most influential vice presidents in American history. With Biden's help, President Obama garnered enough votes to pass his most significant legislation, the Affordable Care Act.

In 2017, Obama presented Biden with the Medal of Freedom for the vice president's many contributions to the nation.

DIRECTION

Despite thoughts of running for the presidency in 2016, Biden ultimately declined due to yet another family tragedy.

This time it was his eldest son Beau — attorney general of Delaware since 2007 and a major in the Delaware Army National Guard in the Iraq War — who in 2015 died of brain cancer at the age of 46.

Later, Beau's death was attributed in part by the former vice president to toxins inhaled from the burning of waste at U.S. military installations overseas.

Walking yet again through the valley of the shadow of death, Biden's faith helped him cope for a second time with the most painful of journeys a parent can endure.

Throughout his life, from childhood through his Senate career and the vice presidency, Biden had faithfully attended church services on a weekly basis, finding comfort and direction in praying to God.

After a long period of grieving Beau's untimely death, Biden's religious faith played a significant role in a decision to run for the presidency, one he publicly announced in April 2019.

Running as a moderate Democrat, Biden squared off against the extremist sitting Republican president, Donald Trump. As in the 2016 election, conservative white evangelicals again overwhelmingly voiced loyalty to Trump, who again played to their anger, prejudices and hatreds.

Refusing to use his religion as a political card, Biden remained focused on restoring law, order and democracy to the White House. Amid Trump's racist and xenophobic campaign and erratic handling of the COVID pandemic, candidate Biden projected more likability and stability than the sitting president.

In the November election Biden easily won the electoral and popular votes despite being soundly rejected by white evangelical Protestants (of whom approximately 80 percent voted for Trump).

Appealing to a broader swath of America, Biden garnered some 52 percent of Catholic voters, a big majority of minority voters, and the overwhelming backing of non-Christians.

BACKDROP

Knowing he had lost but determined to stay in the White House by force, if necessary, Trump, supported by his white Christian nationalist base, went to extreme and illegal measures in attempting to overturn the 2020 election.

Roundly failing in these efforts, he galvanized thousands of his most loyal followers to assault the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Beneath Christian flags, banners, signs, a large cross, and Bibles held aloft, the domestic terrorists assaulted and overpowered some 140 law enforcement officers and smashed their way into the Capitol building.

Some searched with intent to kill congresspersons and Republican Vice President Mike Pence, who had refused to support Trump's earlier efforts to overturn the election.

During the domestic terrorist assault, President-elect Biden publicly called for Trump to call off the insurrectionists. Trump refused.

Only the heroic efforts of local law enforcement saved America's democracy. It was one of the darkest hours in American history.

In the more than two years since the assault on the Capitol, some 1,000 of the insurrectionists have been arrested, charged, and many sentenced to prison for their crimes against the nation.

Against the backdrop of the January 6 domestic terrorist insurrection and amid beefed-up security guarding against the possibility of another coup attempt — which fortunately did not happen — duly-elected President Joseph R. Biden Jr. was sworn into office on Jan. 20, 2021.

PRESIDENT

In his inaugural address Biden openly acknowledged the existential threat enabled by his predecessor's alliance with militant far-right extremists, many self-perceived Christians. January 6 was a warning that democracy was "fragile" and had barely "prevailed."

Still existing was "a rise in political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront, and we will defeat," said Biden.

The new president promised to combat authoritarian forces still aligned against the nation, declaring "I will defend the Constitution. I will defend our democracy. I will defend America."

For their part, white Christian nationalists continued to make clear their allegiance to the lie that the 2020 election had been stolen from them and Trump. From the moment he was sworn in, President Biden faced a nation dangerously divided, and with no assurance that American democracy would yet survive intact.

The inaugural prayer delivered by Catholic priest Leo O'Donovan, a longtime friend and mentor of the new president, reflected the peril and promise facing Biden.

Invoking the teachings of Jesus and the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln, O'Donovan sought to redirect America to a better place:

"Today we confess our past failures to live according to our vision of equality, inclusion, and freedom for all … American patriotism" is "'born not of power and privilege, but of care for the common good with malice toward none and with charity for all' … Help us under our new president to reconcile the people of our land, restore our dream, and invest it with peace and justice and the joy that is the overflow of love."

Elected to office alongside a Democrat-controlled Congress, Biden devoted himself to moving the nation beyond stark divisions and a slew of crises, including an economy hollowed-out by the COVID pandemic. It would not be easy.

ISSUES

Most viscerally and immediately, the suddenly fragile nature of American democracy alongside ascendant authoritarian ideology called for a restoration of national law and order.

The Justice Department's rapid, determined and systematic response in identifying, arresting and prosecuting the January 6 domestic terrorists signaled a new hope for American democracy. The department's prosecution of the terrorists, and its investigation of Trump as the inciter, continues at the time of this writing.

Paralleling and buttressing the Justice Department's defense of democracy, the rapid formation and determined work of a congressional January 6 investigative committee uncovered a massive trove of evidence that Trump led the illegal effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election and, failing to do so, incited the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol.

In addition, a Georgia grand jury investigation into Trump's efforts to fraudulently overturn Biden's victory in that state is, at the time of this writing, moving into the potential prosecution stage.

Restoring law and order throughout the rest of the nation, however, remains elusive. Ever-looser gun restrictions trouble law enforcement and further enable ever-more-common mass shootings, soaring hate crimes, violent urban crimes, excessive suicides and accidental gun shootings.

Although the Biden administration has invested more federal dollars in support of local policing, the results yet seem marginal.

Saddled with a heritage rooted in systemic racism in a nation where 98 percent of guns are in civilian hands — and only 2 percent in the hands of law enforcement and the military — many police departments struggle to overcome racial biases that too often result in unwarranted and illegal violence against Black persons, while simultaneously feeling threatened by the many angry civilians carrying concealed weapons.

Against the backdrop of democracy's existential challenges and the increasingly violent nature of American society, Biden entered office facing lingering pandemic and economic crises. Although hopes for the eradication of COVID dimmed, vaccine boosters brought cases downward and saved lives.

But there was no vaccine for the massive wealth inequality gap that had begun with the Reagan presidency, nor an easy solution to lingering high unemployment due to COVID.

Most Americans today agree that decades of Reagan's "trickle-down" economics — the argument that slashing taxes on the rich eventually benefits the middle class — have widened income inequality. Indeed, middle-class wages have been static since the early 1980s, while the rich have grown far richer.

A bipartisan Congress in Biden's early months passed, and the president signed, the "American Rescue Plan," a bill designed to restore and expand blue-collar and white-collar jobs. The legislation worked, in 2022 driving wages up and unemployment down to record lows, but with the negative side effect of increasing inflation.

On the other hand, some pressing issues during Biden's presidency have remained entirely unsolvable, perhaps none more visible than immigration, where the president's more-humane-yet-still-restrictive

immigration policies have pleased few on either the left or right.

Less visceral but no less daunting, much of the nation's infrastructure — roads, bridges, public transport, and water and energy systems, most constructed no later than half-a-century ago during an era of high tax rates on large corporations and high earners — is unprepared for the future due to decades of inadequate funding and the rapid progression of cascading disasters caused by climate change.

In response, a $1.2 billion infrastructure package supported largely by Democrat congresspersons and signed by Biden in 2021 provided a record amount of funding to modernize energy, transportation, and water systems while rapidly transitioning the nation to clean energy that helps mitigate the worst of the future effects of rising global temperatures.

In addition, targeted executive orders and departmental initiatives by the Biden administration have done much to combat climate change, increasingly a concern among both progressive and conservative Christians.

Rejoining the Paris Climate Accords, the Biden administration's climate policies set in motion an obtainable plan to reach net zero emissions economy-wide by no later than 2050.

CIVIL RIGHTS

Also to the delight of progressive Christians and many conservative Christians alike was Biden's reinstatement of a national freeze on federal executions that the Trump administration had put on pause.

Pleasing progressives but not conservatives, Biden is currently on pace to appoint more federal judges than all but four prior presidents: Reagan, Clinton, Obama and George W. Bush.

Biden's overturning of a Trump-era ban on openly transgender members of the U.S. military, on the other hand, reflected the will of most Americans other than white Christian nationalists.

Like all presidents since the Civil Rights era, political currents not originating from the White House have roiled American Christianity during Joe Biden's presidency.

First and foremost, the U.S. Supreme Court's June 2022 overturning of R*oe v. Wade* struck federal protection for abortions and gave states the freedom to abolish, restrict or protect abortion rights. Most Americans, in reality, favor abortion rights.

In elections since June 2022, Democrat candidates running for political office at all levels have collectively done exceptionally well beyond expectations, as Republican candidates have faired poorly. Data indicates the reason for these results is bipartisan voter anger against far-right Christian nationalist efforts to place women and girl's bodies under government control and criminalize women who have, and doctors who perform, abortions.

This presents a conundrum for white Christian nationalists. Are they like the dog that had long been chasing cars, and one day actually catches it?

What do Christian nationalists do now that their primary cultural war objective — the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* — on their journey to forcefully making America a Christian nation, has been achieved, but the bipartisan public response threatens to run them off their political road to theocracy? Time will tell.

In their attempts to place women's and girl's bodies under government control and in other ways, too, white Christian nationalists — Protestant and Catholic alike — have relentlessly pressed toward a theocratic America under the guise of protecting their superior "religious freedom" over the freedoms of others.

At all levels of government Christian nationalists have crafted discriminatory legislation blatantly designed to punish non-heterosexuals, prohibit the teaching of truthful American history in public schools and universities, and deny equal rights to persons of color and non-males at large.

In all instances such legislation — frequently enacted in red states — is designed to unravel America's pluralistic and inclusive democracy and reinstate white Christian privileges that began eroding during the Civil Rights era.

In this cultural arena of framing religious freedom as the right to discriminate against others, Biden, a Catholic, finds himself at odds with America's Catholic Church. The conflict was obvious on his inauguration day, when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, voicing Christian nationalist rhetoric and ideology, accused the new president of plans to "pursue certain policies that would advance moral evils and threaten human life and dignity, most seriously in the areas of abortion, contraception, marriage and gender. Of deep concern is the liberty of the Church and the freedom of believers to live according to their consciences."

Shortly after Biden's inauguration one analyst presciently observed that "with Mr. Biden, a different, more liberal Christianity is ascendant: less focused on sexual politics and more on combating poverty, climate change and racial inequality."

At the same time, liberal Christian Biden is by far a more faithful church attender — albeit quietly — than have been most presidents, his devotion seemingly matched only by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Woodrow Wilson.

DEMOCRACY

Biden was born into a world literally engaged in a global war between authoritarianism and democracy. In his own country, tens of millions of conservative white American Christians supported Adolf Hitler and his Nazi vision of white conservative Christian supremacy, holding up Hitler's worldview as their dream for America.

America's pluralistic democracy, under an empathetic President Franklin D. Roosevelt, ever so slowly edging toward equal rights for Black persons, was their enemy.

The world has come full circle. Europe's largest war since World War II is raging, a battle between authoritarianism (Russia) and democracy (Ukraine).

Tens of millions of conservative white American Christians support Russia's Vladimir Putin and his vision of white conservative Christian supremacy, holding up Putin's worldview as their dream for America. The United States' pluralistic democracy, now rapidly expanding in diversity and inclusion, is their enemy.

The war against authoritarian Nazism was one in which a young Joe Biden had no voice. But today's war against authoritarian Putinism may well prove to be his greatest lasting legacy as he stands shoulder to shoulder with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Upon his election, Biden sensed the gravity of his place in history. FDR in his first 100 days in office had focused on creating infrastructure to combat the Great Depression; America's Nazi movement would rise later.

Biden, for his part, devoted his first 100 days to existential economic and autocratic challenges. For this task he recruited some of the nation's leading historians to help him understand how Roosevelt in the 1930s and early 1940s succeeded in bringing Americans together in unparalleled dark times.

"We have to prove democracy still works," Biden later declared in a speech in May 2021, echoing Roosevelt. "That our government still works — and can deliver for the people."

Biden's concerns about autocracy proved well-founded. January 6 came to be understood, in the minds of authoritarians, as the mere beginning of their efforts to destroy American democracy.

In March 2022 at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, a leading white Christian nationalist political activist summed up the book-ended worlds in which Biden has lived:

"Here's the deal. Russia is a Christian nationalist nation. They're actually Russian Orthodox ... I identify more with Putin's Christian values than I do with Joe Biden."

This is a common stance among white Christian nationalists, the far-right base of today's Republican Party. For them, white authoritarian America is a must. Inclusive democracy must be overthrown.

Fortunately, we know from history that America's Nazis during Biden's earlier life — heavily armed, holding massive rallies, cheered in many conservative white churches, training for domestic terrorism in Nazi compounds, and inundating America's mailboxes and airwaves with pro-Hitler, anti-Roosevelt, and anti-democratic authoritarian propaganda — failed to realize their dream of a fascist Christian America.

Today historians fret that the jury is still out on whether America's Putin-loving authoritarians of Biden's latter years — heavily armed, holding massive rallies, cheered in many conservative white churches, domestically assaulting the U.S Capitol, and inundating America's email inboxes, social media accounts and television and radio airwaves with pro-Putin, anti-Biden and anti-democratic authoritarian propaganda — will realize their dream of a fascist Christian America.

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor quelled the rise and sapped the energy of a massive, far-right, Christian authoritarian movement during Roosevelt's era. What will stop and deflate today's far-right Christian authoritarian movement?

EPILOGUE

On Jan. 6, 2021, following the assault on the U.S. Capitol, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell correctly stated, "This election actually was not unusually close." Yet an overwhelming number of Republicans continue to echo the lie that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump.

Simultaneously, most Republicans refuse to admit the reality that the violent assault was domestic terrorism. The Republican Party itself is on the official record as deeming the January 6 insurrection "legitimate political discourse."

The fragile nature of American democracy exposed by January 6 — the nation's most pressing and existential crisis since at least the American Civil War — was not altogether unexpected. None other than President George Washington had recognized the possibility that violent authoritarianism might one day destroy the nation's experiment in democracy.

For eight years Washington had presided as the first president of an upstart, forward-thinking nation devoted to yet-to-be-fully-realized human equality and the "general welfare" of the people.

Not mincing words in his 1796 farewell address to the nation as his second and final presidential term drew to a voluntary close, Washington solemnly warned against any one political party becoming a "destructive … faction" and descending into "frightful despotism" in "which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people."

Washington foresaw that some Americans with unstable minds driven "by the spirit of [political] revenge" might one day "seek security and repose [comfort] in the absolute power of an individual."

That individual, for "purposes of his own elevation" willing to ruin "Public Liberty," would have to be stopped. It is "the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain" authoritarian factions, Washington warned.

To fail to do so would lead a future tyrant to plant "jealousies and false alarms" – resentfulness and lies – in the minds of his followers, thus sparking widespread "animosity" and lighting the fires of "riot and insurrection."

"[L]ove of power … in the human heart," Washington well knew, required "checks in the exercise of political power," lest "free governments are destroyed."

An Enlightenment Deist, he had opposed oppressive theocracy of the colonial era and played a leading role in creating America's secular federal government grounded upon human "reason" — the word he used most often in his farewell address — not religion.

Washington understood both the authoritarian and the benevolent poles of public religion and advocated for the latter. Virtuous and humane "religion and morality" should support "enlightened" public "knowledge" and "opinion," collectively providing "indispensable support" for an inclusive nation devoted to "justice and benevolence," he advised his fellow Americans.

Departing, the first president closed his letter to "The People of the United States of America" with simple but powerful words of wisdom. Each generation should avoid partisan "fury" and "guard against" the "pretended patriotism" of despots and tyrants, he noted, so that future Americans might enjoy "good laws under a free government."

Amen. NFJ

‘GREATEST THREAT’

Dowd warns of Christian nationalism’s danger to faith and country

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

“I love my faith and I love my country, but I hate what Christian nationalism is doing to both of those things.”

So said Matthew Dowd, a political consultant whose television appearances often involve his explanations of Christian nationalism to the show’s host and other panelists.

Dowd addressed the topic to a different audience during a Feb. 2 webinar hosted by Good Faith Media. It was the launch of Good Faith Advocates, which brings together the organization’s faithful supporters to engage important issues.

“To me, Christian nationalism is opposite of Christianity and our Constitution in many ways,” he said.

Dowd is the author of *Revelations on the River: Healing a Nation, Healing Ourselves* (2021) and *A New Way: Embracing the Paradox as We Lead and Serve* (2017).

Dowd told participants that he views Christian nationalism “as the greatest threat to our faith and country.”

The chief strategist for the Bush-Cheney 2004 presidential campaign, Dowd served for more than a decade as chief political analyst for ABC News. Currently, he is an MSNBC political analyst who often raises concerns over Christian nationalism on *Dateline*: *White House with Nicolle Wallace.*

Nationalism, he noted, directly goes to “one specific identity,” to exclusivism, and to “one common culture.”

Christian nationalists co-opt the language of faith, he added, and assume “free reign” when their cause is considered to be divinely inspired.

Fear and anger, said Dowd, arise when Christian nationalists experience a more ethnically diverse and multifaith culture than their own identity. He described their nationalistic worship as idolatrous.

Expressing concern over the current lack of respectful and truthful public dialogue and debate, Dowd said, “We’ve lost the art of persuasion.”

He offered four suggestions for engaging Christian nationalists, in addition to providing a much-needed alternative voice.

First, he said, is to approach the conversation from a point of common faith rather than in partisan ways that break down quickly.

Second, he said, is to focus on the “means” by which we engage others. “Do what’s right and the ends will take care of themselves,” said Dowd.

Third, he advised, is to build bonds locally. The most trusted sources of news, he noted, are those at the grassroots level.

Fourth, he said: “The more personal we can talk about our own story of faith and about being an American, the better. That’s more likely to change people than anything else.”

A BETTER WAY

Earlier in the webinar, historian Bruce Gourley of Good Faith Media put the topic in historical context.

Christian nationalism, he said, is based on “the false belief that America was founded as a Christian nation and must return to being a Christian nation.”

Gourley’s first in a series of online columns as part of A Better Way Initiative appears on the opposite page.

An ongoing effort to provide healthy alternative understandings and practices of both patriotism and Christianity — which counters Christian nationalism — is being conducted through GFM’s A Better Way Initiative (goodfaithmedia.org/a-better-way-initiative).

“For too long, the religious right has dominated the conversation when it comes to matters of faith and culture,” said GFM’s CEO Mitch Randall. “Good Faith Media hears from Christians around the world with a different perspective. We want to provide a platform to amplify those voices, promoting an inclusive gospel and working toward justice and hope.”

The new network’s future online monthly gatherings will follow a similar format to this inaugural Good Faith Advocates webinar. Information on becoming a Good Faith Advocate can be found at goodfaithmedia.org/good-faith-advocates, or by email at info@goodfaithmedia.org. NFJ

How white Christian nationalists define themselves

By Bruce Gourley

Whether they do so in action or word, I am a big fan of letting white Christian nationalists define themselves.

On Jan. 6, 2021, white Christian nationalism was defined in both ways, and went to war against America.

Amid a sea of Christian flags, banners, signs, prayers, Bibles and a gigantic cross, thousands of white, self-identified Christians assaulted some 140 law enforcement officers and broke into our nation's Capitol building.

Rampaging with the stated intent to kill politicians and overthrow democracy, they were determined to install (in their minds) God's chosen one — Donald Trump (who had lost the 2020 presidential election) as the authoritarian leader of a new, anti-democratic government.

They almost succeeded.

Even now, roughly half of Republicans — the chosen political party of white Christian nationalists — claim to believe the lie that Trump won the election. They seemingly regret that the attempted coup failed.

Why? For the answer, we turn to Michael Flynn, a former general and Trump's former national security advisor – or more aptly, Trump's former *personal* security advisor.

Leading up the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol, Flynn encouraged Trump to forcefully and illegally overturn the 2020 election, and to remain in power indefinitely.

Now, Flynn is touring the U.S. on a so-called "ReAwaken America" tour during which he rallies white Christian nationalists to continue the war against his — and their — nation.

Months ago, as Flynn traveled the country selling himself to white Christian nationalists as God's general, he proclaimed to rousing cheers: "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, right?"

The absolute necessity for "one nation under God" drove Flynn to betray his country during Trump's presidency, and now animates aggrieved Christian extremists everywhere he travels.

Who is this angry and vengeful January 6 God for whom Flynn is shilling?

Who does Flynn think he is in demanding the overthrow of the secular-birthed American nation for a theocratic state?

Does he even know the story of the phrase "one nation under God"?

He wouldn't have to look far to find the origins of the phrase that is lining his pockets with earthly riches. Four years before Flynn was born, "one nation under God" suddenly rocketed out of nowhere into popular discourse.

The year was 1954. It was literally an explosive time.

During the Cold War, America's largest nuclear detonation occurred in a test at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The 15-megaton explosion formed a cloud 4.5 miles wide and 130,000 feet high.

Radioactive debris fell over some 7,000 square miles. The end of the world seemed imminent.

Weeks later, a suddenly defensive Congress bowed to public pressure — led by evangelist Billy Graham — to take a stand against the "godless communism" of America's nuclearized enemy, the Soviet Union, by overwhelming passing legislation that added the words "under God" to the nation's pledge of allegiance.

President Dwight Eisenhower, not known as intently religious, declared upon signing the bill: "From this day forward, the millions of our schoolchildren will daily proclaim in every city and town, every village and rural schoolhouse, the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty."

But this war-fevered breach of constitutional church-state separation did not go far enough for extremist U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin.

Seemingly unhinged, he effectively tarred the whole of government and military leadership as communist lackeys. By the end of the year, he went too far and was soundly censured by his fellow senators.

Finally — and with real world consequences — a moderate U.S. Supreme Court ruled against public school segregation in *Brown v. Board*, sending much of white American Christendom into a lather over the federal government infringing upon their religious rights to discriminate against Black people.

"One nation under God," in short, was birthed in the pivotal year of 1954 as white Christian nationalists pushed back against godless communism and became increasingly restless as racial segregation of public schools was challenged in the nation's highest court.

The same impulses drive today's militant-minded white Christian nationalists. January 6 was a test of the ideological nuclear bomb on which construction began in 1954.

On January 6, they went to war not against godless communism, but against a perceived godless — that is, secular, pluralistic, human-rights oriented, liberal — democratic government.

Today, Flynn and others are cheering white Christian nationalists for a renewed assault against our inclusive, democratic nation. In the name of their self-serving god, they intend to succeed. NFJ

Editor's note: This column first appeared at goodfaithmedia.org to launch an online series about Christian nationalism's origins and expression. It is part of GFM's A Better Way Initiative.

MAN in the ARENA

In whatever setting, Wendell Griffen speaks truth with grace

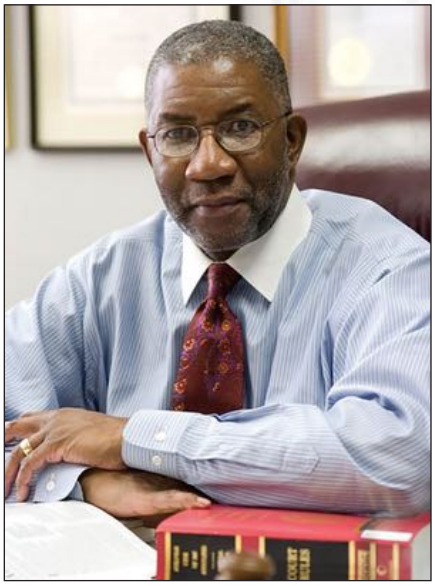
BY DEMETRIUS SADLER

President Theodore Roosevelt, after an arduous hunting expedition in Central Africa, began attending events across Africa and Europe delivering speeches and meeting with dignitaries.

On a cool Saturday in Paris, he stood before a grand crowd of ministers, navy officers, university students and commoners, and delivered one of the most prolific speeches that has reverberated throughout time.

"Citizenship in a Republic" — more famously known as "The Man in the Arena" speech — is not only a great meditation on criticism, courage and the will of man, but also a scathing condemnation of humanity's penchant toward hate.

Roosevelt asserts that most of us aren't "the man in the arena," the one putting our lives on the line courageously and bravely in the name of honor, respect, dignity and freedom. We are more often the audience, those in the crowd who sneer and harass the



fateful ones in the arena, choosing to sit on the sidelines and judge.

Therefore, the valiant "men and women in the arena" of history are rare and should be celebrated for their honorable work and achievements, continuing to fight despite constant scrutiny. No one deserves to sit among the other brave leaders of this country and be declared "a man in the arena" more than Wendell Griffen.

CONVICTIONS

An illustrious Arkansas judge, pastor, activist and community leader, Griffen is a man of many convictions for which he advocates in every arena, even in the state's high seat of authority.

The work he has done is a testament to his values and deep understanding of the human condition, providing him with compassion and empathy to all "God's creatures'" just as Jesus would.

A man both intellectually and prophetically gifted, Pastor Griffen's passion for being a beacon of change has not wavered in his more than four decades serving as an arbiter of law.

If you ask Judge Griffen where his love for public service stems from, he will tell you about his experiences and tribulations that surrounded his upbringing in the small rural town of Delight, Ark.

There Griffen was raised by wonderful, hard-working parents whose love for education and social justice set the groundwork for his calling to the judge's bench. Their striving and yearning for advancement despite society's unwillingness to change is the exact type of "pesky faith" that Pastor Griffen lives by.

When recounting the stories of his youth and how his parents' influence shaped his view of the world, he highlights the injustice of veterans and its intersection with race.

"My father was a World War II-era veteran," he said. "I have relatives who were military veterans."

"My parents were wonderful, devout people who paid their taxes and loved the country," he continued. "But we didn't have

the same freedoms. I had hand-me-down books. I went to segregated schools; from the time I started school until 1965."

"Remember, *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided in 1954," he added. "It was 11 years later before I went to an integrated school or desegregated school. And the nearest desegregated school was two miles from my house."

"I saw the bus drive by my house every day. And until 1965, I didn't even know where that school was, because of segregation. So, that gave me a passion for justice."

FORMATION

His formative years instilled the value of education and critical thought, meaning college was an obvious and necessary goal. However, he flunked out in 1970.

A man who found himself a failure in an area he believed in so strongly continued to fight and went back to school and graduated in three years. Griffen attributed his success to the examples and motivators he met during his time in college, particularly a mentor and warrior in his own right, Major Richard Rogers, who believed in his character and work ethic.

Rogers encouraged Griffen to join the school's ROTC program. His confidence in Griffen along with the discipline that ROTC provided undergirded a young man with great potential, leading him to enlist in the Army immediately after graduation.

Griffen enlisted as a second lieutenant during the Vietnam War. Trained as an artillery officer, he was stationed at Fort Carson near Colorado Springs, Colo.

His convictions and faith began to morally juxtapose the violent brutality of war, and therefore led him to leave the armed forces, honorably discharged in 1976 at the rank of 1st Lieutenant, receiving the Army Commendation Medal for meritorious service in work concerning race relations and equal opportunity.

While his time in the army gave him valuable life lessons and built a community for which he is eternally grateful, his faith swayed his perspective on the value of war and the military.

"Followers of Jesus are not questioning the unthinking acceptance of militarism as part and parcel of allegiance to Jesus," he said. "How can we fail to do that, while preaching that Jesus was the victim of the Roman military empire?"

His love of law and public service grew out of that discontent with war. Judge Griffen had found a way to fight without the destruction and calamity — a way to radically change systems that held his father, a war veteran, down; a powerful tool to subvert expectations and target oppression head-on in a meaningful way.

Griffen used his passion to fight to become a lawyer, with the objective to make long-standing change in the state of Arkansas and inspire others to liberation across the country.

REFUGE

Griffen's struggles with his faith during the Vietnam War also bolstered his interests in the church as a beacon of hope in a tumultuous time when war seems like an inevitable fate. He sees the church as a peaceful abode, a friendly place of refuge on a hill for those of us who choose to fight for God's word, despite the many dangers it poses.

In this spirit he launched New Millennium Church in Little Rock in 2009. It has become another passion, providing fulfillment in ways that are revolutionary in scope.

Members of the church have discussed the merits of the radically shifting work of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.*

Griffen says New Millennium is a rare Baptist congregation in Arkansas that is "open, welcoming and affirming" to LGBTQ persons and where women are empowered. The first person the church ordained to ministry, Anika Whitfield, was a woman.

A more inclusive, understanding and deeply engaging congregation is what Griffen has led New Millennium to become. He considers some traditional church models to be disingenuous, and isolated to the real traumas and issues within congregational life.

Recently retired from the bench, Griffen has found a dual life calling in both law and ministry. With deep respect for church-state separation, he understands and guards those individual roles.

But that doesn't mean his values and convictions change.

Instead of leading a traditional Good Friday service in 2017, Griffen and his Baptist congregation marched to the governor's mansion in Little Rock, where the governor of Arkansas was to preside over the death of eight persons on death row because the lethal injection drugs were about to expire.

New Millennium members saw a connection between the taking of these eight lives and the execution of Jesus. In protest, Judge Griffen famously laid on a cot and tied himself with rope for an hour and half, symbolizing someone being condemned to die by order of a criminal punishment system.

This protest caused a huge uproar among the judiciary leaders in Arkansas, subsequently leading to Griffen being barred from any dealings in the pharmaceuticals case and from all civil and criminal cases involving the death penalty or the state's execution protocol.

But it is in this action that his faith fueled his politics. Retiring from the bench last year, his passion for the work of the community and the fight for the freedom of humanity continues.

When detecting discrimination of any kind, Griffen continues to fight for justice within systems that have often failed those who look like him.

Griffen is widely known in Arkansas and beyond as a leader, pastor, friend, lawyer, veteran, scholar and author — using each role and place of service for the benefit of those who need someone to stand up for them. Faithfully, he is a man in the arena. NFJ

—Demetrius Sadler has served as an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Intern with Good Faith Media.

BETTER DAY DAWNING

Transforming slavery's epicenter into freedom's blueprint

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

In the Deep South along the South Carolina coast, federal military officials were in uncharted territory.

The early November 1861 flight of Sea Island planters had liberated many thousands of slaves who by default were now under the charge of occupying Union forces, an unprecedented development in the early months of the War of the Rebellion, as it was officially known.

Formally freeing slaves was not yet a war-time objective nor politically feasible. Former slaves behind Union lines could be considered "contraband" — Confederate "property" liberated by Union armies — but were not legally free. Nor did many of the northern soldiers and sailors, themselves harboring prejudices and racism, believe Black Sea Islanders worthy of freedom.

Making matters worse, winter was approaching and food was limited. Sea Islands planters' fixation on profits had led them to grow cotton primarily, neglecting large-scale production of edible crops other than rice, a second commercial crop and also a staple of Black Sea Islanders' diets. Planters had imported many of their foods, while slaves fished and grew small vegetable gardens to supplement their meager diet.

Editor's note: This article is the third in a series made possible by legacy funding from the former Whitsitt Society.

From occupied Beaufort commanding officers General T.W. Sherman and Admiral Du Pont — of the U.S. Army and Navy respectively — implored Washington D.C. to send help. But the federal government, too, was in a bind, as there were no viable political options.

Most northerners at this early stage of the war were less interested in aiding slaves and former slaves than punishing white southerners for breaking apart the Union. There would be no federal relief efforts for the freed Sea Islanders.

Their hands tied politically, Lincoln and his administration searched for answers — both in identifying the needs of the former slaves, and in securing appropriate help. Sea Island planters' abandonment of their former properties provided an opening for the U.S. Treasury Department to assess the plantation lands now effectively owned by the federal government. The next step was to recruit someone for the task.

Edward L. Pierce, a prominent and well-connected Massachusetts reformist politician, answered his government's call. Departing in December, he spent two months on the islands and among the "contraband." Returning northward, Pierce reported to Washington that the former slaves should be provided with wages, better food and education.

During Pierce's journey several abolitionist organizations, at the urging of the Lincoln administration, had agreed to lead relief efforts on the Sea Islands. At Pierce's recommendation, some 60 "missionaries" — clergy, laity, educators, philanthropists — prepared for what became known as the "Port Royal Experiment," named for the island upon which the critical town of Beaufort was located.

Down South on the Sea Islands, meanwhile, military personnel were more than ready for help. Fighting wars was their specialty, not guardianship of poor Black families.

Relations between the white military and Black Sea Islanders were strained by inherent racism and mistrust. But it was obvious the two groups would be joined together for quite some time, a realization to which both sides were trying to come to grips even as the arrival of planting season frayed matters all the worse.

Unfamiliar with the world of cotton, the northern military overseers nonetheless felt compelled to teach their charges how to grow the southern commodity crop for income. It did not go well. Long the experts on selecting the best cotton seed to plant each spring, native Sea Islanders had to put up with whites pretending to know best.

Many officers and soldiers dismissed their recalcitrant charges as insolent, but in time the most perceptive among the military men came to realize and acknowledge that the Sea Islanders, despite their lack of formal education, knew far more about cotton than did they.

With the planting season underway, northern missionaries began arriving in March 1862, abolitionist Quakers and Unitarians from Pennsylvania among the first. Urban, well-educated men and women with robust social justice sentiments, few were familiar with such an isolated rural environment as St. Helena Island, chosen as most suitable for their efforts.

Warm weather and spring flowers greeted the winter-weary sojourners. Aston-

ishment characterized their sighting of thousands of raggedly-clad Black Sea Islanders tending vast fields of newly-planted cotton, a task requiring much time and effort. Nonetheless, the former slaves clearly made it known that when not in the fields, they were eager for education long denied.

The missionaries appropriated a church building abandoned during the Battle of Port Royal five months earlier. Named after the materials from which it was built, the Brick Baptist Church had been constructed in 1855 by slaves for their masters' families, wealthy elites who owned thousands of slaves imprisoned on the island prior to the Big Gun Shoot, the battle that freed Sea Island slaves.

Now, the sturdy church served as a good place to establish the Penn School, named in honor of William Penn, an early Quaker and the founder of Pennsylvania. Quickly school sessions were organized for both children and adults.

Among early instructors were two abolitionist Philadelphians: Universalist Laura Matilda Towne and Christian spiritualist Charlotte Forten Grimké. The first African-American teacher in the Sea Islands, Grimké voiced more empathy for the islanders than did Towne and the other white teachers. She also openly marveled at the beauty of the South. In her words, the church in which she and her fellow missionaries taught was "beautifully situated in a grove of live oaks … trees … that we do not hear of … at the North."

Even so, Grimké like the other missionaries struggled to understand the religious world of Sea Islanders. The northern missionaries discovered that the former slaves were "mostly Baptist, and like emotional religion better than rational, so called."

One schoolteacher complained of youngsters' widespread spiritual "seeking" that kept them up all hours of the night "out in the wilderness." The conversion-related practice adopted from traditional African spirituality and grafted into slaves' Baptist Christianity had no equivalent outside of the South. Nor did the Sunday scene at the Brick Baptist Church.

Co-purposed as a schoolhouse and community center, the church building that hosted reading, math, and other educational instruction during the week became on the Sabbath an ever-evolving gathering place. The high point of the week, Sundays were social and instructional occasions as much as religious.

Missionaries, military officers, and large numbers of Negroes filled the church building, the latter often spilling out the doors and windows of the Brick Baptist Church. In a typical service a northern white missionary preached, lectured and/or offered words of advice to the Sea Islanders. Well-meaning if paternalistic, military officers frequently addressed the Black islanders on matters of discipline and work. Graciously, in their estimation, the white protectors and educators allowed their African-American charges to help lead the religious component of Sunday gatherings. Most Sundays "a Negro member would offer prayer." Others sang.

Grimké rejoiced at the islanders' "wonderful, beautiful singing … their enthusiasm." She marveled at a typical Sunday scene of "mules tied in the woods and the oddly dressed negroes crowding in. Inside it was stranger still, the turbans or bare heads, the jetty faces, and uncouth forms were all wild."

The missionaries' observations touched on a central element of St. Helena Island life during the first year of Black freedom: southern African Baptists' religion could not be contained within northern white paradigms, nor northern sentiments at large.

Officers and soldiers, many secular in practice, seemed to agree: Few expressed interest in understanding the Sea Islanders' seemingly strange religion.

Missionaries, on the other hand, struggled to set aside their own preconceptions. Particularly puzzling was the realization that religious services in the Brick Church were but a small part of islanders' spiritual lives. And the more the missionaries learned about religion on the island, the greater their bewilderment.

Sundays aside, the true religious center of each of the Sea Islands was the Praise House, a primitive chapel-like structure or an elder's cabin in which generations of slaves had long joined in a celebration of African spirituality out of sight of white people.

In these humble structures expressive and emotional religious celebrations included communal singing, dancing and shouting. African superstitions infused spiritual thought and practice in the everyday life of the islanders.

Many of the northerners failed to understand the blended nature of African Baptists' religious beliefs. Townes' characterization of the Praise House scene as "savage, heathenish" spoke for many.

More gracious than her fellow teachers, Grimké took delight in elements of Praise House religiosity, deeming it "wonderful that perfect time the people keep with their hands, feet, and indeed with every part of their body. I enjoy these 'shouts' very much."

The chasm between Black and white cut both ways. Former slaves, perceiving themselves free even if the distant federal government did not, could not understand why the Christian missionaries insisted on exercising control over their religion. A prominent Black Baptist leader, tired of outsider interference in islanders' religious affairs, privately voiced his wishes that the white northerners would attend the "White Church" [a white tabby Episcopal chapel built for planters around 1740] and turn the Brick Baptist church over to the Black population. That wish was not granted, but Black Baptists did exercise their religious liberty in calling their own ministers, raising a Blacks-only choir, and holding formal church services of their own within the Brick Church.

Evidencing the disconnect between elite northern white religion and southern low church Black religion, Sea Islanders' Baptist faith — adopted from whites in the plantation South, converted to incorporate African spirituality, and now liberated from white control — signaled the color-blind triumph of freedom of conscience, soul liberty, and local church autonomy.

Baptist principles since the faith's inception in the early 17th century, the three freedoms — alongside bodily freedom, a crucial fourth freedom that most white

Baptists had wavered on at best — found fullness in the African Baptist experience in the liberated Sea Islands.

Not that Baptist planters had actually practiced the principles of their proclaimed faith; Slaveowners for generations long tried and failed to control the minds and beliefs — the conscience — of African slaves.

White ministers had failed to be mediators between African slaves and God, thereby denying slaves' soul liberty. But the slaveocratic South that imprisoned Black bodies had successfully, until this point, prevented African Baptists from exercising local church autonomy by mandating white supervision of the few allowed Black congregations.

Now the systems of oppression had been disrupted. Formerly enslaved persons were proving themselves capable of raising their own cotton for income and rice and other food crops for sustenance. They were learning to read, write, and do math.

They were exerting autonomy over their religious and spiritual beliefs, individually and congregationally. And they were looking yet further into their future of freedom, asking when they would be given actual possession of the lands upon which they had toiled for generations.

Even though the distant white federal government in Washington could not yet provide an answer to that question, the Port Royal Experiment had begun, and new developments on nearby Hilton Head Island offered lasting hope for all Sea Islanders.

With the construction of Fort Mitchel in 1862, Hilton Head Island became headquarters of the Union's South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. There Union forces guarded the Port Royal Sound from Confederate encroachment and transformed the island into a transfer point and supply base for U.S. troop movements into and from the southern interior. There an initial liberated contingent of hundreds of Black Sea Islanders swelled month-by-month as more former slaves from other islands relocated to the vicinity of Fort Mitchel.

Arriving in February 1862, forward-thinking Union Army General David Hunter took command of the island's soldiers. He carried out plans, set in place before his arrival, to coordinate with Union naval forces to capture the nearby Confederate-controlled Fort Pulaski on the Savannah River.

Georgia's Sea Islands, including Tybee, St. Simons and Jekyll, next fell to Union forces. Slaves abandoned by fleeing planters were temporarily quartered on St. Simons Island near Brunswick and Butler Island near Darien, both on which the now-destitute Pierce Mease Butler had once owned plantations.

Hunter made the boldest move of the war to date on May 9, issuing a military order emancipating slaves in Georgia, South Carolina and Florida. The announcement followed his decision to begin enlisting Black soldiers from the occupied Sea Islands to form the 1st South Carolina (African Descent) Union regiment, the first-ever Black regiment. In time, Hunter's regiment grew to include more than a thousand men. The general, however, had gotten ahead of Lincoln, who was not yet ready to formally emancipate southern slaves or officially enlist Blacks as soldiers. Hunter's moves were subsequently revoked by the Lincoln administration. Nonetheless, Confederate President Jefferson Davis used the Union General as a political foil, deeming him a "felon to be executed if captured." (Hunter was never captured by the Confederates.)

Although the federal government had distanced itself from Hunter, his advocacy of formal freedom for Black southerners was shared by Mitchel, who took it upon himself to oversee the construction of barracks at Hilton Head's fort to house the growing Black homeless population on the island.

Less paternalistic than his officer counterparts on St. Helena Island, Major General Ormsby Mitchel, namesake of Fort Mitchell, developed a friendship and partnership with Abraham Murchison — a literate, formerly enslaved Baptist preacher from Savannah — and encouraged freed Blacks, almost all Baptists, as was the case throughout the islands, to construct their own church building. The Hilton Head islanders eagerly set to work. In August 1862, Hilton Head's First African Baptist Church opened its doors.

Led by Murchison, the church thrived from the beginning. On Sundays, congregants gathered in their colorful "Sunday Best," often wearing turbans, for praise and worship. Weeks following the church's establishment, Major General Mitchel addressed the congregation, speaking to the former slaves' ongoing concerns about their future.

"What will you do with the black man after liberating him?" Mitchel asked rhetorically. "We will make him a useful, industrious citizen. We will give him his family, his wife, his children — give him the earnings of the sweat of his brow, and as a man, we will give him what the Lord ordained him to have. This experiment is to give you freedom, position, homes, your families, property, your own soil. It seems to me a better time is coming … a better day is dawning."

Mitchel had voiced an ambitious and unprecedented goal for the Sea Islands that he immediately began implementing but would not live to see in its fullness. The community of Mitchelville, named in his memory, was birthed as "the first self-governed town for the formerly enslaved."

In Mitchelville, former slaves constructed their own houses and held all town positions. In addition to being pastor, Murchison over time served as the town's magistrate and mayor.

Mitchelville was a game changer. Within months federal forces departed Georgia's Sea Islands, transporting the freed slaves of those islands to Hilton Head. Past Savannah they sailed, where slave auctions continued as usual.

Some former slaves aboard the ships had themselves been auctioned off in the city. Docking at Hilton Head, the former Georgia slaves disembarked, Mitchelville becoming their new home in their newfound freedom. And like most South Carolina Sea Islanders, the Georgia Sea Islanders were largely Baptist.

The Old South in the Sea Islands had dramatically changed within a year. In 1860 in every coastal county in South Carolina and Georgia save two, enslaved people had equaled or outnumbered whites, and in all but two of those counties, slaves had

outnumbered whites by an average of 3 to 1.

The Big Gun Shoot in November 1861 had signaled the coming of freedom among South Carolina's islanders. By late 1862 most of the state's roughly 200 coastal forced labor camps had been liberated, the majority of the more than 10,000 human beings recently enslaved on those plantations living free under the protection of Union forces alongside newly-arrived former slaves from the Georgia islands.

In the ideological heartland of the old antebellum South and shining brightly in Mitchelville, freedom of body and religion alike cast light along the thin eastern edge of the vast darkness of human slavery — America's original sin and greatest evil — that yet plagued most of the South.

Today, Hilton Head is a vacation destination. Yet 160 years after the founding of Mitchelville, I trekked to the island not to lounge on the beach, but to see for myself the remains of the storied town where long ago a new day of freedom had dawned.

At its height covering 200 acres and home to more than 3,000 former enslaved persons, Mitchelville — and all of Hilton Head Island — remained isolated for almost a century after freedom came to the enslaved Gullah peoples of West African descent who lived on the island.

Melvin Campbell, a retired educator and descendant of Gullah slaves, is a community leader on today's Hilton Head. His down-to-earth demeanor and simple lifestyle do not match the vibe communicated by the island's marketing campaigns and multi-million-dollar mansions.

To the limited extent that white residents value the island's Gullah heritage, Campbell garners much of the credit as the most vocal connection between past and present. A jovial man with a great sense of humor, Campbell's natural people skills complement his thought-provoking, insider tours of the past.

Journeying with Campbell into the island's Black history became a treasured experience. In his younger days, he recalled, Hilton Head was a forested island inhabited mostly by Gullah people, the descendants of slaves, such as himself. Only about 40 white families lived on the island of his childhood. How simple was life? There was literally no money among the Gullahs.

Gullah families grew, created or traded for everything they needed — and their needs were minimal. On the isolated island they lived self-sufficiently, eating rice at every meal, often with fish or shellfish, as had their ancestors.

Once young Campbell, tiring of rice, asked his father if they could have something else to eat, to which his father replied, "Is there something else?"

That lifestyle came to an end when a bridge to the island opened in 1956 in tandem with plans by a white real estate developer to build an upscale resort. Within a few short years beachfront homes dotted the island, and in the decades following many Gullah residents sold their properties and moved off the island.

What remains of pre-1956 Gullah Hilton Head is a shadow of its former days, tucked away in a few out-of-the-way, simple neighborhoods that few visitors ever see. Riding through Hilton Head's Gullah neighborhoods of old with Campbell was a step back in time, an era of living off the earth, a time when everyone knew everyone else.

Campbell pointed out several of his cousin's homes and named what they were growing in their gardens that spring. But the community of Mitchelville no longer exists. In 1893 a massive hurricane flattened the town, killing as many as 2,000 residents.

The first town of freed slaves never fully recovered, largely returning to forest in the decades following. In 1950 the Hilton Head Company, a timber corporation, purchased the land upon which the town had once stood. Logging largely ceased when the bridge opened, and the resort era began.

The Mitchelville site, far from the island's beaches, remained overgrown, but in 1988 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 2010 a local group of citizens, led by descendants of former slaves, organized Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park on the site. Today the organization is working toward turning the site into a living history cultural attraction.

In the spring of 2022, on Melvin Campbell's tour of his family's island, I stood where Mitchelville once stood. We were the only ones there.

In a forest clearing next to the marsh, a few replica buildings quietly stood, including a simple, plain, wooden Praise House like that which Campbell remembered from his childhood. But there was no actual remnant to indicate that an actual town had ever existed in this place.

The winds of a hurricane and time both had obliterated the homes, stores, and church that former slaves had built in 1862 and the decades following. Campbell's voice was tinged with sorrow. Not much land on the island is owned by today's Gullah peoples.

The island's native residents and their history are to the moneyed residents and visitors an afterthought at best. Subsisting on the economic margins, many live in trailers because they cannot afford to build houses. Discriminatory municipal codes effectively limit their options.

There is a sense of being trapped on what remains of their own lands. To stay is to be increasingly isolated; to sell and move is to lose one's cultural moorings. Gradually, the Gullah community is being squeezed out of existence.

One notable vestige of Mitchelville remains, at least in part. Long ago relocated from the historic Mitchelville site and no longer bearing its original name, the First African Baptist Church of Hilton Head Island exists today as Crossroads Baptist Church near the Hilton Head airport.

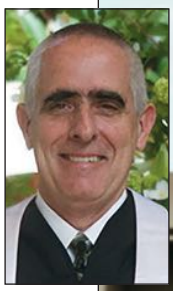
"A better day is dawning," Union Army Major General Ormsby Mitchel proclaimed long ago in 1862 in the then newly-opened First African Baptist Church. And at that time, he was right.

Slavery was in its final throes, and the Baptist-dominant, newly-freed Sea Islanders were the first to experience freedom. On St. Helena Island thousands had embarked upon an education, and on Hilton Head Island hundreds of Black families built their own town, and their own houses, on the first land that liberated Blacks of the South could properly claim as their own.

Those were days of joy and celebration, and more wonders than could then be imagined were just around the corner. NFJ

Before there was *woke*, there was *awake*

By Chuck Poole



As even the most casual observers of popular culture cannot help but notice, the word *woke* is being spoken with ever-increasing frequency and disdain these days.

Pundits, politicians and policy makers invoke phrases such as *woke mob* and *woke fantasy* — with one even proclaiming proudly that his state is "where woke goes to die."

While *wokism*, as a pejorative, may be a relative newcomer to the partisan political stage, the word *woke* as a call to vigilance and diligence has had a long and distinguished career.

Staying woke as a metaphor for enlightened racial awareness is at least as old as a 1938 version of the song "The Scottsboro Boys" by Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter.

Similar subsequent invocations of *woke* appear in a 1962 essay by William Melvin Kelley, Barry Beckham's 1972 play "Garvey Lives," and Erykah Badu's 2008 song "Master Teacher."

Each includes some version of the phrase *stay woke*.

Staying woke became more widely known in the 2010s as a call to advocacy and action for racial justice — not long after which came *woke's* usurpation and weaponization by those who are quick to question calls for racial reckoning and social justice.

They do so with that now all-too-familiar lexicon of diversion: "political correctness," "white guilt," "virtue signaling," and most loudly now, *wokism*.

As a person of faith, I suggest that what so many people dismiss as *wokism* might actually be, instead, *awakeism*.

To be "awakened" is a spiritual aspiration common to many faith traditions. Whether it is the way of Halacha in Judaism, the Sadhana in Sikhism and Hinduism, the Path to Jannah in Islam, the Noble Path in Buddhism — or what my faith, Christianity, calls, "walking in the Spirit" — many long to be awakened to a deeper spiritual life, an awakening that most often leads to stronger empathy for, and deeper solidarity with, the whole human family and all of creation.

Which may explain why so many people of faith seem, to some, to be *woke*, when in fact what we are is not so much *woke* as *awake*.

More deeply awakened to the love of God for all persons, we have become more fully awake to the particular concern of God for whoever is most on the margins of welcome and the edges of equality.

Which is why so many people of deep faith are so relentlessly drawn to whoever is most marginalized, ostracized, stigmatized and dehumanized.

We stand *with* those who are oppressed by standing *against* discrimination, exclusion, inequality and injustice — not because we are *woke*, but because we are *awake*.

Perhaps so many people of faith work so passionately, for example, for equal access to healthcare for all persons, including the most helpful forms of care for gender-nonconforming persons, and the compassionate treatment of our immigrant neighbors, not because we are *woke*, but because we are *awake*.

We guard the rights of religious minorities and stand for marriage equality for all persons, not in spite of, but because of the depth of our faith.

We strive to speak to and about others in ways that are thoughtful, mindful, sensitive and kind, not because of political correctness, but because of spiritual discipline.

We teach truthfully, and face responsibly, centuries of systemic racial injustice not because of white guilt, but because we are called in the words of the prophet Micah to do justice and love kindness.

We strive to serve the common good, not to signal our virtue, but to serve our God.

So, the next time you hear social justice passions being derided as *woke*, stop for a moment and remember that the life of empathy and solidarity that so many of today's most angry voices so glibly dismiss as *wokism* might actually be just good, old-fashioned, mindful, thoughtful, kind, brave, life-lifting, love-giving, world-changing *awakeism*. NFJ

—Charles E. (Chuck) Poole retired in 2022 as pastor of Northminster Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss. He and his wife Marcia recently moved to Birmingham, Ala. He is the author of numerous books including *The Path to Depth*, from Nurturing Faith.

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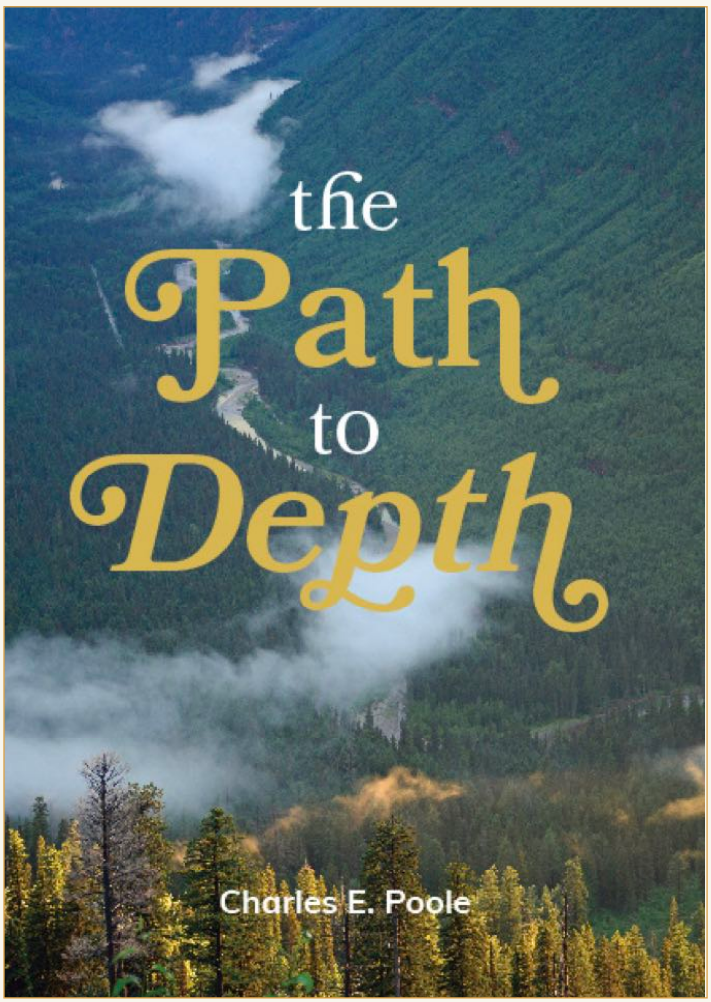

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WHAT IS GOOD NEWS?

The urgent need to recognize, refocus and restate the gospel

BY DAN DAY

Not so long ago when the preacher spoke of "the gospel," everyone knew what was meant. "The gospel" meant Calvary.

It meant the forgiveness of sins. It meant eternal hope. It meant people being saved.

And in a very profound sense, it meant our reason for being, our good news, our center.

Surprisingly, "the gospel" no longer holds that central place, having become an arguable entity. Some even complain "the gospel" is heard today about as often as the Everly Brothers.

Like the honoree who slipped unnoticed from the banquet hall, so it's been with "the gospel."

ABSENT

Its absence, however, was officially noted by preacher and teacher of preachers, Tom Long, in his 2006 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School.

The sermons of the broad mainline church, he said, "often have the hollow sound of an old oak whose living center has died and rotted away."

Though biblically informed and erudite, they arrive with "the tacit admission that, really, when we get down to it, whatever good there is in life is the product of our own industry and intention."

That's hardly good news.

Update the scenario with a review of current best-selling Christian books. A good half of them are bad news treatises, detailing the endless failings of Christianity or explaining the author's disgust with or departure from the church.

It is brave-hearted to pose the question — "What is the gospel?" — in a church group of one's choosing. In many settings the response will be awkward silence or a descent into debate.

The lack of a clear, ready and vibrant answer is telling.

In a world drowning in bad news, what *is* our good news — our gospel — or do we in fact have anything encouraging and essential to say to this world?

Have we anything to share that isn't already available through compassionate therapists and social service agencies? If so, what is it?

This is not just another needed tweaking to add to the church's already long list. Uncertainty at the center spells collapse of the entire organism.

It means the joyful heart of the church's life is either in *absentia* or shrouded in fog.

Pivot as we will and must in this whirligig time, a church that is commissioned to be a message-bearer cannot long endure with a mushy or muted message.

It lacks an animating center. Meanwhile, an even greater emptiness stalks a world waiting for good news from anywhere.

THE PLAN

There are several influences creating and contributing to this puzzling scene, but perhaps the strongest of the contending voices within earshot or memory of many is that of *uncritical traditionalists.*

This voice says, "Gimme that old-time religion; it was good for Paul and Silas, and it's good enough for me" — and for this politically correct time and culture.

Decoded, this response insists that "the gospel" is the so-called "plan of salvation." And all that is needed is to preach that plan more fervently and share it more frequently.

Unfortunately, difficulties arise immediately. Chief among them is that a plan-of-salvation understanding of the gospel is not "old-time religion."

The church thrived for 1,800 years before this plan surfaced in 19th-century American revivalism. The ancient church knew nothing of it.

Augustine nor the later saints of the medieval church ever hint of such; and the great Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli) would never have consented to the idea that the gospel could be reduced to a bullet-pointed salvation sales-pitch.

So, as effective as the plan has been as an evangelistic tool for generations, it never was an old-time or an adequate expression of the gospel of God.

It is a Johnny-come-lately with several flaws, including: 1) an unbiblical lynchpin insistence that the wrath of a blood-thirsty God demands gore to forgive sins,

2) its singular design as a "Get out of hell" plan gives the impression that neither God nor the gospel are concerned about the hells we see this side of heaven, and 3) its overly simple promise of "salvation" reduced to a transaction accomplishable via one prayer.

LIVED ETHICS

Another strong voice is that of *ethics supremacists*. This group believes the gospel isn't to be found in words or plans but in unalloyed, unconditional love enacted in deeds.

"Please, no more sermons or sales pitches," they plead. "Put your doctrines and rituals aside and just dare to live as Jesus taught us to live. If we faithfully incarnate his teachings, we *become* Jesus' message — his gospel."

Decoded, this response says love is stronger than words, and apart from radical inclusion and prophetic deeds of justice any message we concoct only compounds the hypocrisy.

No one today can downplay the urgency of a heightened emphasis upon a lived Christian ethic. Therefore, this response is currently an understandable favorite, although it too is not without flaws.

One significant problem is its tendency to become a religion of duty rather than of grace. A repeated emphasis upon what we must do, unmatched with an equal emphasis upon what God has already done, can easily become a religion of do-good drudgery.

Another subtle pitfall within this understanding is the potential hubris within it. Our behavior, no matter how excellent, is not the same as non-believers' encounter with something beyond observed behavior.

How Christians act may be the credibility-gaining part of "the gospel," but it's only a part. The Christian witness is essentially a *show* (ethics) and *tell* (proclamation) synergy, a Christly life requiring a story to explain its source.

Whatever "the gospel" means, therefore, it means more than "us." It calls attention to God's behavior, not ours, and we are unwise to reduce "the gospel" to "us" — even the most loving aggregation of "us."

CREEDS

There is yet another voice speaking, even if more faintly to non-creedal Christians; it is the voice of *creedal advocates*.

They urge us to listen to the church's historic creeds, especially the Apostles' Creed, as a fine summary of the gospel.

"Just recite the creed," they say, "for everything the church has to say to the world is lodged within the phrases of this terse, fourth-century masterpiece."

There is much to commend the creed's candidacy — and I personally find it more acceptable than the previous alternatives — but it is highly unlikely that non-creedal Christians are going to rally around any creed as the good news centerpiece of their faith.

So I mention it only in passing, noting with appreciation its broad (albeit breathtaking) range of topics and its semi-narrative form.

But I also wonder if these creedal features are not a reflection of the manner in which the early church itself declared its gospel. They called that gospel the *kerygma*.

New Testament scholar C.H. Dodd noted this specific Greek term in 1935 as the New Testament's term for the public message preached by the apostles.

Kerygma did not include their in-house teaching or admonitions; the *kerygma* was only what the church had to say to the first-century world, its proclamation of its core convictions, its gospel.

Dodd revealed that this message was essentially a narrative, a chronological report of what God had done, especially in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

It typically concluded with an appeal to listeners to receive this testimony as true and to alter their lives accordingly.

GOSPEL CRITERIA

If we are to attempt an exit from this Babel and regain our good news center, we might wisely begin by acknowledging the reality of this cacophony.

The truth about us is that all these voices impact us, but we find none of them (whether the plan gospel, or the social gospel, or the creedal gospel, or the kerygmatic gospel) wholly compelling.

Little wonder then that on many Sundays, beset by all these influences (and more), the joyful sound of God's good news goes unspoken. Its place is filled by more easily uttered laments, devotional comments, consolations, essays, calls to action and sanitized Bible studies.

Therefore, the hard work of refocusing and restating "the gospel" for our day must be undertaken.

In that task all these voices (and others) may serve as our teachers, for from them we can glean initial criteria for recognizing the gospel when we hear it.

Here are some criteria I have gleaned from them. Please argue, amend, amplify — or perhaps add an "Amen" — as you consider the following:

The gospel will be story-formed, not bare propositions.

The Bible itself is narrative in form, as are the four gospels, the parabolic teaching of Jesus, the early church's *kerygma*, and our primal creed.

While propositions are debatable, stories are meant to be pondered; they are sneaky teachers.

Even the word "gospel" nudges us in the story direction; its Greek origins meant "good news," and it referred to the town crier shouting news of a most important development.

"Something wonderful has happened!" is our message, not "Here's another noodle-nugget for your consideration."

The gospel will dare to speak of God's acting in history.

We have nothing significant to say if this is not so. Without audacious stories to tell of a God who has and continues to act, our contribution to the world's dialogue is confined to ethical humanism

peppered by Jewish wisdom with a Jesus-twist.

But a Christian gospel will dare to speak of a God who cares, who comes, who surprises, who saves, and also angers and disappoints but is always faithful.

A Christian gospel will talk supremely about what this God has and is still doing in and through the man from Nazareth. Among other things, it will say God was present in his coming, in his life, in his teaching, in his crucifixion, in his resurrection, in his ascension.

In sum, our gospel will rise from the Bible's absurd assertions about a living God.

The gospel will have the sweep of the ages within it.

The gospel includes the ages-long search of God for wayward creatures and the groaning creation of God's making.

The New Testament says the crowning, climactic moment of it all was the coming of Jesus. But we cannot understand this Jesus or his purpose if our attention is fixated only "on a hill far away."

Without the context of centuries of the rise and fall of nations, without the hopes and dreams of potentates and peasants, without knowledge of the prophet's vision of the just creation God seeks, we cheapen the very cross and resurrection that are the fulcrum of all this history.

A gospel for today will locate Jesus the Jew within and as the fruition of all this story and as the harbinger of more to come.

The gospel will speak of God's kingdom as well as of God's heaven.

The two are not the same; Jesus taught us to pray that the ways of heaven might become the norm on earth, a condition that would be like heaven on earth or, if you will, the Kingdom of God.

I cannot believe Jesus told us to pray for the impossible, but I can believe he'd tell us to pray for a heavenly earth because that has always been God's dream. Can you then think of anything grander than to spend some of your life striving for what God craves?

That we are invited and can do so is surely good news, the news that our little lives really can make a difference, that we are wanted and needed. Best of all, even when we die, we are still wanted and waited for in God's heaven.

The gospel will speak of vocation as much as justification.

The language of the law court and judicial justification dominated the ethos of previous understandings of the gospel. Yet the enduring biblical emphasis has always been on vocation, on God's call and calling of persons and of a people called Israel.

This was not a calling to a profession, a job, but to a companionship, to a lifestyle, to an identity.

As God's call was heeded and God's will was done, persons discovered they were being saved from more hells than they'd ever reckoned, and God used them to free others from those hells.

The gospel is about the marvel of being called, of being recognized and commissioned as a child of God and therefore an agent of the Holy One.

Justification alone tends toward complacence; vocation leads to perpetual vigilance and joy.

The gospel will speak of God's sovereignty.

There is a cheap, reality-denying way of speaking of God's sovereignty — and also a broken, confessional profession of it that is stunning.

After Auschwitz and after the unrelieved meanness of continuing history, it is a preposterous thing to affirm that someone who is good is in charge, let alone that this same someone will prevail. But this is the gospel's steadfast proclamation.

The first Christians' brave profession was "Jesus is Lord," and they exempted no earthly tyrant or personal tragedy from his rule.

It is astonishing and certainly arguable when anyone asserts that someone who is good and kind is lord over all — even over all the power-mad bullies, all our death-dealing diseases, all our stupid life-destroying choices and all the wrecks of time.

Yet this is part of the scandalous nature of the gospel. It dares to say God's love is stronger than death in all its forms.

The gospel will speak of the renewal of all.

A church with a skimpy inventory of hope is a sorrowful sight, for the abiding work of God is "making all things new."

Nothing is over until God says it's over, and the God in question is the one who raises the dead.

The gospel we seek will speak of a sustaining hope for our times of personal loss and shame, and also of a defiant hope when the forces of big money and no morals destroy entire nations or a warming planet.

The indomitable, recreating God of the ages will be its theme.

My sense is that a restatement of the gospel cannot now be framed. The debris of this era of deconstruction is still too chaotic for successful reconstruction.

But even amid the broken bits of what once was, faithful followers of the Lamb of God will continue listening, straining to hear above the fray the beautiful notes of a gathering melody.

A phrase here, a phrase there will fall into place. And soon enough the new song will be ours, and once again we will sing. Our center will be clear. NFJ

—J. Daniel (Dan) Day is the pastor-emeritus of First Baptist Church of Raleigh, N.C. and former associate professor of preaching at Campbell University Divinity School. He is the author of *Seeking the Face of God* (2013), *Finding the Gospel: A Pastor's Disappointment and Discovery* (2019) and *Lively Hope: A Taste of God's Tomorrow* (2021), available at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore.

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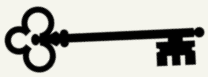

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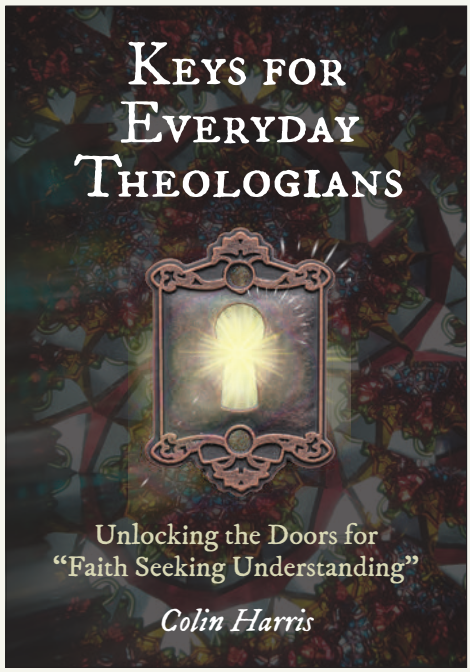

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'WHAT WAS IN HER, WAS ALSO IN ME'

A conversation with John Blake about racial identity, faith and change

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

CNN journalist John Blake's new book, *More Than I Imagined: What a Black Man Discovered About the White Mother He Never Knew* (2023, Convergent Books), is a riveting and deeply personal account. A Saturday morning "take a look at it" turned into a cover-to-cover reading.

Growing up rather anchorless in West Baltimore — the setting for the HBO series *The Wire* — John "counted the days until my childhood was over."

As a slim, biracial youth he found little stability and security — except for close-knit relationships with a younger brother and a determined aunt whose faith came in large, shared portions.

"I couldn't even once remember using the name 'Mom,' he writes of the woman who gave him birth and a lighter skin than others with whom he shared life in segregated classrooms and community activities. Her name, he said, was not even listed on his birth certificate.

Discoveries he made in adulthood about his family have shaped his own life and faith with lessons readers can draw from — not by being lectured, but through Blake's raw openness, confessions and insights.

With the skills of a gifted and experienced journalist, John rolls out a story that keeps the reader in the grip of the pain and possibilities of humanity.

While careful to document rather than speculate on social realities, the book rests not on statistical data. As Blake affirms, "Facts don't change people; relationships do."

The following conversation with Blake about his book and life discoveries is adapted from a recent interview.

NFJ: John, you write that your story "doesn't fit traditional narratives about race and identity." In what ways?

JB: The typical stories come from Black men who come from the inner city and are driven by anger. I'm not saying it's not justified because I can relate to that anger.

EDITOR'S NOTE: John Blake is an award-winning journalist for CNN. We got acquainted years ago when he was religion writer for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

In 2004 he wrote a fascinating book, *Children of the Movement* (Lawrence Hill Books), about the offspring of civil rights leaders and how being the son or daughter of a risk-taking, high-profile figure impacted their lives.

I knew he had grown up in Baltimore, attended Howard University and had an affinity for tennis. But I never imagined the gripping, personal story that he now tells and interprets in a new book available on May 3.

The most famous Black writer from my neighborhood, West Baltimore, is Ta-Nehisi Coates. He's excellent at dissecting what racism does to Black people and white people.

My story, in my opinion, is not driven by anger. I just attempt to make peace with half of my family, my mother's family who really just didn't like Black people and didn't like me because I was Black.

I couldn't cancel them. I had to find a way to connect with them. So that's part of what makes it different.

It's me seeing that some of the same stuff in them was also in me — and my learning to love them despite their denial about racism and despite how much they had hurt me.

White America really responds a lot to Black anger. But I just felt like this story wasn't driven by that. And there were some nontraditional elements that really had a big impact on me — that I felt people would find hard to believe.

I dealt with things that could be called paranormal, and those things have affected me in reconciling with my mother's family. That is definitely not traditional storytelling about race.

Much of the way we write about race is that we put a lot of emphasis on ideas and information. That if we just give people the right information about the 1619 Project, slavery and Jim Crow, that these ideas alone will change people.

I don't believe that anymore. Facts don't change people; relationships do. And I focus on the relationships.

NFJ: What was West Baltimore like when you grew up, and how has it changed?

JB: It was a community, but kind of sliding into chaos too. I saw the storm coming.

In the younger part of my life, there was genuine community in the sense that you had vibrant churches and NAACP branches.

Baltimore had the biggest Black baseball league in the nation. You had all these little community places that would help a kid who wanted to live a better life. You could feel the community.

My neighborhood was full of sidewalks and porches. People stood on the corner or on the steps. They talked, flirted and joked with one another. You know the cliché: people looked out for one another.

Then drugs started coming in, and all these Black men pretty much disappeared from the community. Many were either in jail or dead. The sense of community was gone.

What was left was a frightening place. I look over my shoulder when I go through my old neighborhood today. People don't stop for red lights and stop signs because they might be carjacked.

It's full of fear now, and houses are rubble. It looks pretty awful.

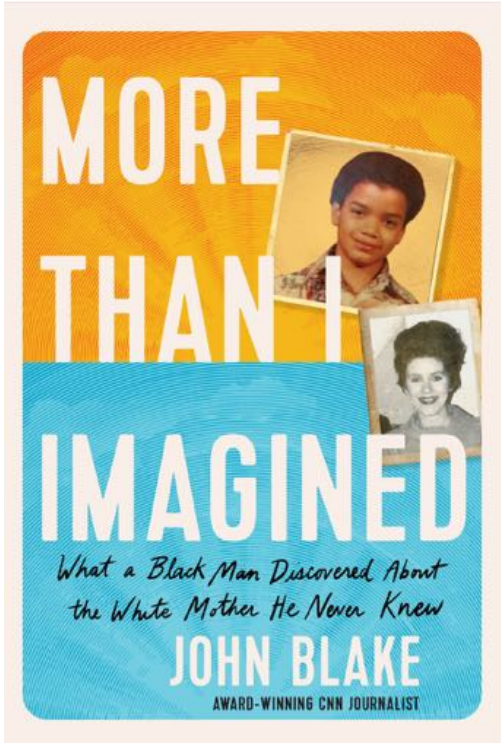
NFJ: Why did you refer to Baltimore as "Jim Crow North?"

JB: I grew up with the assumption, that a lot of people still have, that the deep South — where I live now — was so much more racist, and that those in the North were more accepting.

What I learned over time, through reflection and going to college and living in different places, is that the Jim Crow North was incredibly racist and segregated. They just dealt with their racism with a lot more savvy.

It was underplayed, but no less fierce. Baltimore is one of the most heavily racially segregated cities in the country.

It was Baltimore that came up with the first housing law that restricted someone who is Black or Jewish from moving into a neighborhood. That was Baltimore, not Birmingham.



Baltimore has some of the most racially segregated schools in the country. They resisted the whole *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Growing up in that environment, I never thought: "Why am I never seeing any white people in my neighborhood?" "Why don't I see any white students in my school?"

That was not an accident. It was deliberate.

I used to think that was only something you would see in the Deep South. But it was very much in the northern cities like Baltimore, Boston and Chicago too.

It was not Bull Connor with a night stick and attacking German Shepherds. It's where community groups would go into court and use euphemisms like, "We believe in neighborhood schools."

It was more savvy. So not to come off like overtly racist people in the South, they dressed up their resistance in neutral

What I learned over time, through reflection and going to college and living in different places, is that the Jim Crow North was incredibly racist and segregated. They just dealt with their racism with a lot more savvy.

terms, but it was driven by the same racial animosity.

That's why I call it the Jim Crow North.

NFJ: You write, "My family was split by the racial hatred that divides America today." How so?

JB: Well, it was exhausting growing up. I never thought I would talk publicly about this stuff because in some ways it was very shameful.

My mother's family didn't want me because my father was Black. It was something that really tested me. So, as I said in the book, I had to find a way to love people who rejected me at birth.

That was very challenging, and the only way I could really do that was to use spiritual tools. I had to find other ways to connect with them.

I couldn't do it through reading a book or going to a diversity workshop. It was really difficult.

NFJ: In an earlier conversation, you joked about being told to never discuss race, religion or politics — and then taking a job at CNN to cover those controversial and interwoven subjects. Another topic many people avoid is mental illness, which plays a large role in your family story. You write that "it was one of the only topics more taboo than race in the mid-'60s." Why did you choose to talk about it?

JB: You can't address an issue in a constructive way if you don't talk about it. [Mental illness] was one of the big secrets I grew up with, though I didn't know that was why my mom had disappeared from my life.

I didn't even know that on the day when I met her. It was not until I was actually sitting in front of her in that place that I knew why.

I don't see how you address any issues, particularly at a time when you have to cut out history and can't talk about things that make people uncomfortable.

You can't really talk about things until you get them out in the open. But there was such a stigma attached to talking about people who have mental illness. I think that stigma has declined.

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It was something that really tested me. So, as I said in the book, I had to find a way to love people who rejected me at birth.

Someone with a really severe form of mental illness can be more stigmatized and reviled than Black people in some ways. That was one of the things that really helped me to connect with my mother and her family.

As a young man I had thought that no white person could understand what it meant to suffer and be treated with contempt, to be reviled or to be ignored. But I saw my mom had been dealing with this most of her life — locked away in this cruel place where she was ignored.

Then when she would get outside, people who saw her on the street would cross to the other side because of the way she looked. It really helped me become empathetic towards white people in a way I never thought I could — just by meeting her and seeing her in that condition.

NFJ: Half of your family tree comes out of a white family. Yet your early observations of white persons were mainly the few, like police officers, who exerted power over African Americans. You write: "The only white person I ever saw in my church was the rendering of Jesus that hung on the wall behind the pulpit." How did all of that impact the way you perceived white people — and Jesus?

JB: Well that's a good question. I saw white people as the enemy — as the white police officer who came in my neighborhood one day, walked into my backyard, and beat a Black woman down on the ground in front of me.

When I was a kid, I saw white people on TV who had all these things we didn't have because we were living in poverty.

When I went into church and saw the white Jesus, I saw someone I could not relate to. That was a huge problem.

That's part of the racial segregation you grow up in. You have all these assumptions about a group of people you don't come in contact with …, and they didn't change until I got older and met my mom's family.

As far as my faith, I started meeting other Christians and reading the New Testament. I began to see Jesus in another way — as somebody who could very much relate to what Black people went through because he was this person who was a minority in this huge Roman empire.

There was a book that really helped me. It was Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*. He compared Jesus to a Black person growing up in the Jim Crow South.

He knew the type of anger that came from living in those conditions. That really changed me and helped me to become a Christian.

NFJ: Your father's experience as a merchant marine was wholly unlike what most African Americans, especially at that time, were experiencing. He told you: "I never hated white people; I hated the system." What did you draw from that?

JB: It wasn't so much that he said that. What had such an impact on me was what I saw day in and day out.

My father was born in the Great Depression and grew up in the Jim Crow era. He told me once, "I've been called [n-word] so much that I think it's my middle name."

He told me stories about white people being really cruel to him. But one thing I didn't really appreciate until later is that,

despite all those experiences my father had, I never heard him lumping all white people in one category, using racial slurs or describing them as racist.

I never saw him have the type of anger that consumed other Black people who had gone through that experience. Because he was in the most integrated space a Black man could probably be in the mid-20th century — and that was on the deck of a merchant marine ship.

At sea, color doesn't matter when you're in the North Atlantic and German U-boats are sinking ships around you. Men see each other as human beings.

So he experienced this level of acceptance and friendship with white men that took away a lot of that anger. He could see that they were individuals.

I think it also explained why he was so bold to come home and openly see my mom at a time when interracial marriage was illegal in much of the country.

He had been living with freedom while spending most of his life overseas in a more integrated world — where people were treated with more respect. That created a sort of freedom, just boldness, that he brought back to the States when he would try to see my mom.

The stuff that happened to him in merchant marines was really crucial. I was shocked when I read Gordon Allport's book, *The Nature of Prejudice*. He told a story about the merchant marine union. I was like, "That's my father."

NFJ: How did your journalist lens help you explore, process and tell this very personal story?

JB: Being a journalist, in a weird way, helped me connect with white members of my family that frankly I saw as enemies — as unrepentant racists.

Because part of being a journalist is learning to listen to the stories of people you might not agree with, you might not even like. But I learned as a journalist that you can't tell someone's story unless you really listen to it.

When I would talk to white members of my family, I would hear things that I disagreed with, things that really made me angry.

Instead of venting initially, and condemning them and calling out racism, I went into journalist mode. I learned to listen and to hear their story. It helped later on for us to build that relationship.

Secondly, being a journalist gave me context for all the things that were happening around me. It's not enough for me to say I grew up in an all-Black neighborhood in West Baltimore.

In the book, I had to use my journalistic experience to give the historical context; to talk about the reason Baltimore was so segregated — because of decisions made years ago by the city council about the school board.

I wanted to give context to all these different things that were happening. When I talked about going to integrated churches, I used my experience as a religion reporter to talk about how difficult those churches are to create, and how often when you see an interracial church that it's just temporary: it's on its way to becoming all Black.

So being a journalist gave more historical context to what was happening to me and more depth to the story.

NFJ: Your story is not just an autobiography; it's a faith journey for which you said you needed "spiritual tools." What tools did you discover?

JB: The word I would use is grace. I think specifically of my mother's sister and my mother's father — how I grew up hearing these stories about them.

I was afraid of them and hated what they did to my father and to other people — and what they did to me. A part of grace, as a Christian, is not defining people by their worst act.

And I had to learn that my mother's father and sister were more than their worst acts. That they had all these other sides that were full of good that I could connect with.

There are things that I've done that I've been ashamed of — things where I've fallen short. If God can accept me, why can't I accept literally members of my own family?

That really helped me, particularly with my mother's sister because she is a devout Roman Catholic. So we both spoke the language of forgiveness, of grace, and were able to connect on that level. That really helped.

NFJ: When it comes to your own grappling with race, faith and identity, which came first: new awareness or new experiences?

JB: The latter. For me, it goes back to what I said earlier in the book, "Facts don't change people; relationships do."

That's what really changed me and helped me to connect and reconcile with my white family members. It was not about the intellect. It was about the experience of being in a relationship with them, day in and day out.

One of the huge things that's missing right now is that when a lot of people talk about race, write books about race, and focus on these ideas, it's like, "Let me tell how this happened and it will change you."

I see it again and again that ideas aren't enough. It's not enough to give people information. What's really crucial is giving people relationships and giving them communities.

It was just me being in these relationships with the white members of my family, being in a community with them, and being in community with interracial churches where I had to meet and befriend white people. That was the thing that changed me.

Ideas aren't enough to change people because people have an ingenious ability to resist information they don't agree with. We're just too ingenious about rationalizing and denying things ourselves.

When you're in a relationship, though — day in and day out — it's harder to do that. I want to give people some hope. NFJ

A part of grace, as a Christian, is not defining people by their worst act.

Questions Christians ask scientists

I grew up believing in the Bible and I know science is not just made up, but I have a hard time seeing how the two can fit together. Can you help?

BY PAUL WALLACE

One of the capital moments of my life occurred when I was about 10 years old. I attended Midvale Elementary School in Dekalb County, Ga.

One of the crown jewels of the school system at the time was a place called Fernbank Science Center. Back in the late 1970s Fernbank featured a hand-cranked model of a tornado, a broad range of taxidermies of native animals, a Mercury-era space capsule, and a nature trail out back.

But its main attraction, at least to me, was its planetarium. One day my second-grade classmates and I walked into the round room and threw ourselves back into the low-slung chairs.

I did not know what the star projector would do, or if it would do anything. But it stood in the center of the room like a giant robot.

The lines of the room were curved and cool and spare, and the onion-colored dome seemed impossibly high. Overall, the place felt like some kind of sci-fi sanctuary. I loved it before the show even started.

When the room dimmed and the ceiling grew black and the stars shone out of the darkness like nails, I felt like I was floating. This artificial night made me so happy. The stars were scattered and tossed in random patterns. They were lovely but disconnected, fixed but chaotic.

Then two things happened that made it even better. First, gridlines appeared. I did not know it at the time, but these arcs were reflections of the earth's lines of latitude and longitude projected out onto the sphere of the stars.

Then the stars began moving together along the lines, the earth's rotation transferred to the heavens. The glowing grid was marked with numbers that organized the stars into relationships with one another and with us.

The numbers brought order to the chaos, making sense of the scattered lights and forming a basis for a system of location and meaning. Ancient in origin, the impulse to order the stars by number has proven useful and continues even today.

The next thing that happened was even better than the first. The gridlines dimmed, and the stars lost their numerical relationships with each other and with us.

They remained beautiful but again turned random and scattered and chaotic. Then, out of the inky blackness between them, shining mythical figures emerged.

Swans and bears and winged horses and doomed princesses filled the sky. Unicorns and goat-fish and other fanciful creatures joined everyday objects such as cups, clocks and tables.

Many of these figures were joined through common stories, stories told and retold across centuries, and others connected the lives of everyday human beings to the heavens, sacralizing and honoring the commonplace.

This childhood introduction to the night sky turned my life's work in a direction toward the sky, and today I spend my days working in an observatory with a planetarium, one I can turn on and share with friends and family, or simply enjoy in silence and solitude whenever the spirit moves me.

Many adults live their lives well removed from wonder. For all I know, this is as it should be. We all need to get through our days, earn a living, pay the bills and care for our children.

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to john@goodfaithmedia.org.

This takes work and calls our attention to the immediate and often to the urgent. And even our religious lives often call our attention away from the deeper questions of existence and toward assurances, answers and doctrinal formulas.

So much of our lives are experienced on the surface and, consciously or not, we avoid facing the simplest, most obvious questions facing us: Who are we? Where are we? Why are we here, now, on this planet, in this cosmos?

We find ourselves here, having shown up without explanation, facing an unpredictable, indifferent, turbulent universe. Yet its beauty exhilarates us and compels us to ask these questions, to make sense and meaning out of the chaos.

At this most basic of levels the world appears to us much as the scattered stars appeared to me that day at the planetarium: random yet beautiful, disorganized yet persistent in their call to be understood. What do we as humans do in the face of such a universe?

We create! By create, I mean we do what God did in the first chapters of the Bible: we bring order out of chaos.

We draw together pieces of the world, we separate things, we connect things, we build and frame and construct. In other words, we create meaning — in at least two ways.

First, we do so by using numbers. Pythagoras, in the sixth century BC, was convinced that numbers rested at the foundation of all things. And Euclid, Copernicus, Galileo, Einstein and many others followed in this tradition, finding surprising and deep connections between mathematics, geometry and physical reality.

As the shining numbered gridlines made sense of the scattered stars on the planetarium dome, physics has found harmony and order far beneath the surface of the seemingly chaotic universe. Science, a human creation, has drawn order out of chaos.

Second, we create meaning by telling stories. Our lives often seem noisy and rushed and fragmented, and we thirst for stories that make sense of it all; stories that help us to step back and take a longer view; stories that reveal the beauty of everyday moments.

We have been telling stories long before we started doing science, and I suspect we will never outgrow them. The story of Israel and of Jesus, and the stories Jesus himself told, have been among the most influential in human history.

They have framed civilizations for centuries and have become part of the air we breathe, whether or not we call ourselves Christian.

They lie at the root of much of our ethics, our art, our education, our hospitals, and so forth. Jewish and Christian stories help us make sense out of the randomness and noise of life. Religion, a human creation, has drawn order out of chaos.

I do not mean to say that, because both science and religion are human creations, they are arbitrary or pure constructions with no reference to reality. Both science and religion say true things about the world and us human beings who have so abruptly shown up in it.

What I mean to say are two things. First, that wonder and our drive to create meaning lie at the common root of both science and religion.

The world stands as it is, beautiful and terrible, and here we are in it, left to make sense of it. So we do. We create meaning; we draw order from chaos — one of the sure signs of the divine image within us.

Second, religion and science are two complementary ways of making this meaning. To accept one does not mean to reject the other, any more than accepting the numbered grids on the planetarium dome would lead you to reject the stories told by the constellations.

But it is really better than this. Science and religion are not two independent systems; there is only one world, after all. Accepting them both does not mean thinking of only one at a time.

Accepting science and religion means allowing them to shape one another, to illuminate one another, to deepen one another's meaning.

So allow yourself time to ask and think about any questions you may have about science, or about religion, or about what they might mean together. There is plenty of room in the cosmos for both. NFJ

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