

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2023

# NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

Editor  
to retire

.....  
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## LIFE & ARTISTRY

Cindy Morgan writes  
out of deep, personal  
connections

### SHARED PILGRIMAGE

Friends take to the  
Camino de Santiago

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*A publication of Good Faith Media*

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# Editor's Letter

“For such a time as this” is a rather commonly used phrase — often without recognition that it comes from Hebrew scriptures.

Mordecai suggests to Esther that the timing is just right for her to become queen. It's a good reminder that particular moments matter.

On one hand, we often speak of the timeless gospel. Yet we know time, place and context matter too. Much of the content in this issue reminds us of the veracity of both concepts.

The priorities and purposes Jesus offered to his followers have no expiration date or alternate choice. Yet the context in which we live and express our faith is everchanging — requiring astute attention to the various shifts that provide fresh opportunities.

So this issue is chock full of stories, appeals and confessions about our shared though individual efforts to live more faithfully in the tension of timeless truth and a changing culture.

May your reading prod and encourage you along your journey of faith. As theologian John Franke writes in his column:

“As the followers of Jesus, his mission is ours as well.”

From the excellent Bible studies within to every article, the desire is to help us share in that mission more faithfully.

Read on!

P.S. You'll note on pages 4-5 that I've announced my retirement plans for the end of this year. I'll have more to say about that in the November-December issue.



Executive Editor

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

## Great Bible Study IS IN YOUR HANDS!



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

*See page 21 for more information.*

*Nurturing Faith Journal & Bible Studies are a part of Good Faith Media.*

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

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Series shines light on Gothard, authoritarianism

By John D. Pierce

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On the cover:

Singer-songwriter, and now novelist, Cindy Morgan of Nashville sings at Atlanta's Church at Wieuca. Photo by John D. Pierce.

## Pierce to retire as this publication's longest-serving editor

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Good Faith Media Executive Editor/Publisher John D. Pierce is set to retire at the end of this year, following more than two decades of expanding and innovating the organization's flagship publication — *Nurturing Faith Journal* (formerly *Baptists Today*) — and Nurturing Faith Books and the Jesus Worldview Initiative.

A native of Ringgold, Ga., Pierce earned degrees from Berry College (BA, Religion and Philosophy), Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (Master of Divinity), and Columbia Theological Seminary (Doctor of Ministry).

He began his career as a Baptist campus minister, serving first at Kennesaw State University in Marietta, Ga., and then at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. He was editor of the *Religious Services Guide* for the 1996 Summer Olympics and wrote stories from inside Olympic Village.

Journalism marked the remainder of Pierce's career, first as managing editor of Georgia Baptists' *Christian Index*. Then in early 2000 he became editor of *Baptists Today* (now *Nurturing Faith Journal*) and in 2012 the founding publisher of Nurturing Faith Books.

Now both the journal and book publishing are among the various offerings of Good Faith Media.

Pierce's professional awards include the Wilmer C. Fields Award for editorial writing and first-place awards for best news magazine and best redesign from Baptist Communicators Association, and the DeRose/Hinkhouse Award of Excellence for newspaper feature series and magazine writing from the Religious Communicators Council.

A founding board member of Cobb County (Georgia) Habitat for Humanity, Pierce has been a frequent speaker to community and church-related organizations. His interim pastorates have included



Friends and colleagues gathered during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Atlanta for a reception honoring *Nurturing Faith Journal* editor John Pierce who will retire at the end of the year. Photo by Cliff Vaughn.

First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tenn., and Vineville Baptist Church in Macon, Ga.

Over the past three years, Pierce helped form and shape Good Faith Media. GFM's CEO Mitch Randall praised Pierce as "one of the greatest faith-based journalists of our time."

"During a very difficult and confusing time in Baptist life, Johnny's insightful, challenging and informative style educated and inspired readers across the world," said Randall. "In the second half of his career, he reminded Christians of their commitment to Jesus."

"The Jesus Worldview Initiative has been one of many great contributions throughout Johnny's storied career," Randall continued. "Personally, I have found it an incredible privilege to work with him as we created Good Faith Media."

Several notable Baptist leaders expressed appreciation for Pierce's friendship and his contributions.

"I consider John Pierce to be the leading voice for moderate Baptists in our country," said Don Brewer, a former board chair of *Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith* and long-time lay leader at First Baptist Church

in Gainesville, Ga., where Pierce is now a member. "I am grateful for his leadership, influence and friendship."

Mary Jayne Allen of Chattanooga, a former advisor to the publication, called Pierce "a creative journalist who has gifted us with insightful editorials, interviews, stories and so much more."

"As a Christian educator," she added, "I'm grateful for his vision and leadership that have kept us well-informed as free and faithful Baptists."

Church historian Walter B. Shurden, a former board chair who is retired from Mercer University and now lives in Maryville, Tenn., praised Pierce's many contributions.

"For almost two and a half decades, Johnny Pierce wrote clearly in plain English language about Baptist nouns: Baptist people, Baptist places and Baptist things," he said. "A denominational sleuth, he knew as much about our goings-on as anyone."

"A gifted interviewer and a polished feature writer, Johnny served incognito as one of our best everyday theologians," added Shurden. "He always put heady stuff on the bottom shelf so everyone could reach it."

Theologian Fisher Humphreys, a former board member who is professor emeritus of Beeson Divinity School, observed that Pierce “has energetically used his immense editorial, journalistic and entrepreneurial gifts to make *Nurturing Faith Journal* indispensable to non-fundamentalist Baptists in our nation and, in the process, he has also made it an inspiring and instructive resource for Christians of all denominations.”

Good Faith Media board member Kelly Belcher, a North Carolina-based chaplain, reflected on the inclusiveness of Pierce’s career.

“Johnny has been a friend to Baptists of all stripes as the chronicler of our lives,” she said. “His gift of seeing us as we are — missing nothing, speaking truth to power, offering support and mercy and a spotlight to the underdog through nearly 25 years of spiritual joy and painful loss — lands his words at the side of Jesus.”

Belcher added: “His insight reveals us to each other and creates connections that bring communion to Baptists across the

country through the pages of the journal we love to read.”

Journalism was the pinnacle of Pierce’s career, as noted by veteran journalist Marv Knox, the former editor of the *Texas Baptist Standard* who now lives in Durham, N.C.

“Johnny’s journalism has been grounded in deep empathy and compassion,” said Knox. “So, he consistently has helped readers consider the human condition in dialogue with a loving God.”

William Neal, former editor of the Georgia Baptist *Christian Index* and currently a Good Faith Media board member, recruited and mentored Pierce. The two worked closely together for more than five years at the Atlanta-based denominational paper.

“I believe John Pierce to be the preeminent Baptist journalist of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century,” Neal says of his former colleague’s work.

“I say that not only because of his penetrating editorial writing,” said Neal, “but he also gives voice to many other

‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ through his insightful interviews and feature stories.”

Tony Cartledge, who writes the *Nurturing Faith Bible Studies* for Good Faith Media and is professor of Old Testament at Campbell University Divinity School, was formerly editor of the North Carolina *Biblical Recorder*.

“I have known Johnny Pierce as a colleague for 25 years and worked directly with him for much of that time,” said Cartledge. “As editor, Johnny has demonstrated an impressive devotion to providing news, features and resources designed to inform readers of important issues and to inspire believers toward faith and discipleship.”

“His insightful writing and administrative skills are matched by his care in building relationships with co-workers, supporters and donors,” added Cartledge. “I count it a privilege to have been part of Johnny’s team.”

Good Faith Media has named an endowment fund in Pierce’s honor. [NFJ](#)



# TERMINATED FROM YOUR MINISTRY?

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# “Worth Repeating:

“Children of the Facebook era ... are growing up, preparing to enter the workforce, and facing the consequences of their parents’ social-media use. Many are filling the shoes of a digital persona that’s already been created, and that they have no power to erase.”

—Kate Lindsay (*The Atlantic*)

“The messianizing of leaders to prop up a Christian empire can have dire consequences for social freedoms and prove injurious to the integrity of the church’s own witness when it allies itself too closely with an earthly power.”

—Aussie Anglican theologian Michael Bird on Christian nationalism  
(A Word from the Bird)

“What will people think?”

—Tim Seelig, author of *Tale of Two Tims* (2020, Nurturing Faith), on conquering these four dangerous words with courage  
(TEDx Mountain Ave)

“Religious fundamentalism that holds girls and women responsible for protecting boys and men from sin is a shelter for predators of the worst kind. It is criminal and an insult to ... the name of Jesus.”

—Bible study teacher Beth Moore (Twitter)

“I felt great pressure to force my kids to say the sinner’s prayer, because it was their ticket to heaven. If the rapture happened, they had to say the sinner’s prayer, but it had to be genuine enough so they wouldn’t get left behind.”

—Lerone Martin, director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University (RNS)

“The secret and the gift of the African American journey is our ability to simultaneously hold the sensations of trauma and joy.”

—Tonya Matthews, president and CEO of the new International African American Museum at the slave port in Charleston, S.C. (CNN)

“The Southern Baptist congregation I grew up in is the place where both my faith and fears were kindled.”

—Donovan McAbee, professor of religion and the arts at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn. (*Time*)

“Some seem surprised by the tone of attacks against me of late by Christian men who claim God-given authority to lead and protect women.”

—Church historian Kristin Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne*, posting on Twitter

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

— Ephesians 4:32

Lynelle Mason of Signal Mountain, Tenn., made a gift to Good Faith Media in honor of **Bruce Gourley** “for his superb leadership and especially his series of articles on our U.S. presidents.”

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# Three C's of breaking free

By John D. Pierce

**F**ormulated faith is often lacking. But I'll take that risk in suggesting a needed three-step approach that moves from the past to the present, from self-service to faithfulness.



It allows for needed spiritual and social growth — and can prevent us from falling into the same old traps of our own making.

The track record of Americanized Christianity is not good when it comes to moral and social issues. There is a long history of being on the wrong side of justice, equality and mercy — tragically warping the Bible into a misused source of authority.

There are reasons to believe that the pursuit of truth and justice as actually revealed in the Bible — that culminates in God's revelation through Jesus — is not the goal of many who profess his name. We must acknowledge that reality.

We can never come close to being faithful followers of Jesus until we address the many ways institutional Christianity and our personal preferences have profoundly, absolutely and destructively failed to reflect the life and teachings of Jesus.

For those who truly desire to follow Jesus beyond snagging a pass to heaven, there are ways to do so. They are not easy, but rather clear — as Jesus revealed them in his life and teachings, and calls others to follow.

Perhaps it is helpful to sum up these responses as the three C's of redirected faith. The first is *confront*.

Many of us get stuck at the outset due to an unwillingness to face the facts. Yet we know that admitting a problem is always the starting block for change.

Denial is the short leash that keeps many professing Christians in a state of infancy and ignorance.

"Don't look back" is appropriate advice after moving through a healing process. However, a refusal to confront one's complicity in past and present misrepresentations of the Christian faith that harm others just continues the destructiveness.

Often it takes getting one's head out of the sand in order to get one's heart right — which leads to the second act: *confess*.

Confessing one's sins is a hallmark spiritual practice. Yet it is often applied in very limited doses to ridding oneself of the stains of particular, personal misbehaviors.

It is like shaking an Etch-A-Sketch of old after several minutes of straight-line doodling — a quick cleansing of the heart so God is no longer mad at us.

However, deep, honest confessions of the ways we've so often been on the wrong side of history are more painful — and more needed. Our personal sins and corporate participation in wrongdoings are wrapped up with each other.

The altar call for repentance is not limited to the so-called sins enumerated by those who look more for loyalty to their cause than the kind of transformation that Jesus offers.

But there's a third step: *correct*. Having confronted the realities of our failures and confessed our complicity leads, hopefully, to making needed corrections.

This redirected course leads to the challenge of righting wrongs and helping create healthy systems in which similar abuses cannot easily arise.

It is not enough to have the good feeling of a cleanly wiped heart. We face a continuous calling to make things right — as righteousness is best understood.

However, there is a fourth C-word that so often trips up those stumbling along the dusty trails of following Jesus. It is *comfort*.

This is seen in everything from emphasizing "my rights" at the expense of others to describing one's eternal destination as a mansion.

As long as comfort is the driving force in one's life and faith, it is impossible to deny oneself of such tightly held security blankets and take up a cross.

Moving through confronting, confessing and correcting requires placing those things Jesus elevated as greatest above what we might cherish the most.

In his book, *Breathing Under Water*, priest and author Richard Rohr addresses the sticking points for privileged Americanized Christians.

"Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure and security," he writes. "Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else."

"We often gave them a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self," he continued, "and the result has been the spiritual disaster of 'Christian' countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious and addictive as everybody else — and often more so, I am afraid."

Is it naïve, unrealistically optimistic, that Jesus' call is compelling enough to break out of such comfort — so that we might confront, confess and correct that which inhibits our faithfulness in following him?

The answer is found in both our individual decisions and the ones we make in our communities of faith. **NFJ**

# LIFE & ARTISTRY

Cindy Morgan writes out of deep, personal connections

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

“Simple truth will keep you going; simple love will keep you strong.”

**S**o sang singer-songwriter-novelist Cindy Morgan during Sunday worship at Atlanta’s Church at Wieuca. The song, “How could I ask for more,” is from her 1992 debut album, *Real Life*.

It is Cindy’s realism, openness and empathy that make her music and now her first novel, *The Year of Jubilee*, so inviting and insightful.

Words flow purposely and beautifully from her heart, mind and distinctively good voice. Much evolving life and expanding artistry have flowed since Cindy arrived in Nashville as a designated Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) artist.

She is a repeated Grammy Award nominee and 13-time Dove Award winner and recipient of the Songwriter of the Year trophy. Her songs have been recorded by other artists including Vince Gill, Amy Grant, Ricky Skaggs, Rascal Flatts, Glen Campbell and David Archuleta.

She even wrote a song, “Bird in a Cage,” for director Robert Redford to sing on the soundtrack of his 2017 movie *Blind*. Cindy flew to New York to assist Redford and his duet partner Sasha Lazard with the recording.

## CREATIVITY

Cindy, 55, is a mentor to younger female songwriters in Nashville and keeps her hands in numerous projects. But it is her debut novel, a forthcoming soundtrack (“The Sounds of Jubilee”) and a hopeful movie script that get much of her creative attention today.

She discussed the book, released earlier this year by Tyndale, with Wieuca pastor Barry Howard as part of the worship service.



Cindy Morgan’s first novel, *The Year of Jubilee*, was published by Tyndale House Publishers this year. A related 17-song soundtrack, “The Sounds of Jubilee,” will feature various artists. The first single, that Cindy recorded with Tommy Sims, was released this summer.

“It’s a lot more complicated,” said Cindy of writing 349 pages of fiction rather than a less-than-four-minute song.

While the story is fictional, it is rooted in life experiences, said Cindy, who had performed that weekend at the “Home by Dark” concert series in suburban Alpharetta, Ga.

“My very first memory as a child,” she said, “was the death of my brother Samuel who was almost five.”

During his long hospitalization, Cindy stood on her dad’s shoulders and hoisted the family’s pet rooster Roho up to the window so Samuel could see him. How could such a vivid childhood scene not make it into her story?

“There are moments in the book that are taken from what actually happened,” she said, estimating those parts at about 30 percent.

That allowed Cindy to ensure relatives who might wonder if they are being portrayed as villains that such characters are pure fiction.

The similarity to songwriting, she noted, is that fiction calls for “emotional honesty” as well. “You have to put your heart into it.”

Cindy said she wrote the prologue to the book 17 years ago and then set it aside for seven years.

“I actually worked on this for 10 years,” she said, “with 21 drafts.”

A hopeful takeaway, she told the congregation, is “the need to be in community when walking through something difficult.”

## TIME & PLACE

“I grew up in the middle of nowhere,” said Cindy in an interview with *Nurturing Faith Journal*. “To get to town was a commitment.”

On the map it would be seen as an open space along the Kentucky-Tennessee border — that bore names like Snake Holler.

Her mother traveled as a gospel singer — though she preached as much as she sang, said Cindy — leaving Cindy as the youngest child with much time on her hands.

“It makes an observer out of you,” she said. “I had time to absorb the culture.”

Southern-fried religion permeated those hills and hollers and influenced every aspect of life — for good and bad,

“It’s the Bible belt, but with all this superstition and taboo,” she noted, “and conflict.”

“They say you should write about what you know,” said Cindy. So the surroundings of her childhood became the setting for her story in the fictional small town of Jubilee, Kentucky.

The story is placed in the tumultuous year of 1963 — five years before her birth.

Conflicts and confessions over racial justice weave their threads throughout the story.

“I wanted to tie the concept of freedom of choice into that time period,” she said, calling 1963 a most critical year in the life of the nation.

Jubilee is representative of familiar places to many readers who’ll relate to an early line in Cindy’s story: “In the South, there were two unforgiveable sins: speaking poorly of the Holy Spirit and being a liberal.”

## GRACE & HUCK

*Jubilee* is told through the life and voice of Grace, a reflective white teen who not only sees what’s around her but also processes it all through the lens of justice.

While the story has an expected array of protagonists and antagonists, Cindy considers Huck to be the main heroic figure — even more so in the upcoming film script her daughter, a Los Angeles-based screenwriter, is guiding.

“I had no choice but to be a white girl writing this story,” said Cindy. “But I had several African Americans read the draft, and I changed everything they suggested.”

An African-American woman reads the audiobook as well.

Huck, a Black man who works at the gas station, welcomes Grace’s growing relationship with his family. He stood strong in the face of racist violence while not returning evil for evil.

“A hero of the highest order,” the fictional white physician Dr. Clarke calls him in the story.

Many other well-developed characters carry the story — including relatives, a fearless teacher, neighbors divided by race, and religious figures of various stripes.

“It’s like they’re all alive,” said Cindy of the story’s characters formed out of imagination and relationships. “They have their own consciousness, their own opinions.”

“I don’t think I’ve experienced anything like it,” she added.

“Aunt June is so real in my head,” she said of the beloved family member who stepped faithfully into a space opened by tragedy.

## RELIGION

Three religious figures play prominent roles in the story — two contrasting pastors and a child evangelist.

Since religion — in a variety of forms — saturates the culture of Southern Appalachia, it is present throughout the storyline. Both faith-infused beauty and too-familiar abuses within religious expression are found.

Cindy’s own religious experiences informed the story and character development.

“My mother was a hellfire and brimstone preacher,” she said. Though billed as a gospel singer, “she’d sing and preach.”

Religious faith, she said, was often tied to public image.

“My extended family had so many secrets,” she said. “Maybe in the South we’re trying to protect this holy, righteous image — but we’re flawed.”

Guilt more than grace was often the tool and product of such religion.

“It’s like it’s not OK,” said Cindy. “You’re always waiting for the next shoe to drop.”

This plays out in Grace inheriting a sense of living with a debt to be paid.

“The one emotion worse than grief was guilt,” says Grace late in the story. “I knew that well.”

In this guilt-soaked culture, grace is a welcomed surprise when it surfaces from unexpected places. And the main character’s name, Grace, was chosen for a reason.

Growing up in a legalistic, guilt-driven world impacted her own life, said Cindy, leading to time in a male-dominated cult.

Yet she had people in her life, including her father, who helped break down role expectations and provide self-assurance not limited by designations of gender, race and class.

So her upbringing and later life experiences provided both the pain and possibilities for writing *Jubilee*, without it being merely autobiographical.

But why this format that gives freedom of expression beyond reporting facts?

“Because fiction is written to reveal truth,” said Cindy.

## CHRISTIAN

As a musical artist and novelist, Cindy knows the restrictive nature of labeling. It is one thing to be a Christian — and another to be packaged and sold as a Christian artist with associated expectations.

“When I first came to Nashville and signed a Christian music deal, I had to suddenly become like a preacher,” said Cindy. “But I was really a singer.”

Even with great success in Contemporary Christian Music, Cindy felt “those words were put in my mouth.” So she fought to write her own music and play her own piano parts.

“I’m a soft-seller,” she added. “And there’s no ‘Christian’ way to tell a story; the truth just leaks out.”

So Cindy worked at finding a more comfortable way to be both a follower of Jesus and an artist with freer expression.

“I gained new listeners and lost some listeners,” she said. “I consider myself a folk-Americana writer from a spiritual bent.”

That reflective, honest and more humble approach has become obvious in both her songwriting and first novel — with another one in the works.

There is much in white American Christianity that deserves critique and redirection. However, Cindy is a careful critic in her work.

“I didn’t want to be too mean to white Christians,” she said of the novel. “I just wanted to tell the truth. And I don’t like preachiness.”

Among her writing influences, Cindy cites Pat Conroy — “there’s a beautiful ache in his voice” — and Wendell Berry “who writes about something common and shows the various layers.”

Also, writer Rick Bragg “makes me laugh so long.”

Her love of Harper Lee is most obvious in that Grace and her family are given the last name Mockingbird.

The biblical Year of Jubilee — that calls for forgiving debts and making new starts — was an easy choice for naming both the town and the novel, she said.

“The deep personal connection called for that.” **NFJ**

# SHARED PILGRIMAGE

Friends take to the Camino de Santiago together

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Like all of us, Joel Snider, a consultant for the Center for Healthy Churches who retired from the pastorate of First Baptist Church in Rome, Ga., had time during the recent pandemic to dream a bit.

“I stumbled onto an Ewan McGregor TV series, *Long Way Round*,” said Snider. “The former Star Wars actor and his friend rode motorcycles from Great Britain across Europe, Asia and North America, ending in New York City.”

More than entertainment, said Snider, “The adventure challenged me to do something out of the ordinary.

## THE PLAN

“In 2017, my wife and I had walked the last 100 kilometers of the Camino de Santiago, coming from France,” he said. “I challenged some friends to join me and walk 100 kilometers — only this time starting in Portugal.

Three other couples joined Joel and his wife, Cherry, in making plans for the pilgrimage in the summer of 2023: David and Jane Hull, Ronnie and Janet Brewer, and Chip Bishop and his fiancée Phyllis Alexander.

“For months we challenged each other’s training with texts and phone calls,” said Joel. “What shoes are you taking? The best socks? How far are you walking each week?”

The preparation and expectations paid off, he said.

“After months of training and two weeks of traveling, eating and walking together, our legs were stronger,” he said. “Our appreciation for each other’s gifts were deepened.”

“Even in our 60s, we experienced affirmation and direction in our callings,” Joel



Local host Antonio Moreira (center front) assisted the group of pilgrims.

added. “It was one of the deepest spiritual experiences of my life.”

He commended the planning and direction provided by The Way—Custom Camino Tours based in Rome, Ga.

## TRUST

“Anything Joel and Cherry have deemed worth doing must be of great value,” said longtime friend Chip Bishop of Waynesville, N.C., who served as a pastor for 20 years before becoming a certified financial advisor.

“They are in the ranks of people who can be trusted to have researched, planned thoroughly and reported candidly when it comes to traveling,” he said. “So when Joel first told me about their earlier Camino experience through France, that sparked an interest.”

Chip said he has had enough of large group tours to historic sites in other countries.

“I now look for more immersive experiences,” he said. “Camino offered that — and it also appealed in its challenge of walking.”

The small number of participants, he said, yielded even deeper friendships.

Having lived in a Portuguese culture in the Azores during his youth, Chip said he had longed to go to Portugal itself.

“Deeply and personally, there was some mystical urge,” he said about the destination. “I felt there might be a sort of spiritual

recovery along the Camino path that would help along my valley of grief wandering.”

“There was,” confirmed Chip, whose wife of 40 years, Eve, died in 2022.

“That is mostly beyond words but some of the benefits were interacting with people who ‘get it’ when dealing with both mysticism and grief,” he said. “There was also the simplicity of making headway day by day in a positive direction, step by step, that symbolizes grief endurance day by day.”

## DEAR FRIENDS

“We both agreed that the community we experienced with dear friends was a highlight,” said Ronnie Brewer who was joined by his wife Janet.

“We have been friends with most in the group for a long time but have never spent this much time with one another,” he added. “The shared journey was deep and an absolute joy.”

Ronnie said he was surprised by “the quiet, almost mystical feel of the journey.”

“No one will write on my tombstone, ‘He was a mystic,’” confessed Ronnie. “But I felt this invitation to just ‘be.’”

His tendency toward productivity rested, he said. “It was a great thing each day to not really have a call to accomplish much. I walked, thought, walked some more.”

“I felt something ancient and settling about the quiet Roman roads, and the sacred history of the many who came before me seeking something,” he said.

“I was thankful to start each day with food, coffee and rest, and then just go,” said

Ronnie. “As I walked and thought, I was thankful for those I love, for the opportunities of work and service I have enjoyed, and for quiet with God and the ‘bigness’ of that” — adding, “I dreamed, confessed, forgave, remembered, and walked some more.”

Balancing doing and being, he said, will now get more of his attention.

“One of the many things I enjoyed about the Camino, was engaging with other pilgrims,” said Janet Brewer, who along with Ronnie recently settled into a new retirement home in Birmingham, Ala.

“Just a simple question would open a door to conversation, and you’d find out something about this person, or family, from different parts of the world,” she said. “I’m usually reserved when I’m in an unknown place, but the Camino lent itself to reaching out to people around you.”

## TRAIL MARKERS

Jane Hull, who serves as pastor of First Christian Church of Lincolnton, N.C., shared her Camino experience through posts on Facebook.

She told of traveling from Porto to Tui, Portugal to begin the pilgrimage.

“We went to the cathedral and received our pilgrim passports and shells — the mark of a pilgrim,” she wrote. “Thankful to share this with dear friends.”

She noted that the yellow arrows and shells were markers of the Camino.

“We found our first [marker] today.” She reported. “Tomorrow, we begin our pilgrimage at the bridge into Tui.”

On day four, Jane wrote of her satisfaction with the experience.

“Today turned out just as we imagined the Camino would be,” she wrote. “As we walked out of Pontevedra, we crossed a beautiful river, and soon moved into a eucalyptus forest with wooded trails.”

“We then continued to follow the ancient Roman highway XIX. Along the way we met some cows and were blessed by beautiful waterfalls and the sounds of a rushing creek.”

“We ended the day walking through beautiful vineyards,” she continued. “Along the way we had great conversations with pilgrims from Ireland, Australia, Germany,

New Zealand, Canada — and even Winston Salem [where she lives with her husband David].”

“It was such an amazing experience to share together,” said Jane upon return.

## THREE WORDS

David Hull, a retired pastor and current moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, noted that the path they traveled had been used by pilgrims for thousands of years.

“Having seen the movie, *The Way*, which is about this pilgrimage,” said David, “I remember a scene in which Martin Sheen, the star pilgrim in the movie, has finally come to the Cathedral in Santiago, Spain, and is about to receive the Compostela, signifying completion of the Way.”

He is asked, “Why did you walk the Camino?”

“That question lingered in my mind as I prepared for this trip,” said David. “What would I say when I made it to the finish line as my reason for making the trip?”

Three words, he said, began to define his reason for the journey. But, then he realized they have broader application.

“After returning home, it hit me that those three words are my dreams for my life and for my ministry,” said David. “I don’t need to leave them with someone in Santiago, Spain.”

The first word is *community*, he said. “Some of these folks I have known since we were seminary students together.”

“The journey deepened our friendships because we made it together,” he added. “More than that, the Camino provides rich opportunities to meet and engage with people from all over the world who have come for various reasons to walk the Way.”

The second word he offered is *faith*.

“Walking the Camino de Santiago is not just a long hike like the Appalachian

Trail,” he said. “This has been a Christian spiritual pilgrimage for centuries.”

While grateful others had access to GPS technology, David chose to go on a cell phone fast during the pilgrimage.

“I was looking for a journey to deepen my faith,” he said. “I have thought for a long time that the best word to use to define faith is trust.”

Looking for signs was both a practical and spiritual exercise.

“The trail is well-marked by yellow arrows and by signs with shells, the symbol of the Camino,” he said. “Not knowing what was ahead, I chose to simply look for the signs.”

“They were always there, one after another, pointing the way,” he added. “By trusting in the signs, and following where they pointed, we never lost our way.”

Trusting while not knowing where one is going reminded David of Jesus’ call to his disciples: “Follow me.”

“Those early disciples certainly did not know where they were heading on that journey with Jesus — but they trusted and followed and found their way,” he said. “My Camino journey taught me that lesson again as I practiced trusting and following.”

David’s final word he offered is *adventure* — “because I was not entirely sure I could do what I was setting out to do.”

Even with increased walking to get in shape, he knew treks of 10-15 miles a day for a week would be challenging.

“Going up and down steep inclines severely taxed my old legs and lungs,” he confessed. “Long stretches of walking without any place to take a good break caused me to rely on my water pack and the protein bars I had brought along.”

Yet they all made it — together.

“Those three words that I chose for the trip — community, faith and adventure,” said David, “are now the words I choose for my life and ministry.” **NFJ**

*“A small but growing number of churches are finding new life by experimenting with new models for pastoral ministry.”*

# New models for ministry

By Larry Hovis

Recently I participated in the installation service for the new pastor of a rural congregation. This church, located in a farming community far from any sizable city, had a prosperous history.

They were blessed with a nice building and a comfortable parsonage. For many decades, they were served by full-time pastors who were theologically educated.

Some of their pastors were young, fresh from seminary. Others, such as their last full-time pastor, were in the twilight of their careers. Every time one pastor left, they were able to recruit another pastor who fit their profile, with no more than a traditional interim period — until recently.

When their pastor retired, they called an interim pastor and began the usual pastor search process. They solicited résumés from denominational sources and partner divinity schools. They ran advertisements in various publications. But they were unable to find anyone who fit them well and was willing to move to their area.

At the same time, they greatly enjoyed the ministry of their interim pastor, a retired minister who lived outside of their community and served them part-time. Under his leadership, attendance had rebounded from pre-pandemic levels. Considering the state of most churches in general, and churches in their region in particular, they were thriving under the ministry of their interim pastor.

In a phone conversation, the interim pastor lamented the difficulty the church was having in securing a full-time pastor. I asked him if he would be interested in staying there. He explained that he found joy and fulfillment in his current arrangement, which involved being with them only part of the week, and a generous number of Sundays off per year. But, he said, he had

no interest in serving full-time.

“What if they would be open to allowing you to keep your current schedule?” I inquired. “Would you be willing to serve as the installed pastor?”

He said, “Let me pray about that and get back to you.”

The next time I spoke to him, he shared some good news. He had thought about what I said and presented a proposal to the church leadership that would allow him to stay on as their installed pastor, but on a schedule that would fit his current stage in life. The congregation voted to call him as their pastor.

During the installation sermon, I praised the congregation for their willingness to be flexible and innovative in this unique arrangement. And I’m pleased to say this congregation is growing and making a positive impact on its community.

Many congregations today are struggling to find a pastor who fits their familiar model — a theologically educated, full-time pastor who lives in the community of the church. The demand exceeds the supply.

So a new model of ministry is needed for these congregations — one that considers these new approaches:

*Consider non-traditional candidates.* Most congregations have firm requirements about pastoral candidates. They want pastors who are a particular age or have a particular experience level.

Instead, they might focus on skills, maturity, temperament and theological compatibility with the congregation. The best candidate might be young, old or middle-aged.



The candidate may have decades of ministry experience, or experience in other careers. In fact, having another career may be a tremendous asset as many ministers in the future will be bi-professional.

Churches must also be open to female candidates and candidates of another race. God’s call isn’t limited to young, white male pastors with a wife and several small children.

*Consider non-traditional arrangements.* The pastor they need today may not look like the pastors they’ve always had.

The ideal pastor may not, for valid reasons, be able to live in the community, or in the church’s parsonage. The ideal pastor may not be able to devote every hour of the week to the church, or every Sunday per year.

What matters the most is not the amount of time committed, but the impact and results of a pastor’s ministry. Flexibility for both pastors and congregations will be essential as we develop new models for ministry.

A small but growing number of churches are finding new life by experimenting with new models for pastoral ministry. They are embracing Isa. 43:19, “Behold, I am doing a new thing ... do you not perceive it?”

I’m concerned for the former models of ministry, but excited for the new. They have the best chance of thriving in the challenging new environment in which we find ourselves. **NFJ**

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

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# Seven ways AI can assist pastors in their work

By Barry Howard

A recent discussion with young professionals in our community turned to artificial intelligence. I was asked, “What do you think of AI and how are you using it in your work as a pastor?”

I had not given that much thought and decided to explore the question more intentionally.

Global leader in AI, Andrew Ng, insists: “It is difficult to think of a major industry that AI will not transform.”

“This includes healthcare, education, transportation, retail, communications and agriculture,” he continued. “There are surprisingly clear paths for AI to make a significant difference in all of these industries.”

While often associated with technological advancements in business and healthcare, AI has also started to make its mark in religious communities.

Primarily, I am interested in exploring the ways in which AI can assist pastors in guiding and supporting their congregations. Here are 7 ways pastors may utilize AI to enrich their ministry:

- Sermon preparation:** Crafting inspiring and relevant sermons that resonate with the congregation’s needs and interests is one of the most crucial aspects of pastoral ministry. AI-powered tools can aid pastors in researching and organizing relevant content, scriptures and historical context. With the assistance of AI, pastors can access vast databases, theological texts and commentaries to enhance their biblical knowledge and ensure reliable interpretations. AI can even help in generating sermon outlines based on chosen themes or biblical passages, providing valuable insights and fresh perspectives. AI shouldn’t prepare the sermon, but it can be a valuable tool when used appropriately.

- Writing and editing:** In addition to sermon preparation, most pastors write newsletter

articles, blog columns, devotionals, reference letters, emails and social media posts. AI can assist in generating ideas, doing research on specific topics, providing templates for correspondence, finding relevant illustrations, and proofreading one’s work. When using AI to generate ideas and assist with proofreading, no citation or attribution is necessary. However, when using AI to generate the bulk of one’s content, a citation is appropriate. The MLA Handbook now includes a way to cite an AI-generated source. When using AI to contribute to content in one of my columns, I include an endnote that says, “This article has been written with the assistance of AI.”

- Pastoral care and counseling:** AI has the potential to significantly enhance the provision of pastoral care and support services. Virtual assistants, driven by AI algorithms, can quickly locate and generate resources to assist the pastor in ministering to those seeking spiritual guidance or counseling. Such resources may include scriptural references, prayers, counseling services, healthcare referrals and grief support. These resources can be made accessible even when the minister is not available.

- Community engagement and outreach:** AI can play a crucial role in connecting pastors with their congregations and facilitating community engagement. Social media monitoring tools can help pastors understand the concerns, interests and questions of their community members, enabling them to tailor their messages and programs to address these needs effectively.

- Data analytics for decision-making:** AI’s ability to process and analyze vast amounts of data can assist pastors in making informed decisions and strategic planning. By examining demographic information, attendance records and engagement metrics, pastors can gain insights into the needs and preferences of their congregation.

This data-driven approach allows pastors to adapt their ministry, identify areas that require attention, and implement strategies that align with their community’s evolving dynamics.

- Language translation and interpretation:** In an increasingly multicultural world, pastors often face the challenge of delivering messages to congregants with different language backgrounds. AI-powered language translation tools can assist pastors in presenting their sermons, written or oral, in multiple languages. These translation tools can also help pastors communicate effectively with non-English-speaking individuals during counseling sessions or hospital visits, ensuring that no one is deprived of pastoral care due to language limitations. For example, I am currently providing a printed translation of my sermons each week for a family our church is hosting from Ukraine.

- Administrative assistance:** Employing AI to accomplish routine administrative tasks can free up a pastor’s time to focus on more meaningful interactions and activities within their communities. In some churches, whether due to budget cuts or personnel realignment, administrative support has shifted from administrative staff members to the minister. Having a virtual assistant can enable a pastor to minimize administrative tasks and major on ministry initiatives.

\*

It is essential for pastors and other religious leaders to embrace technology responsibly and integrate AI tools thoughtfully into their ministries, ensuring that the human connection, spiritual insight and relational empathy remain at the core of their pastoral work. [NFJ](#)

—Barry Howard serves as pastor of the Church at Wieuca in Atlanta, Ga., and as a leadership consultant for the Center for Healthy Churches.

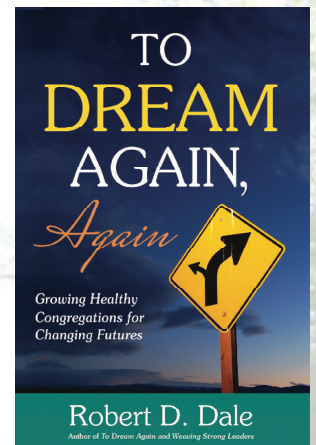
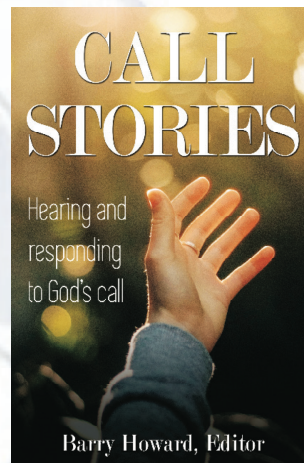
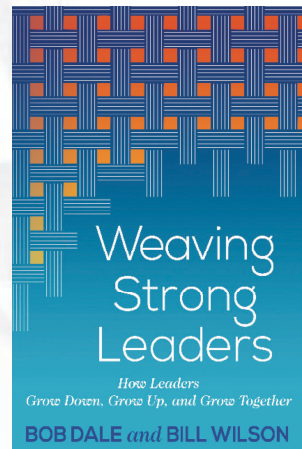
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# Developing a decentered self

By Paul Lewis

Robert Sellers writes that one thing unites the world's religions: their ethical teachings.



In a Baptist News Global column, he shows how they share commitments to compassion, the Golden Rule, interdependence and so on.

I tend to agree but want to probe further. Is there something that grounds these ethical similarities?

It is certainly not a shared conception of the divine or final destiny. Sellers, following Stephen Prothero, author of *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World*, rightly recognizes that there are too many significant differences between the world's religions to say that they are different paths up the same mountain.

Nevertheless, it seems that the world's major religious traditions share the conviction that to live a good, wise, flourishing or enlightened life requires that we decenter the self. Different traditions teach this in different ways, but they all point us in that direction.

In Judaism, the *Shema* enjoins love of God with one's whole being. The prophets remind those in power that they have obligations to the vulnerable. Proverbs says that awe and reverence of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

In Christianity, Jesus says that we must lose our lives in order to save them. In the Lord's prayer, we learn that it is God's kingdom we should desire, not our own. The apostle Paul talks about being crucified with Christ and becoming new creatures.

In Islam, the "Five-Pillars" (acknowledgment that there is only one God, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage) and *shariah* (better understood as "right way" rather

than law) orient life around God, not one's own will.

In Hinduism, the teaching that *Atman* is *Brahman* suggests that the notion of a separate self is illusory. Instead, the reality is that the self is of the essence of the divine.

In Buddhism, this is taken further in the notion of *anatta*: no self, no ego. What we call the self is really a conventional way of referring to aggregates (*skandhas*) of matter, sensations, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness. The self is not an eternal, unchanging, permanent thing.

Of course, more needs to be said about how different traditions have significantly different conceptions of what a self is. Eastern notions are especially hard for westerners to grasp, for we have been raised to think of an enduring self.

Moreover, we need to be cautious when we talk about decentering the self. Long ago, the late feminist theologian Valerie Saiving Goldstein pointed out that an ethic of self-sacrifice advocated by the privileged and powerful too easily can oppress the vulnerable by telling them they should sacrifice on behalf of the ruling class.

We, therefore, need to lean into and live with a creative tension in which we balance a recognition of the value of the self with the recognition that the self is not of ultimate importance.

Again, perhaps the different religions seek to teach us this. In Judaism, Adam may be dust of the earth, but Adam is also the breath of God.

Jesus, who says we must deny ourselves, also says to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Hinduism does not say



the *Atman* is nothing; *Atman* is instead *Brahman*.

Buddhism does not deny the reality of the *skandhas*, only the ego, and reminds us of our interdependence with the rest of nature.

Perhaps, it is Daoism's yin and yang that best helps us visualize this creative tension. The symbol depicts two opposing, but ever evolving complementary principles that contain something of the other within them.

There is value to the self. But the well-being of the self is not the highest good. **NFJ**

—Paul Lewis is professor of religion at Mercer University and the author of *Wisdom Calls: The Moral Story of the Hebrew Bible* (2017, Nurturing Faith). This column first appeared among the daily content at [goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org).

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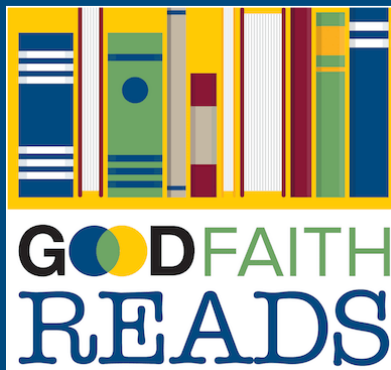
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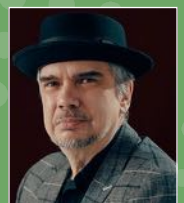
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## NOW AVAILABLE: **BODY / BUILDING**

It's Season 4 of The Raceless Gospel Podcast, and we are doing some heavy lifting. "Body/Building" discusses if Christianity is expressed through a body or a building. Hosted by Rev. Dr. Starlette Thomas, Director of the Raceless Gospel Initiative. Features new guests every episode.

# Liberating love forms people into who they're called to be

By John R. Franke

In my last column, I considered the idea of Lesslie Newbigin that the church is the primary means by which we will see a demonstrable Christian impact on public life in an increasingly secular world.



“How is it possible that the gospel should be credible...?” he writes. “I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”

This leads to a question: How are Jesus followers formed for this witness?

Of course, the first disciples were formed by Jesus himself. Today, through divine inspiration, we are guided by scripture. As we read in 2 Tim. 2:16-17: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Drawing out the implications of this and other texts, we may conclude that scripture is the principle means by which God forms the church to participate in the ongoing mission of Jesus.

While this may seem to settle the question of formation sufficiently, a challenge still remains. How do we interpret the Bible?

As we all know, the answer to this question depends on who you ask, and numerous proposals and methods have been put forward in the history of the Christian community.

What I would like to suggest here is not so much a particular proposal, but rather a common *telos* or end to the various approaches that have been offered. The *telos*

I have in mind might simply be defined as liberating love.

The love of God expressed and lived out in the world leads to the liberation of all things — human beings, animals and the whole of the created order — from the powers of sin and death.

The primacy of love in biblical interpretation has also been articulated historically by Augustine of Hippo who writes of this theme in his classic work, *On Christian Doctrine*, “The fulfillment and end of scripture is the love of God and neighbor.”

In the midst of all the diversity of biblical teaching and various approaches to hermeneutics and interpretation, Augustine maintains that the sum and ultimate *telos* of all biblical interpretation is love of God and neighbor:

“Whoever, then, thinks that [they understand] the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand then as [they] ought.”

This perspective follows in the tradition of the apostle Paul who wrote in 1 Cor. 13:1-3: “If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

If we interpret and use scripture in ways that do not lead to the love of God and neighbor, we are not interpreting it properly.

As to the result of this love, liberation is a usefully holistic idea to describe its significance and effects in the world following the description of Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. He speaks

of liberation in three senses — political, cultural and spiritual.

Together these three are part of a single, all-encompassing salvific process that takes root in temporal political history. Importantly, Gutiérrez makes it clear that while the salvific process of God’s love *always* has a temporal and political dimension, it is not exhausted by temporal and political concerns.

He writes, “We can say that the historical, political liberating event *is* the growth of the Kingdom and *is* a salvific event; but it is not *the* coming of the Kingdom, not *all* of salvation.”

This seems to be entirely consistent with the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry in Luke 4, where he announces his mission by reading from the Isaiah scroll:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

As the followers of Jesus, his mission is ours as well. It is this liberating love that guides our reading of scripture and forms us into the people we are called to be for the sake of the world. **NFJ**

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



# Addressing the lack of prophetic imagination

By Starlette Thomas

**N**orth American Christians are often without prophetic imagination — save what we can glean from the margins of society. How else can we explain our idolatrous nostalgia and programmatic resistance to change?

The past is easier to maintain. The future will always be seen as unruly, unpredictable.

Still, it must get out of hand — and will get out of our hands no matter how hard we struggle to maintain power and control. Why?

Because people with their backs against the wall cry loudly, and don't spare the American empire's feelings or any church that goes well with it.

Most days, I am looking for evidence of the unseen or an oddly dressed person crying in the street for justice. Between the flower committee meeting and the coffee bar, I don't see them.

Often Sunday's accomplishment is not "turning the world upside down" but balancing traditional and contemporary elements of worship. For whom are we preparing the way?

Perhaps someone to break the monotony of worship where we are likely never to hear a "woe," a lament or a call to repent?

Those we have marginalized and minoritized have needs, have sinned, and have been sinned against. They also don't mind saying it repeatedly. They sound like prophets to me.

Historically, with churches copying and pasting colonialism, racism, segregation and Christian nationalism onto their bulletins, I'm sure that the prescient was given voice in the hush and brush harbors where enslaved Africans worshipped.

"And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free," they sang.

Because "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" — not oppression or another business meeting. "I shall not, I shall not be moved" is a Southern folk call for resistance — not a mantra for those who dig in their heels over worship music.

Parenthetically, this Jewish Jesus didn't sing hymns or praise songs so we can file that conversation under cultural predilections and move along.

To be sure, "God has not signed on for any of our easy preferences," Walter Brueggemann wrote in *A Way Other Than Our Own*.

As a child, I thought that every Sunday morning service would be a mystical, otherworldly experience that empowered resistance to oppression in all its forms.

As an adult, I learned that many churches provide theological support to patriarchy, misogyny, race and its progeny while offering "sweet by and by" promises of a better life to its victims.

As a teen, I had read the Bible in a year with a special emphasis on the Acts of the Apostles, but I couldn't understand how we went from house to house to a protective 501(c)3 organization.

Later, as a clergy person, I heard sermons about a Jesus who reached beyond his people and his tradition. Yet, year after year, I gathered with the same people tied to a denomination.

I had come to the faith through the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition, but it wasn't the denomination that made a difference. We had been instructed to call on the name of Jesus, and I would attend practically any church that called on his name.



Perhaps, that's why although I agree with Baptist tenets, its freedoms, I better identify as an ecumenist.

I struggle to put anything in front of Jesus or my identity as a Christian. I want to follow Jesus closely, and I don't want to lose sight of him for anything or anyone.

During the pandemic I went to the margins to protest injustice and to examine my inherited beliefs, highlighting inconsistencies in the practice of faith when it came to race.

I would never reconcile my racial identity with my baptismal identity, which came with the words of Paul to the church at Galatia:

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-28).

I felt an urgency to say something new first to myself and then to proclaim a raceless gospel — to call all of God's children away from the social hierarchy of race and into their soulful sense of "somebodiness."

After more than 30 years of being a Christian, I am almost certain that no one else would join those two words — raceless gospel — in this way or feel as compelled to repeat them.

Racelessness is good news to me, to hear that we don't have to be trapped in these caste-supporting categories. It takes guts, integrity of faith, and prophetic imagination to assert reality apart from domination.

Until we do, I will cry loud and spare not. **NFJ**

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

## The Lord's Breakfast, Lunch, and Supper

By Brett Younger

New York has some of the world's most attractive, famous and expensive restaurants. My hometown has *interesting* restaurants you may not know about and want to put on your list for when you need something out of the ordinary. If you want something different, New York excels at different.

The Black Ant is an unusual, hip East Village Mexican restaurant that offers food covered with insects. They serve an appetizer of black ant guacamole and an entrée of grasshopper-crusting shrimp. Some of us have eaten in restaurants where the insects are free.

Camaje Bistro Dining in the Dark is known for its "Dinner in the Dark," which is held twice a month. When diners arrive, they are blindfolded. Only after you have finished your meal do they tell you what you have eaten. Some of us have eaten in restaurants where a blindfold would have been helpful.

Ninja New York is a medieval Japanese eatery. Warriors appear out of hidden doors and disappear in plumes of smoke. They scare you, and then take your order. Some of us have been frightened by waiters that did not have swords.

The Trailer Park Lounge is deliberately tacky. The most popular item on the menu is their mouth-watering tater tots. The dining area is filled with lit-up Santas, mannequins, and flamingos. I feel like I have eaten there once in Florida.

Sik Gaek is known for serving live octopus, squirming, writhing just-caught seafood where its nervous system continues to function as it is being served. Nothing is well-done.

The customers are not going to these restaurants for the food. People who wear blindfolds, look out for ninjas with appetizers, and have to spear their food to keep it from crawling away want something more than a nutritious



meal — an experience, an adventure, or something nostalgic, tater tots. Maybe they go to be part of a community, a peculiar community. Something other than food is happening.

Something other is happening at every meal. We don't always recognize it, but there is something sacred about dirt, rain, sunshine, plants, animals, farmers, harvesters, packagers, transporters, grocers and cooks.

Something holy happens when we eat with someone we love. What question is more romantic than "Did you eat yet?" Food is everyone's love language.

For many, the most sacred room in our homes is the kitchen. We pray before meals more than any other time. Oscar Wilde writes, "After a good dinner, one can forgive anybody — even one's own relatives."

The way we eat says a lot about who we are. Churches have potluck dinners for good reasons. Jesus asked the disciples to remember him by eating together.

Shared meals are sacred, because we are hungry for something beyond the food we share. Everyone has a sense that something is missing. We do not have the words to describe our longing, but we try to fill that hunger with houses, spouses and careers. If we were not hungry, then not only would fast food restaurants be out of business, but so would self-help podcasters, plastic surgeons, Lexus dealers, online dating services and the Lottery Commission.

Many of us know the experience of a midlife crisis that shows up early and stays late. We feel like we are standing in front of the refrigerator, stomach grumbling, knowing we want something, but not sure what it is. We want food, but there is nothing but ingredients. We feel empty even when we have what we thought we needed. We are, at the deepest level of our being, longing for more, always browsing the menu.

We find it hard to talk about our hunger for something we cannot identify. Is it faith for which we long? Is it hope? Is it love? Is it a sense of belonging? Is it community? Is it God?

At the heart of it, we are the kind of people who read *Nurturing Faith Journal* because we have heard a rumor of a God who feeds the hungry and fills the soul. We are looking for that for which we long.

At every table, God gives strength, because we get discouraged. God gives generosity, because we get used to thinking only of ourselves. God gives love, because we want to be loved.

This desire that never completely goes away is a gift from God. We will be hungry all of our lives, but we can taste the goodness of a day when there will be no more longing. We can recognize that every meal is the Lord's Supper. **NFJ**

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



LESSONS FOR  
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2023

# BIBLE STUDIES



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

## ATTENTION TEACHERS: HERE'S YOUR PASSWORD!

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



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



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

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

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

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# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

September 3, 2023

Matthew 16:21-28

## *That Far? Really?*

**H**ave you ever thought you understood something, only to have it completely wrong? On more than one occasion, I've had to take a kit-based bed or bookcase apart and start over again because I had put a piece in backwards. When I was a boy, my mother used to make some of our clothes, and I can remember her complaining when she had to rip out a seam and start over because something didn't match up just right.

Restarting a labor-intensive project can be irritating, but discovering that one's entire way of thinking needs reversing is much more serious business. That's where Peter finds himself in today's text, which is adapted from Mark 8:31-38, also the source for Luke 9:22-27.

## Getting with the Text

In all three gospels, this text serves as a major turning point. The first section of each gospel carefully follows Jesus' work and his teaching, gradually developing an image that becomes fully exposed with Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

From that point, Jesus turns his attention toward Jerusalem and the death that awaits him there. Matthew uses a forceful expression, "from that

*Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matt. 16:24)*

time on," to emphasize a shift in Jesus' focus.

Jesus predicts his coming passion in today's text, and again in 17:22-23 and 20:17-19, revealing new information with each prediction. With this shift, we have reached a watershed in the gospel story. Like most turning points, it was an uncomfortable time for those who were being turned.

## Getting behind Jesus (v. 21-23)

Fresh from being congratulated by Jesus for his spiritual and divinely revealed insight, Peter quickly learned that calling Jesus "Messiah" and understanding what that meant were two different things.

Peter *thought* he knew what to expect of the Messiah. For many years he, like his fellow Jews, had no doubt longed for a powerful military messiah who would come to defeat the Romans and to return Israel to its former glory. Although Jesus had given no indication of such plans, perhaps Peter assumed that the Teacher was only biding his time until he had won sufficient followers to accomplish the task.

Imagine, then, how Peter and the others must have felt when Jesus first warned them not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah, and then try to feel their shock as Jesus went on to explain that, instead of amassing and leading an army of Hebrew zealots, he fully expected to suffer many things at the


hands of "the elders and chief priests and scribes" – the leaders of the Jewish people (v. 21).

As if that were not bad enough, Jesus added that he would "be killed." Jesus' second and third predictions add the information that he would first be betrayed, and the final one makes it clear that the governing Gentiles would bring about his demise.

Even Jesus' prediction that he would rise again on the third day could not allay the concussive effect those words must have had on his disciples, who would have noticed that Jesus emphasized that it was *necessary* for these awful things to happen.

Peter again acted as spokesman, though Matthew says he pulled Jesus aside, as if to avoid embarrassing him before the others, and rebuked him for saying such outlandish things. Mark does not tell us what Peter's rebuke involved, but Matthew quotes him as saying "God forbid, Lord! This should never happen to you!" (Matt. 16:22b).

A literal translation of the Greek would be something akin to "(God) be gracious to you, Lord – no way will this happen to you!" "No way" translates a double negative, used for emphasis, as in "not never."

Peter's speech was so fervent that Jesus was apparently tempted to listen to him. The human side of Jesus had no more desire to suffer and die than any of us. Yet, recognizing the true source of this temptation, Jesus responded to his friend's chiding with a rebuke of his own: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (v. 23). 

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





Jesus addressed Peter as “Satan,” commonly thought of as a supernatural adversary, because his friend had unwittingly tempted him to stray from his mission and take an easier road. This created an obstacle or stumbling block that would make Jesus’ path more difficult.

The problem for Peter, Jesus said, was that his mind was focused on human things rather than divine things. This must have been a stunning rebuke, because it followed immediately Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah and Jesus’ congratulatory declaration that Peter had not learned that truth from “flesh and blood,” but from God. It appears that Peter’s mind had switched gears to a more human orientation.

In telling Peter to “get behind me,” Jesus was probably not saying “go away” or even “get out of my way,” but “get behind me” in the sense of supporting or encouraging Jesus, much as sports fans “get behind” their favorite teams or players.

For Peter to “get behind” Jesus also implies that he is to follow Jesus, rather than trying to lead him astray. In the next few verses, Jesus explains that following him can be a dangerous enterprise.

### Following Jesus (vv. 24-28)

Although Mark says that Jesus included a gathering crowd in the following conversation about what it means to follow him, Matthew limits Jesus’ teaching to the disciples.

The teaching is tightly structured, taking the form of an initial pronouncement (v. 24) followed by three supporting statements, each introduced by the word “for” (vv. 25, 26, 27).

Those who want to follow Jesus must “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,” Jesus said

(v. 24). The cross was yet in Jesus’ future, but still fresh in the memory of the gospel writers and the church. Though not all should expect to be crucified, all should be willing to die, if necessary, thus taking up their metaphorical cross.

The hard words of v. 24 appear twice in Matthew and once in each of the other gospels (see also Mark 8:35, Matt. 10:39, Luke 17:33, and John 12:25). Is there any question that the saying was important to the early church?

To “deny oneself” is not to give up a few nice things, as we may do during Lent, but to give up the right to call the shots at all. It is to say “No” to self and “Yes” to God – no matter what it costs.

The first supportive saying (v. 25) states the paradox that those who seek to save their lives will lose them, while those who willingly surrender their lives will save them. That makes little sense in human reckoning, but it reflects a new equation Jesus was bringing to bear.

Verse 26 raises a question that is reminiscent of Ecclesiastes, who did not believe in life beyond the grave, and complained that there was no profit in life, that all was vanity. Jesus asked the question, repeated in countless sermons through the years, “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”

The answers, of course, are “Nothing,” and “Nothing.” To gain all the world has to offer and yet to lose the very essence of true life yields no profit at all. And, when we reach the end of our empty lives and would gladly trade all we have gained in order to regain our life, there will be nothing we can do.

Jesus’ third supportive teaching has eschatological overtones: a time of judgment will come when “the Son of Man is to come with his angels in

the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done” (v. 27). In context, we assume that judgment would be based not on one’s life-list of deeds, but on one’s willingness to follow Jesus.

The final verse of today’s text is troublesome. It is connected to v. 27 in the sense that it appears to speak of the Parousia, the return of Christ at the end of the age. Jesus firmly predicted that “there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (v. 28).

Although some commentators are convinced that Jesus believed the eschaton would occur within a generation, others suggest that Jesus may have had in mind the transfiguration or the resurrection as events in which Jesus’ kingdom or dominion was breaking into the world, though it was not yet fully realized. The transfiguration was witnessed by Peter, James, and John, while all but Judas witnessed the resurrection.

The more important question relates to whether we expect to share in the full experience of knowing Christ’s kingdom. The answer, Jesus told his disciples, lies in whether we are also willing to share in the full experience of bearing his cross.

A short prayer, from *The Oxford Book of Prayer* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 108, is ascribed to Laurence Housman:

*Thou the Cross didst bear:  
What bear I?  
Thou the thorn didst wear:  
What wear I?  
Thou to death didst dare:  
What dare I?  
Thou for me dost care:  
What care I?*

What do we bear? What do we dare? What do we care? How will we respond to the Messiah? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

September 10, 2023

Matthew 18:15-20

## Confrontation and Community

Getting our feelings hurt occurs with uncomfortable familiarity, though some take offense much more easily than others. Our feelings may be stung because we're overly sensitive, or because we misunderstood what someone else intended to say or do.

Sometimes, though, someone may do or say something hurtful on purpose, or may undermine our efforts for their own ends. They may take advantage of us, putting self-advancement over relationships. They may cheat someone or betray a friend. Then we have good reason to be concerned.

How do we respond when that happens? Is there a better option than retaliation, or licking our wounds? Both are common reactions, and both are easy.

Jesus taught his followers a better way to deal with hurt feelings, damaged egos, bruised reputations, or lost opportunities. It's not so easy. In fact, it can be quite hard – but when relationships are at stake, it's worth the effort.

### When we read from Matthew

Matthew's gospel borrows from Mark, the earliest of the gospels, and adapts the material to fit his own intended audience, one that was more Jewish-oriented than the other gospels. The author portrays Jesus as a teacher who

*If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. (Matt. 18:15-20)*

was both human and divine, a prophet who spoke with the authority of God, as the Messiah who fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies, as redeemer and risen king over all. 🇺🇸

Matthew was also more openly concerned with the church. His is the only gospel, in fact, to use the word *ekklesia*, a word referring to a defined assembly that came to be used as the New Testament word for “church” (16:18 and 18:17).

We should recall that the church did not yet exist during Jesus' time on earth, so when Matthew portrays Jesus as speaking to the church and its needs, he is adapting earlier materials for the new situation. This is the case in chapter 18, where several distinct teachings focus on relationships among fellow believers. 🇺🇸

### When a brother offends you (vv. 15-18)

Occasionally we may hear someone speak of “the Matthew 18 way” of dealing with conflict. Some churches have a conflict resolution process based on Matt. 18:15-18 written into their constitution.

How, then, does Matthew say Jesus instructed his disciples to deal with personal conflicts, and what sort of offenses might have been involved?

The text consists of five “if” statements, followed by a conclusion.

All together, they appear to constitute a four-step process for attempted reconciliation following an affront.

But first, what kind of issues are we talking about? The text appears to deal with a case in which one member of the church offends another in some manner.

Most translations have something like “sins against you” (NRSV, NIV84, HCSB, KJV), but there is no Greek equivalent for “against you” in the oldest and best manuscripts. While it is possible that the words were in the original text and were accidentally deleted, it is more likely that the shorter version is more original. In that case, the condition is simply that a fellow believer has sinned in general. Thus, NET2 has “if your brother sins” (see also NIV11).

While this may seem a minor matter, the implications can be huge. Is the text directed only to persons who have been personally offended and the fellow-Christian who has caused them pain? Or, does it invite any believer to rebuke another believer because they have sinned, with the possibility of getting the entire church involved?

It is unlikely that Jesus' intent was for his followers to create an inquisition mentality, or to set up a system of exclusion designed to keep members in line with standards of accepted behaviors. The text does allow, however, for individuals to approach fellow believers whose behavior threatened the well-being of the church.

The word translated as “sin” is a strong word for wrongdoing (*hamartánō*), used only here and at 27:4 in Matthew's gospel. This suggests that the offense is a serious matter, not

something that can be easily brushed aside, but requiring a response for the good of the church. 📌

Let's consider the case of someone who has been directly harmed – a situation that would be more serious than just having their feelings hurt. The instructions are straightforward. If a person has sinned against a fellow believer, the injured party is to approach the offender privately (“when the two of you are alone”) and “point out the fault” to them. If the guilty party “listens to you,” Jesus said – implying repentance and a request for forgiveness – “you have regained that one” (v. 15). The ideal situation is one in which a private conversation leads to reconciliation and restoration in that relationship.

But sometimes that doesn't happen. In this case, Matthew quoted Jesus as saying the offended party should approach the sinner again, this time with two or three others to act as witnesses, following Deut. 19:15: “A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.”

If the accused still refuses to respond positively – implied by “does not listen” – the offended person, along with the witnesses, should present the matter to the church, offering the person charged with wrongdoing a final chance to acknowledge and repent of the wrongdoing. If the offending person still refuses to listen (implying a lack of confession, remorse, or repentance), the church is to “treat him as a Gentile or a tax collector” (v. 18).

Commentators often note that the Essenes at Qumran (a strict Jewish sect) had a similar process for dealing with those who had violated rules of the community. It is recorded in a

list of rules called the “Community Document,” 9:2-8.

We note that the responsibility for initiating reconciliation lies primarily with the offended party. This may seem strange to us, for we typically think the person who has offended us should take the initiative to ask for forgiveness. This is easier said than done, however, especially when the sin is grave. The offended party is thus better positioned to initiate reconciliation than the sinner.

It is also apparent that Jesus wanted such matters to be handled as privately as possible, respecting the feelings and reputation of the offending party as well as the one offended. Believers should never hold one another up to public ridicule or shame, even when there is clear wrongdoing.

Verse 18 is virtually identical to 16:19, where Jesus gave to Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven,” with authority to “bind or loose” on earth, with heavenly consequences. In 18:18, that responsibility is transferred to the entire fellowship of believers: the words are the same, but the verbs are plural.

The language of binding and loosing may suggest the difference between being “bound” to seek reconciliation up to a point and being “loosed” from that responsibility after the prescribed attempts had failed. It is more likely, however, that it refers to the authority to hold the offender guilty or to grant forgiveness – with heavenly importance: “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This comports with the reference to granting Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:19) and with John 20:23, which speaks directly to forgiveness. 📌

## When Christ is among you (vv. 19-20)

The final two verses of the text – about asking for “anything” from God and receiving it – have been the subject of much misunderstanding. Many readers, preachers, and teachers through the years have divorced v. 19 from its context and taken it as a blank check from God that can be written and cashed so long as two or three persons endorse it.

Claims of prosperity preachers aside, it doesn't work that way, as anyone who has tried it should know. The first words of v. 19 – “Again, truly I tell you ...” bind the following words to the previous context. The “two of you” in v. 19 probably reflects the multiple witnesses from v. 16, and “on earth” reflects v. 18.

The statement “If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask,” may use the word “anything,” but the context has to do with binding or loosing an unrepentant sinner. Thus, v. 19 reiterates v. 18, that what the community of believers bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven.

This statement carries with it great responsibility, and it assumes that the stated prayer is offered carefully and in a full attempt to seek that God's will be done.

While v. 19 is not the free offer that some take it to be, the promise of v. 20 holds true, that Christ's Spirit is present wherever believers gather in Christ's name, that is, in a spirit of worship and openness to the Spirit.

Hard things are hard, and confronting broken relationships is among the hardest. With the promise of Christ's presence to strengthen and guide, however, we can do what needs to be done. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

September 17, 2023

Matthew 18:21-35

## *The Power of Forgiveness*

**D**o you find it easier to forgive, or easier to bear a grudge? Forgiveness can be hard, especially when the offense is extreme or if the offender is callous. Yet, learning to forgive is essential if we are to know peace.

To begin with, forgiveness is essential in cultivating healthy relationships. Even the best of friends may occasionally offend each other, and we are subject to being used or abused by others who advance their self-interests with no concern for ours. If we are to be reconciled with those who have hurt us, we must learn to forgive.

This is for our benefit as well as the one who has offended us, for harboring hurts and refusing to forgive are like emotional cancers that can eat away at our soul and make us miserable people, roiling in a bitter stew of unresolved feelings.

Learning to forgive is one of the great secrets of a joyful, flourishing life.

### **A curious question (vv. 21-22)**

Matthew 18 is presented as a discourse in which Jesus talks to his disciples about relationships within the fellowship. The growing community of men and women who followed Jesus would have experienced the same sort of inter-personal issues that would later come

*Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" (Matt. 18:21)*

up in the early church, the context of Matthew's writing. 📖

Earlier in the discourse, Jesus had taught his followers to relate to one another with humility (vv. 1-4), warned against leading others astray (vv. 5-9), and emphasized the importance of seeking and restoring those who were lost (vv. 10-14). In vv. 15-20 we find instructions for dealing with inter-familial conflict, when one member of the community has sinned against another, and today's text expands on the theme of forgiveness.

Peter was often the foil for Jesus' parables, the question-raiser who could appear both obtuse and perceptive. The crusty apostle was portrayed in the gospels as a temperamental sort who could bear a grudge, so it is not surprising that he would query Jesus on the limits of forgiveness.

How often should a person forgive? Is once enough? Peter wanted to know, so he asked: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

The NRSV's translation "member of the church" is expansive. The Greek text has "my brother" (NET2, HCSB), which could imply a fellow believer, whether male or female. The NIV11 has "my brother or sister," as does the updated NRSVue.

Peter may have intended for his suggestion of seven-fold forgiveness to be overly generous. The rabbis held

differing opinions about how often someone should be forgiven for the same type of sin, with some teaching that three times was the limit. 📖

Peter's question may also reflect a teaching of Jesus in Luke 17:3-4, where Jesus insisted that his followers should forgive anyone who asked for forgiveness, even seven times in one day: "And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (Luke 17:4).

The Hebrews considered the number seven to represent completion or perfection, perhaps because of the tradition that God created the world and rested on the seventh day. Thus, forgiving seven times suggests complete forgiveness.

Whether Peter was recalling an earlier teaching or feeling magnanimous, his proposal of forgiving seven times came up short, for Jesus said, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Translators are divided as to whether Jesus' response to Peter in v. 22 should be understood as "77 times" or as "70 times 7 times," but it's clear that the number is symbolic rather than legalistic or limiting. Jesus' intent was that the standard is full forgiveness, whether it takes seven times, or 77, or 490, or more.

There are two ways to look at this. On the one hand, imagine that we are considering multiple offenses. Suppose someone hurts our feelings, but they ask for forgiveness. Tomorrow the culprit does it again but begs pardon. On the third day, they are rude yet again. Should we continue to forgive

someone who persists in offending us? Jesus' words suggest that we should.

But consider another scenario. Suppose someone has caused such pain that it's very difficult to get past it. We may want to forgive – and we may speak words of forgiveness – but the hurt is so deep that it remains unresolved, and every time we feel the pain or loss the other has inflicted, we feel resentment welling up again. In this case, we may need to consciously express forgiveness multiple times for the same offense – not to the other person each time, but in our own heart. Forgiveness is a process. 📌

### A pointed parable (vv. 23-35)

To illustrate the importance of forgiveness, Jesus told a story that is found only in Matthew. It is a parable played out in three scenes, an obvious analogy based on a hypothetical kingdom: “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to ....”

The parable has eschatological implications, beginning with a king who is thereafter referred to as a “lord” over his servants (vv. 27, 32, 34). The king decided to hold a judgment day of sorts in which all debtors would be held accountable. He must have been an incredibly generous king, for one of the servants, Jesus said, owed him 10,000 talents (whether of gold or silver is not stated). This would have been a staggering sum: the talent was the largest unit of currency in use at that time, and 10,000 was the largest number commonly used in arithmetic. The word translated 10,000 is the Greek *myriad*. As in English, it could also refer to an astronomical but indefinite number. 📌

Even if the servant in question was a governor or some other high official, it is inconceivable that he could have

owed so much: Josephus recorded that the total take in taxes from Judea, Idumea, and Samaria in 4 BCE was only 600 talents. Jesus deliberately spoke in hyperbole, exaggerating the numbers for shocking effect. None of his hearers could imagine owing that kind of debt, much less paying it – but they could appreciate the relief that should come from being forgiven such a hopeless amount.

When the servant professed his inability to pay the jillions of dollars he owed, the king ordered that he and his family be sold into slavery. It was uncommon in Jewish society, but possible, for someone to be sold into slavery to pay debts. Jewish law prohibited the sale of the entire family, though violations of the law may have occurred.

The cash return from sending the family to the slave market would have been miniscule compared to the amount owed, but it would prevent the king from facing a total loss and would impose a penalty on the debtor, sending a message that one should not borrow what one cannot repay.

The thought of his family being sold into slavery sent the debtor into a paroxysm of penitence as he shamelessly begged for more time, though everyone involved knew he could never pay it all (v. 26). Surprisingly, the king took pity on the servant and forgave the entire mind-boggling debt (v. 27).

In Jesus' telling of the tale, the now-freed debtor departed (did he even express thanks?), and soon met a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii. Three months' wages were not insignificant, but microscopic in comparison to the amount he had just been forgiven. Incredibly, the ungrateful servant caught his colleague by the neck and harshly demanded immediate payment. When the poor man begged for more time just as he had done, the

forgiven man showed no mercy, but had his fellow servant thrown into prison (vv. 28-30).

As one might expect, the churlish servant's heartless actions were soon reported to his “lord,” who called him in for a tongue-lashing: “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” (vv. 31-33).

“In anger” Jesus said, the king reinstated the formerly forgiven debt and threw the heartless servant into prison “to be tortured” until the entire debt was paid – something that could never happen (v. 34).

The parable concludes: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (v. 35).

Is it time to take a deep breath? That's quite a warning. The threat of unending torture is just as much hyperbole as the inmate's staggering debt but intended to stress the seriousness of the matter. Those who follow Christ have been forgiven of a sin-debt that no amount of good works could repay. Could believers be as callous as the man in the parable and refuse to forgive others?

For believers, forgiveness is not an option. Holding grudges is not only bad for our emotional health, but also for our spiritual health, for our attitude in relationships with others directly affects our relationship with God.

Here's the bottom line: those who wish to receive forgiveness must learn to forgive – both readily and repeatedly.

Do you feel forgiven? If not, have you wondered why? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

September 24, 2023

Matthew 20:1-16

## A Question of Fairness

When I was a boy, a neighbor whom I called “Mr. Herman” decided to go into the egg business, and he hired me to help assemble scores of wire cages to be mounted inside the two long chicken houses he was constructing. Each cage contained multiple compartments designed to hold three hens each, with a sloped wire floor that allowed eggs to roll onto a shelf while droppings fell to the ground beneath.

I gave no thought at the time to whether the system was humane to the chickens: I just wanted to feed my fledgling bank account. Mr. Herman offered to pay me a flat amount per cage, and after I got the hang of it, I could start early, work steadily, and build enough cages to earn seven or eight dollars in a day. That was big money for a 12-year-old in 1963.

All was fine until Mr. Herman also hired my cousin, who was less industrious, built fewer cages, and made less money. He complained, and his father persuaded Mr. Herman to pay both of us a flat five dollars per day.

When told of the new arrangement, I felt betrayed by my boss and ill-treated by my uncle, who helped his son earn more while robbing me of extra cash I could earn by being productive. When my dad came to pick me up that day so I wouldn’t have to walk home in the rain, he found me

*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? (Matt. 20:15)*

so frustrated that my tears competed with the raindrops.

We have strong feelings about fairness, don’t we – and injustice abounds. It’s frustrating to know that women consistently get paid less than men for doing the same work, and that people of color routinely make less than whites, while jet-setting CEOs routinely earn from 200 to more than 1,000 times the salary of their average employees without doing much apparent work.

The offense we take at such inequity typically grows from the greed of employers, whether it was my late neighbor trying to save a few dollars per day, or a contemporary executive more concerned about his bonus and his wealthy shareholders than about his employees who struggle to pay the rent.

Would we take the same offense if we were to see an apparent inequity based on an employer’s *generosity* instead of greed?

We would not be the first to wonder.

### Men at work (vv. 1-7)

Matthew alone recounts Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard, which could just as well be called the parable of the generous landowner. The story concludes a series of conversations about ultimate rewards. The first

encounter took place between Jesus and a young man who was willing to keep any number of ritual laws to gain eternal life but was unwilling to part with his possessions (19:16-22). Afterward Jesus remarked how difficult it was for wealthy people to adopt the sacrificial lifestyle of kingdom followers (19:23-26), and he responded to his disciples’ questions about what sort of rewards they might receive after following him faithfully (19:27-30). 📌

With the question of finances and fairness in the air, Jesus told his followers a challenging parable that still has the power to make us squirm. The story builds on the preceding verse: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (19:30). It then concludes with the same thought, but in reverse order: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (20:16). Similar observations appear in Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30.

Jesus’ story seems to address an earlier question Peter had raised about what reward he and the other disciples could expect: “Look, we have left everything and followed you,” he had said. “What then will we have?” (19:27).

The story that follows continues to trouble the legalist in all of us who think people should get only what they deserve – what they have *earned*. Legalism has always had a hard time understanding grace.

The rabbis taught that a full workday lasted from dawn until the first stars became visible, and Ps. 104:22-23 suggested that same thing. The widely accepted wage for a day laborer in Palestine was one Roman denarius per day, roughly equivalent to the Greek

drachma described as payment for a day in Tobit 5:15. 🕒

The parable describes a landowner who went out early in the morning – probably about 6:00 a.m. – and hired laborers to work in his vineyard, contracting to pay the standard daily wage of one denarius (vv. 1-2). He later returned to the marketplace about 9:00 a.m. and found other day laborers who had gathered to seek work. The owner hired additional hands, promising “I will pay you whatever is right” (vv. 3-4). At noon and 3:00 p.m. the employer returned seeking additional help, presumably making the same offer (“he did the same,” v. 5).

It must have been harvest time, with grapes begging to be picked before they spoiled on the vine, for the desperate landowner returned as late as 5:00 p.m. to seek more workers. Finding job hunters still available, he asked “Why are you standing here idle all day?” (v. 6). The men insisted that the problem was not laziness on their part, but a lack of opportunity: “Because no one has hired us” (v. 7).

Why had no one hired them? Had they slept late or had other business earlier in the day, or had they been waiting there all day without being chosen? Whatever the case, the vineyard owner quickly took care of the problem: “You also go into the vineyard.”

### Wages, and grace (vv. 8-16)

So far, so good. The only unusual thing about the parable is the apparent urgency shown by a man who is so anxious to get his grapes off the vines and into the winepress that he’s still hiring day labor so near the end of the day.

Jesus’ parables often contained a surprise twist, and the shocker arrived as the day wound down and the landowner instructed his paymaster to

distribute the men’s wages. 🕒 Surprisingly, he told the men to line up in reverse order of when they were hired, with the last hired to be the first ones paid.

Any person would expect those hired last to be paid a smaller, pro-rated amount of the day’s wage: the landowner had promised to pay those hired later in the day “what is right.” When the latest hires surprisingly received a full denarius, those who had worked an entire day naturally expected such a generous employer to pay them more, but they also received the standard scale of one denarius each (vv. 8-9).

Can you imagine the ruckus that erupted from those who had “borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat”? “They grumbled against the landowner,” Jesus said (vv. 10-12).

Surely we would have complained, too, if we had come to the end of the day weary of bone and stinking with sweat, only to receive the same pay as someone who sashayed in and worked a single hour or two. We would think it completely inequitable: note the worker’s complaint that “you have made them equal to us.”

Though the workers cried foul, the landowner insisted that justice had not been violated. The early-bird workers had agreed to the “denarius a day” scale, and that’s what they had been paid (v. 13). The employer had treated them with perfect fairness, but they could not accept the fact that the latecomers had received something more than fair: gracious generosity.

The parable, no doubt, would have angered legalists who expected eternal rewards in return for a lifetime of following the law. Jesus’ free acceptance and forgiveness of sinners, no matter what their past or how lately they had turned to God, turned the theology of legalism upside down. That, of course, was the

point. Those who receive the kingdom and its rewards do so because God is gracious, not because they have earned it.

A life of faithfulness is not without reward, but Jesus calls disciples to steadfast service that is motivated by generous love, not the expectation of a payday commensurate with either experience or competence.

The issue has to do with generosity and resentment, grace and jealousy. The landowner asked: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (v. 15).

The translation “are you envious because I am generous?” renders the literal phrase “Is your eye evil because I am good?” This does not carry the superstitious connotations of “the evil eye” that some believe is an ability to pronounce curses: it was a common euphemism for jealousy.

We may find it hard to receive grace we did not earn, and even harder to accept God’s generosity to others whom we believe earned it less than us. Jesus’ insistence that “the last will be first and the first will be last” (v. 16) was a way of emphasizing God’s freedom and desire to extend grace to all people – even those who come late or who others might consider unworthy.

We can only imagine how the disciples responded to Jesus’ story, because the text does not say. The important thing, as always, is how we respond. Do we, like the all-day workers, react with resentment when others receive unearned grace? It’s hard to rejoice with people who appear to be rewarded beyond what they deserve, but that’s what makes it grace – and without grace, none of us would make it out of the field. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 1, 2023

Matthew 21:23-32

## Who Decides What Is Right?

The Jesus we find in today's text is not the gentle teacher and healer many people like so much, but a bold revolutionary who wreaks havoc in the temple and challenges abuses that had crept into the temple practices. 📌

Jesus appreciated tradition and often observed it, but also went beyond it. His teaching pointed to God's in-breaking kingdom and the redemptive acts he was yet to accomplish. Many found his message disturbing.

What do we do with a Jesus who is not in comfort mode, but who makes us distinctly *uncomfortable*? As we consider the text, we may see something of ourselves in the authorities who held tightly to their traditional way of doing things and could not accept the new thing God was doing.

### Jesus, the radical

If the establishment leaders who confronted Jesus used our vocabulary, they would have called Jesus an insurgent, and possibly a terrorist: at least one of his disciples was identified with a Galilean group known as the Zealots. The ruckus Jesus raised in the temple courts-turned marketplace were hardly nonviolent.

*When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matt. 21:33)*

What are we to make of this story about Jesus getting "in your face" with the scribes and Pharisees, priests and elders, the religious and ethnic leaders of his day? He had dared to come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey with hundreds of people shouting praise and crying "Hosanna," as if he were a conquering king. Surely, he knew that would not sit well with defenders of the status quo.

All four gospels relate that story and its aftermath, though not all in the same way. As Matthew tells it, Jesus went straight to the temple, where he took such offense at the carnival atmosphere surrounding the festival week that he resorted to uncharacteristic force. Can you imagine it? The gospels insist that Jesus angrily overturned the tables where men with bags of money were converting Greek or Roman coins into coinage acceptable for the payment of temple taxes. He then went about releasing doves and other animals being sold for sacrifice (at a nice profit) – and not politely.

Expressing heated disdain that commercial business had taken over the temple court intended as a place of prayer for Gentiles, Jesus cried out "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers!" (21:13). With no

other words recorded, he left the city – but the next day he was back. 📌

### Jesus, the debater (vv. 23-27)

As bold as shiny new brass, Jesus walked back into the temple intending to teach, but ran into the path of a religious ripsaw. "The chief priests and elders of the people" were waiting for him, hoping to derail the popular train he was driving, and they did so with a measure of desperation: Jesus' message of the in-breaking kingdom of God was a direct challenge to their religious traditions. 📌

The officials asked Jesus, in so many words, "Who died and made you chief priest? Who gives you the authority to do these things?" (v. 23). The question was intended to trap Jesus and leave him bound and in the path of their metaphorical locomotive. If Jesus claimed to be acting on God's authority, they could just execute him for heresy and be done with it. If he could cite no other authorization for his actions – and they were the only sanctioning body – they could evict him from the temple.

But Jesus was quick on his cognitive feet, and not easily trapped. Thinking fast, he turned the question back on his critics with a trap of his own: "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" (vv. 24-25).

Jesus knew his inquisitors could not answer. If they agreed that John's authority came from God, they would have to admit that they had failed to heed God's messenger. If they denied

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that John was a legitimate prophet, they would have a mob of John's supporters to deal with (vv. 25-26).

Knowing they were caught, but seeking to avoid a greater defeat, the officials gave the only other possible answer: "We don't know."

Their inability to answer provided Jesus with a way out. If they could not identify the authority behind John's baptism, how could they claim to judge Jesus? Affirming his verbal victory, Jesus said "Neither will I tell you by whose authority I am doing these things" (v. 27).

The account of Jesus defending of his authority was memorable and significant enough to be cited in all three synoptic gospels with only minor differences (see Mark 11:27-33, Luke 20:1-8). The parable that follows, however, is found only in Matthew.

The question of authority is a serious consideration. When churches ordain ministers, for example, they grant authority to teach, preach, and preside over the ordinances with the endorsement of the church. When pastors preach, they often claim that their message comes on the authority of scripture, which owes its authority to God.

Knowing what to believe, however, is not so easy. Today's religious authorities, like those Jesus confronted, are also subject to misinterpreting the scriptures and failing to perceive new things God is doing in the world.

The question about Jesus' authority is a reminder that Christians believe Jesus *did* teach with the authority of God, and Jesus remains our highest authority. As we seek to understand various issues of the day, we must weigh broad scriptural evidence against the teachings of Jesus and make a conscious effort to seek Christ's leadership through prayer. We live in a changing world with issues, questions, and possibilities unknown in

the biblical world, but the promise of Christ's continued presence means that new words can still be heard.

### Jesus, the challenger (vv. 28-32)

Having put his accusers on the defense, Jesus shifted to offense by asking the officials a pointed question in the form of a story. The story concerns a farmer who instructed his two sons to go and work in the family vineyard. One of the sons said he would not go, but later changed his tune and went to work. The second son responded with a polite "Yes, sir" – but never showed up (vv. 28-30). 🗨️

"What do you think?" Jesus asked. "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (v. 31a).

There was only one answer, but based on the story, if they pointed to the one who initially declined but later went to work, the religious authorities would have condemned themselves. They would be like the son who claimed to be obedient but would not accept God's new covenant in Jesus, while the other son represented sinners who had violated the law but later repented and followed Jesus. Lest there be any misunderstanding, Jesus announced that prostitutes and crooked tax collectors would enter the kingdom of God before those who treasured their religious authority but refused to accept what God was doing in Jesus.

Tying the parable to the earlier question, Jesus reminded the officials that they had also rejected John the Baptist while sinners of all stripes had flocked to him, repenting and being baptized. The religious elite had seen the revival John's preaching had sparked, but they had refused to believe John's prediction that a greater one would come after him, the one he identified as Jesus (Matt. 3:11-17).

This story may seem limited to a particular setting and time, but could it still speak to our time, to our church, to our ideas about organized religion? If there's anything inauthentic about them, it would. Jesus took it to the most religious folk of his day because they were too frozen in tradition to accept and follow a better way.

In contrast, many who weren't welcome at the temple had begun to follow Jesus and walk a different road. For much of their lives, they had said "No" to God's way, but now they were changing their hearts and their lives. Zacchaeus was paying back the extra tax money he had extorted, and the apostle Matthew (also a former tax collector) was following Jesus all around the country. Many women, both named and unnamed, supported his work. All of these had chosen to follow Jesus, using their resources to help the poor and telling others about how to be forgiven, giving their hearts to walking in the way of God as revealed in Jesus.

So, where does that leave us? Do we honestly want people to judge us by what we *do*, or do we live in the vain hope that others will believe what we *say*? What can we point to that sets us apart and identifies us as true followers of Jesus?

We might indicate financial contributions, perhaps, or volunteer work, or the time invested in church activities. Even so, most of us could probably confess that we are sometimes so concerned with sounding good, looking good, feeling good, and making good that we don't get around to *being* good, especially if it means being open to what feels like radical new ways of showing Jesus' love in the world.

Are we living the faith, loving the people, walking the walk? If Jesus told a story about us, what might it be? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

October 8, 2023

Matthew 21:33-46

## Can Stony Hearts Break?

Alfred never knew what hit him until it was too late. He and Gloria were out for a rare evening alone, sitting at a quiet table in a nice restaurant while waiting for their orders to arrive. Gloria tapped Alfred's toe to get his attention, then inclined her head to a nearby table where another couple was sitting. The woman appeared stony-faced, as if either resigned to a bad situation or frustrated with it but refusing to let the tears flow.

"What's wrong with that picture?" Gloria asked.

Alfred watched for a few moments, and said, "Well, she looks unhappy, for one thing."

"And why do you think she might be so unhappy?"

"Um, maybe because the guy seems really absorbed with his cell phone and she's feeling ignored?"

"Very observant, Alfred. Now, may I ask, what is that you are holding?"

Alfred's goose was cooked – but it was a teachable moment. He put the phone in his pocket, reached out for Gloria's hand, and looked her in the eyes. It was the beginning of a much better evening – at least for them.

### A story with a question (vv. 33-40)

Sometimes, when we're in need of personal insight, we get the point

*Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?'" (Matt. 21:42)*

most clearly when we are led to judge ourselves. We recall how the prophet Nathan confronted David with a story about a heartless tycoon who stole his poor neighbor's only lamb to serve an unexpected guest, leading David to condemn himself for stealing his neighbor's wife – and his life (2 Samuel 12).

The prophet Isaiah famously sang to a group of Hebrews about a friend who labored long to plant a vineyard, only to see it produce worthless fruit. When his audience agreed that it should be abandoned to ruin, he announced that the vineyard represented Israel and Judah, where social injustice had become widespread: he had led the people to condemn themselves (Isa. 5:1-10).

Today's text finds Jesus employing the same strategy to show the religious officials that they were too inwardly focused to recognize what God was doing.

The text comes from a section of Matthew's gospel that has Jesus arriving in Jerusalem at the beginning of what we often call "Passion Week" (Matt. 21:1-23:39). Following Mark, Matthew relates several stories involving conflict between Jesus and various religious leaders who felt threatened by his teaching.

The location is the temple, where Jesus faced "the chief priests and elders

of the people," who challenged Jesus' claims to teach with authority (21:23). Jesus first responded with a tricky question about the source of John the baptizer's authority (21:24-27) and followed that with a parable about a man who told his two sons to go work in the fields. Jesus used the story to criticize those who claim to be righteous but don't do what they should, while sinners were turning from their wrongdoing to follow Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God (21:28-32).

Our text finds Jesus pressing the point by calling the Jewish elites to "Listen to another parable," whereupon he sketched a situation not unlike Isaiah's story of the vineyard, with one key difference. The protagonist of this story, as in Isaiah's parable, put much effort into planting and protecting a new vineyard, complete with a wine press. The vineyard was fruitful: the problem was that he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers before traveling out of the country (v. 33).

This was a common arrangement, in which tenants who owned no land could cultivate and harvest a crop on someone else's property, keeping a portion of the harvest for themselves while reserving a set portion of it for the landowner. According to Jewish law, if the landowner went several seasons without attesting his ownership of the land and requesting his share, or if he died without an heir, the tenants could claim the land for themselves.

In Jesus' story, neither of those situations applied. The landowner followed protocol. When harvest time came, he sent servants to collect his portion, but the tenants had other ideas.

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They beat and mistreated the servants, killing one of them (vv. 34-35). The landowner tried again, sending more servants, but with similar results (v. 36).

With surprising patience, the owner chose to send his son, assuming that the tenants would show him due respect and pay the landowner's share. Instead, they conspired to kill the son, perhaps thinking that he had come because the landowner had died. If they could arrange the son's death, perhaps they could claim the land for themselves (vv. 37-38) – so they threw the heir out of the vineyard and killed him (v. 39). 📌

Having told the troubling story, Jesus challenged the Jewish authorities with a pointed question: “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (v. 40).

### **An answer without reflection (v. 41)**

The snare was set and baited: Jesus had only to wait for his opponents to bite, and they did. As David had done, and as Isaiah's hearers had done, the chief priests and elders fell headlong into Jesus' trap: “They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time’” (v. 41).

The leaders' response not only recognized the wickedness of the tenants, but also judged them worthy of the most severe penalty: “He will put those wretches to a miserable death” (NRSV), they said, or “He will utterly destroy those wicked men!” (NET2).

In Mark's version of the parable, Jesus does not wait for the priests and religious leaders to respond, but answered it himself: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others” (Mark 12:9).

Luke follows the same course, adding “When they heard this, they said ‘Heaven forbid!’” (Luke 20:16). Only Matthew has Jesus' audience speak the obvious answer to his question.

For Matthew, the temple leaders proved themselves capable of seeing wickedness and unfaithfulness in others, as well as the need for judgment. Would they be capable of seeing their own shortcomings?

### **A pointed explanation (vv. 42-46)**

After springing the metaphorical trap, Jesus asked a further question: “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?’” (v. 42).

The scripture in question is Ps. 118:22-23, quoted verbatim from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In the original context, it referred to a stone cut for a building that was rejected from use in one place, but later chosen to become the keystone in an archway, or perhaps a strategic stone used to join two walls together. In either case, it would not have been at the base of the building, but in a more visible place. The psalmist celebrated how his fortunes had been reversed: though rejected by people, God had raised him up. 📌

The irony is that in Psalms, the Hebrews were the stone that had been rejected by the Gentiles but chosen by God. In Matthew, Jesus is rejected by the Hebrew leaders, but chosen by God as the foundation stone of the kingdom of God. Matthew intends for the parable to portray God as the owner of the vineyard, with the religious authorities in the role of tenants who had rejected and even killed prophetic messengers in the past and had set their sights on Jesus in the present.

“Therefore I tell you,” Jesus said, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls” (v. 43). Christian believers have long interpreted this statement to mean that God's primary way of working on earth would shift from Israel to the church, with Christ as its head.

Verse 44 insists that those who reject Christ would be subject to judgment. The image of those who stumble over the stone appears to be drawn from Isa. 8:14-15, in which Isaiah speaks of God as both a sanctuary and a stone over which both Israel and Judah could stumble. The picture of judgment falling like a crushing stone may have been inspired by Daniel 2, which describes a symbolic statue that crumbles when struck by a divinely cut stone.

The “chief priests and Pharisees” had fallen into Jesus' parabolic trap, but they were no dummies. They recognized that Jesus' parable had condemned their leadership and promised judgment. Unwilling to accept the accuracy of his criticism, they wanted to arrest him, but given Jesus' popularity, they were afraid to do so (vv. 45-46).

This is a harsh story: a parable of violence and judgment. How might it speak to Christian believers? We are not in the position of the Jewish authorities who Jesus accused of failing to lead Israel rightly, wanting to own or control the faith, and rejecting the Messiah God had sent. We are, however, responsible for what we do: Will we accept Jesus as the Messiah and the keystone of our faith, or reject him and stumble our way into judgment?

The choice is ours. **N.F.J**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 15, 2023

Matthew 22:1-14

## Hoping for Hyperbole

Does the Bible ever trouble you? If it doesn't, you haven't been paying attention. Some stories are inherently disturbing, such as the way God reportedly zapped Uzzah for touching the Ark when he was trying to be helpful (2 Sam. 6:1-8), or the claim that God ordered the genocide of all Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1-3).

Texts such as these bother me – and so does today's text, which portrays God as an angry king who slays those who reject his invitation to a banquet. Is this the way God behaves, or is it Matthew's exaggerated way of making a point?

### Rejection story #1 (vv. 1-6)

The primary subject of the text is rejection, and the central point of vv. 1-10 is that those who reject God will be rejected in turn, while a brief episode tagged to the end comments on what is required for acceptance.

Matthew's story of the wedding banquet appears to be a more intense variant of a parable also found in Luke 14:15-24. Both center around a generous host who invites people to a banquet, but they decline the invita-

*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. (Matt. 22:2)*

tion, and the host responds by inviting others.

Matthew's version has the marks of an allegory. In context, Matthew has Jesus in conversation with the chief priests and other leaders of the Jewish establishment. The encounter began in Matt. 21:23, when Jesus entered the temple on the day after his "Triumphal Entry," and the priests began to question his authority to teach. Through a series of parables and questions, Jesus argued that the Jewish leaders had become self-focused and unwilling to accept what God was doing through him. 📌

That theme continues with today's text: "Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying ..." (v. 1). Matthew has intentionally combined the parables in a way that drives home a belief that the Jews who rejected Jesus were no longer the favored people but subject to judgment, while people of all stripes who accepted God's invitation could find a home in the kingdom.

As noted, the parable appears to be allegorical: "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son" (v. 2). We read God as king, Jesus as the son, and the kingdom of heaven as the wedding banquet. Servants were sent out to fetch the invited guests, but they refused to come (v. 3). The king sent another round of servants to emphasize the urgent need for response, since the oxen had already been slaughtered and everything was ready (v. 4).

Again, the invitees refused to come. Some made light of the invitation and went about their business, while others responded with irritation, mistreating and even killing the messengers (vv. 5-6). 📌 As in the previous parable of the greedy tenants, Matthew apparently intends for us to think of those receiving the wedding invitation as the Hebrew people, and those who carried the message as the prophets. The two sequential sets of messengers probably represent both Old Testament prophets and latter messengers including John the baptizer and Jesus – both of whom were subject to mistreatment and murder. By the time Matthew wrote, other Christian evangelists had also been rejected and killed.

### Rejection story #2 (vv. 7-10)

The story, then, observes that those who had been chosen and invited to kingdom living, but who had rejected the invitation, were in danger of losing their favored status. There's nothing especially troubling about that. Luke's parable (Luke 14:15-24) leaves those who rejected Jesus on the outside looking in at those who were invited to replace them, but that's all.

Matthew's version of the story – which many scholars believe was amplified by developing traditions in the early church – takes a different approach. Here, the king does not simply spurn those who rejected him: he becomes so enraged that "He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city" (v. 7).

How are we to understand this? Is God so petulant that those who decline the kingdom invitation are subject to

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sudden death and destruction? We observe, first, that the king's response seems not so much directed at those who ignored the invitation but was provoked by those who mistreated and killed the messengers: the troops "destroyed those murderers."

A second thing to note is the surprising assertion that the king's army "burned their city," a comment that makes the parable seem more localized than generic. Most New Testament scholars believe the book of Matthew was probably written during the 80s CE, at least 10 years after a Jewish rebellion prompted the Romans to sack Jerusalem, burn the temple, and ban Jews from living in the city. 📌

As the early church became increasingly dominated by Gentiles, some saw the destruction of Jerusalem as a sign of God's judgment on the Jews who rejected Jesus. We cannot be sure if this is reflected in Matthew's version of the parable, but it seems a good possibility.

As Matthew tells it, those who rejected the wedding invitation were attacked and killed, but the banquet was still prepared; the food needed to be eaten. So, new messengers were sent "into the main streets" to "invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet" (vv. 8-9).

The word translated as "main streets" in NRSV and NET2 is *diexodos tōn hodōn*, a compound composed of words meaning "go out" and "road." Some consider it to refer to an intersection (NIV11 has "street corners"), but it probably describes the main roads that lead to and from a city. Matthew had just said the king's troops had burned the offender's city: perhaps he had in mind those who were fleeing the city by the main roads. It's more likely, however, that he was thinking of the place one is likely to find the most

people and the greatest assortment of people: on the main roads through the city.

The servants did so, "gathering all they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests" (v. 10). The reference here is probably not to Gentiles alone, but to the various categories of people who the religious authorities rejected but Jesus accepted. The Pharisees famously criticized Jesus for eating "with tax collectors and sinners," a group that included Jews (Matt. 9:11, Mark 2:16, Luke 5:30). Jesus embraced people that others considered to be "bad." The new guests seem to reflect Jesus' approach, including people "both bad and good."

### Rejection story #3 (vv. 11-14)

The final verses have no parallel in Luke, and probably derive from a separate parable that Matthew has appended, somewhat awkwardly, to the story of the king's wedding banquet.

The addition concerns a king and a wedding banquet, but the main thrust takes a different tack. "When the king came in to see the guests," Matthew says, "he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe" (v. 11). When confronted with his disrespectful lack of proper attire, the man offered no explanation (v. 12). The king took such offense that he ordered the man bound and thrown "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 13). 📌

To a modern reader, this seems completely inconsistent: if unsuspecting people had been gathered up on the street and brought to the banquet, how could any of them be faulted for failing to obtain a special wedding robe on the way?

What troubles us did not bother Matthew, who probably drew this

from a story with a different setting. He seems to have been concerned that the reference to "bad and good" might be misconstrued as suggesting that one could behave any old way and still get into the kingdom. Wearing proper apparel was sometimes used as a symbol of righteous living: in Rev. 19:8, the bride of the lamb is "clothed with fine linen, bright and pure – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." In some early churches, persons were baptized in the nude, then given a clean new robe to symbolize their right standing with God.

This suggests two things: (1) Matthew wanted to balance the "bad and good" of v. 12 with another story emphasizing the need for personal righteousness. (2) The entire parable has taken on an eschatological cast, pointing to a day of judgment when the righteous are at home in God's kingdom while the unrighteous are consigned to "the outer darkness."

So, while the two parts of the text have differences, they both address the theme of judgment: the first deals with those who reject Christ, and the second with those who reject Christ's way. Matthew concludes by drawing the conjoined parables together with a saying attributed to Jesus: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (v. 14). His intent is not to promote the idea of predestination, but of choice. In context, "Many are called" could carry a universal sense: "All are called." And, in this setting, the few who "are chosen" are those who have themselves chosen to heed and respond to God's invitation: their choosing puts them among the chosen.

Troubling parables such as this may leave us with many questions, but the most important one is this: What choices are we making? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 22, 2023

Matthew 22:15-22

## A Taxing Question

**D***adgum gov'ment!*" So sang Huck Finn's "Pap" in the rousing Broadway musical, *Big River*. We're often tempted to say similar things, perhaps laced with expletives unfit for typical Bible studies. Surveys measuring citizen satisfaction with either the president or the congress are consistently dismal, no matter who is in power. One would be hard pressed to find anyone who is completely pleased with the government.

We recognize that government is a human institution, subject to all the fallibilities of humankind, then multiplied by its mammoth size, the scale of possible corruption, and the immense influence of moneyed lobbyists. Still, some form of government is necessary, or anarchy would reign.

For all its shortcomings, government can be regarded as a positive entity that is worthy of respect. How are people who respect God to relate to their government? How does one live as a "Christian citizen"? At least some aspects of this question are addressed in today's text. 🇺🇸

### A trap baited with flattery (vv. 15-17)

The first story depicts strange bedfellows – Pharisees and Herodians –

*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. (Matt. 22:21b)*

who join forces in attempting to trick Jesus into saying something that would get him in trouble. Pharisees were close adherents of the law, upholders of traditional Judaism. While the gospels display a typically negative attitude toward the Pharisees, their movement grew from a real desire to be righteous. Like ultraorthodox Jews of today, the Pharisees could be inflexible and troublesome to others, but they believed they were doing the right thing.

Since Jesus took a much looser approach to the law – especially the strict and often peculiar rabbinic laws that sought to "build a hedge" about the Torah – the Pharisees naturally saw Jesus as a major threat to their religious heritage.

Little is known about the Herodians, who are mentioned only in Mark 3:6 and in the parallel texts of Mark 12:13 and Matt. 22:16. Both their name and their actions suggest that the "Herodians" were supporters of the Herod family, who were technically Jewish and who ruled by Roman authority. 🇺🇸 The two groups were not natural allies, but both saw Jesus as a danger to their way of life. The Pharisees sought to undercut Jesus' popularity with the people, while the Herodians hoped Jesus would say something incriminating enough to have him arrested.

The improbable partners came to Jesus with a question designed to "entrap him in what he said." Trying to throw Jesus off guard, they addressed

him as "teacher," using profuse flattery to describe him as one who taught God's truth with integrity and without partiality (vv. 15-16). The phrase translated as "you do not regard people with partiality" translates an idiomatic expression that literally means "you do not see the face of people." The idea is that he did not judge or respond to others based on their appearance, their ethnicity, their wealth, and so forth.

By feigning belief that Jesus spoke truth without respect to persons, they hoped to goad him into an answer that would either upset his followers or get him into trouble with the government.

The question was this: "Tell us, then, what you think: is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (v. 17). Many readers are most familiar with the King James rendering of this story (followed by NET, NIV11, KJV, HCSB), which asks if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, rather than "the emperor."

"Caesar" was not a personal name, but a title. As the Egyptian word "Pharaoh" indicated the current king of Egypt, the Greek word "*Kaisar*" (used in the text) was a title used by the various Roman emperors, so either translation is correct.

The question "Is it lawful?" was not about the Roman law, but the Mosaic law. Jewish legalists such as the Pharisees held that it was unlawful for Jews to possess or use Roman coins, because they contained images of human faces on them. The first commandment had warned against "carved images" that could be perceived as idols.

The question put Jesus between a rock and a hard place. If he answered

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“Yes,” it would sound as if he favored Rome, and the Pharisees would have grounds to stir up the people against him. If he said “No,” the Herodians would have cause to claim sedition and seek his arrest by the Romans.

While clever on its face, the question proposed a false dichotomy not unlike the old comedian’s trick question: “Yes or no: have you stopped beating your wife?” Jesus refused to fall into their trap.

### A response based on wisdom (vv. 17-22)

The cunning query was designed to leave Jesus with no feasible escape, but his opponents underestimated him. Recognizing the malicious intentions of his examiners, Jesus called them out, naming them as hypocrites. The Greek *hypokritēs* is the source of the English word “hypocrite,” typically thought of as a sanctimonious person who doesn’t live up to their own projected standards.

Jesus then asked to see the special coin typically used to pay the tax, and someone – probably a Herodian, since the Pharisees despised Roman coinage – came up with one. Jesus challenged his accusers to describe it: “Whose head is this, and whose title?” (v. 20). 📌

The coin, a silver denarius, probably would have been engraved with an image of the current emperor and an inscription bearing his name. If so, the coin brought to Jesus would have borne the face of Tiberius, who ruled from 14 to 37 CE. The front of the coin would have been inscribed with an abbreviated version of “Tiberius Caesar, son of divine Augustus.” The reverse bore the inscription “Pontifex maximus,” meaning “the highest priest,” designating him as the empire’s highest religious authority.

Such coins were minted by the Roman government, and technically belonged to the ruler. To accept and use the emperor’s currency, then, was to acknowledge his sovereignty. Jesus’ answer was disarming in its simplicity.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” Jesus said (v. 21). The word used for “give” carries the sense of giving back to someone what is due to them. If the Roman currency technically belonged to the emperor who authorized its minting and managed its use, then giving some of it back to him should not be an issue.

The heart of Jesus’ response was not his allowance of tax payments to Caesar, but his insistence that people should give to God what is God’s – namely, everything. The small head tax owed to Caesar was irrelevant compared to the challenge to surrender one’s life as well as one’s goods to God. Jesus’ response seems to imply that his inquisitors were more concerned with themselves, their positions, and their power than with serving God.

Thus, Jesus’ response was not the either/or answer his critics were looking for, but a surprising both/and demand that left them flatfooted. As the late Frank Stagg once wrote, Jesus did not straddle the fence as they had hoped, but demolished it (“Matthew,” in the *Broadman Bible Commentary* [Broadman Press, 1969], 206).

As on other occasions, Jesus’ opponents were amazed at his teaching and left so speechless that their only resort was to leave, no doubt muttering among themselves (v. 22).

### A question for our time

Does Jesus’ response have implications regarding church/state issues today? In this encounter, Jesus taught

the legitimacy of human government and its place in our lives. Later New Testament writers probably drew on this teaching in recognizing that Christians have obligations to the government (Rom. 13:1-4, 1 Pet. 2:13). Jesus did not argue that the sacred and the secular exist in isolation, nor that they should be conjoined, but that the relative authority of each should be recognized within its proper sphere.

Government has legitimate claims upon its citizens. Even when we do not agree with all that the government does, we should pay our taxes. However, government is not supreme. Christians are ultimately subjects of a higher kingdom, and when there is clear conflict, we must be obedient to the higher authority of God.

This passage could be used to support a belief in the separation of church and state, but that was not the main point of Jesus’ response. His teaching recognized that the kingdom/country in which we live has a limited claim on us, but our primary allegiance is to God, for all of life is lived within the sphere of the kingdom of God.

This does not imply that Christians should work to impose their beliefs on others through governmental action, that they should expect special favors from the government, or that they should seek a theocratic rule designed to create their idea of a “Christian nation.”

More than anything, perhaps, Jesus’ teaching shows the folly of acting as modern-day Herodians and attempting to put a Christian veneer on support for candidates, parties, or movements that are motivated by greed, prejudice, or attitudes far removed from the principles Jesus taught.

We wouldn’t want to be hypocrites. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 29, 2023

Deuteronomy 34:1-12


## A Good End to a Good Life

**C**an death ever be good – or put another way – can there be a good death? We tend to think of death as an enemy, a fearful specter that steals us away from life and love and family. There comes a time, however, when all of us must die, and some dyings are better than others.

We grieve at the thought of tragic deaths, young deaths, painful deaths, violent deaths, lonesome deaths, and rightfully so. None of us wants to die young, to linger in pain, or to die alone. If we could choose the circumstances of our death, I suspect most of us would wish for it to come at the end of a long and fruitful life, still in possession of our basic faculties, and in the company of loved ones.

Such was the death that Moses experienced, with the added elements of it taking place on a mountaintop and in the company of God.

### Moving up (vv. 1-4)

Moses is the most prominent human character in the Torah (or Pentateuch), the first five books of the Bible. Once he appears, with his birth recorded in Exodus 2, Moses is so dominant that the Pentateuch came to be known as “the Books of Moses.” 

*Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. (Deut. 34:10)*


Today’s text comes at the end of Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch, in a transitional passage that leads directly to the book of Joshua. The story follows directly from Deut. 32:48-52, where God reportedly told Moses that he would die soon, and not be allowed to enter Canaan.

As the story unfolds, Israel is encamped on the plains of Moab, just east of the Jordan River. The fertile oasis of Jericho, the gateway to the Promised Land, lies a few miles west of the river. God instructs Moses to climb to the top of Mount Nebo, from which he can see Israel’s final goal.

The reason Moses cannot enter, we are told, goes back to a wilderness stopover where God had told him to speak to a rock face to produce water for the people during a dry stretch, but Moses struck the rock with his staff in addition to making the speech (Num. 20:2-13). For this bit of grandstanding, interpreted as a failure to have full faith in God, both Moses and Aaron were banned from the land of promise (32:50-52, cf. Num. 27:14).

Knowing that he would not return, Moses pronounced a final blessing on the Israelites (ch. 33) before beginning the rugged climb up Mount Nebo. As mountains go, Nebo is not particularly tall at 2,680 feet, but it is arid and rough, and Moses was an old man. Shortly before, in introducing Joshua as his designated successor (31:1-8), Moses

had declared, “I am now one hundred twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about ...” (31:2).

Moses’ professed infirmity did not prevent him from scaling the highest point of the mountain, a peak also called Pisgah, from which Yahweh “showed him the whole land,” from Dan in the north (near Mount Hermon) to Ephraim in the northwest, to Judah and as far as the “distant sea” (vv. 1-3). The list is either hyperbolic or visionary: from Mount Nebo one can see a few miles into what came to be known as Judah, but Dan was far north and the Mediterranean many miles west, on the opposite side of a mountain range. Neither is visible from Mount Nebo. 

Some scholars interpret Yahweh’s act of showing Moses the land and reminding him that it had been promised to Abraham’s descendants as a ceremonial way of Moses claiming the land on Israel’s behalf, but we could also read it as simply reflecting Yahweh’s desire to show Moses the land, even if he could not enter.

The text describes Moses as a man who was both physically active and spiritually faithful throughout his life – even to the very end. Some of us may be nearing the end of life’s journey, while others have far to go, and none of us know where or when the road will end. Are we like Moses, always on the move, finding purpose for life in serving God and serving God’s people? Such faithfulness does not bring a promise of long life or even good health, but it will make the life we have a better one, both for us and for others.

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## Moving on (vv. 5-8)

Moses' death is told in the simplest of terms: "And he died there, Moses, the servant of Yahweh, in the land of Moab, according to the word of Yahweh" (a rather literal translation of v. 5). We might wonder what it means to die "according to the word" or "at the command" of Yahweh.

It's unlikely that the narrator means to say that Moses consciously keeled over because Yahweh told him to, as implied by the NRSV's rendering that he died "at the LORD's command." Rather, since God had previously told Moses that he would die on Mount Nebo (32:48-52), one could say that his demise arrived "according to the word of Yahweh."

Moses' burial is couched in mystery, including the question of who buried him. The NRSV glosses over the question by changing the verb to passive ("he was buried"), but the Hebrew of v. 6 says "he buried him in the land of Moab, across from Beth-peor, and no one knows his burial place until this day." The subject of "he buried him" must be Yahweh, who presumably buried Moses in a secret place to prevent the Israelites from building a shrine and venerating the site. That would explain why the narrator could insist that no one knew the grave's location, even to the time of his writing. 📌

A note insists that Moses' eyesight remained keen until the day of his death, and "his vigor had not abated" (v. 7). This suggests that Moses' earlier claim that he could no longer "get about" (31:2) must have been an intentional exaggeration as he prepared Israel for Joshua's leadership.

Verse 8 describes the people's protracted mourning over Moses, but the text does not say how they learned

of their leader's death. We presume that Moses would have told Joshua what to expect, and it is possible that his associate may have accompanied him on the mountain: the text mentions only Moses, but it does not specify that he was alone. If Joshua or someone else had gone with Moses, he could have reported Moses' death and the disappearance of his body.

If Moses had gone alone after telling Joshua that he would die on the mountain, he could have waited a suitable time before sending search parties to confirm that Moses was no longer there, and thus declare him dead.

The Israelites grieved for Moses as fervently as they had earlier complained against him. Instead of the typical seven days of mourning, "the Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab" for 30 days (v. 8). The people had depended on Moses for more than 40 years, but now he was gone, and his absence was palpable. What would happen going forward?

The account of Moses' death raises the question of how *we* expect to die. Some of us may plan to expire kicking and screaming, resisting death at all costs, while others anticipate a more peaceful transition from this world to the next. Unlike Moses, we cannot expect to know *when* we will die, but we do know *that* we will die. Moses did not wait until his final day to prepare for death, and neither should we.

## Moving forward (vv. 9-12)

The narrator signals a shift in the story with the last phrase of v. 8: "then the period of mourning for Moses was ended." It was time for next steps, and the first of those was to acknowledge Joshua as Moses' authorized successor and leader.

At Yahweh's word, Moses had commissioned Joshua "in the sight

of all Israel" and charged him to "Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed" (31:7-8).

Joshua was described as being blessed by Moses and "full of the spirit of wisdom," so that "the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD commanded Moses" (v. 9). We know from stories yet to come that the Israelites were not always obedient: their history was pockmarked by one rebellion after another. They did, however, accept Joshua as their new chief, and "listened to him." Hebrew has no specific word for "obey" – true listening implied obedience.

The passage closes with a brief but enthusiastic tribute to Moses, who "knew God face to face" and presided over signs and wonders so powerful and frightening that they would never be forgotten by the Egyptians or by Israel (vv. 10-12).

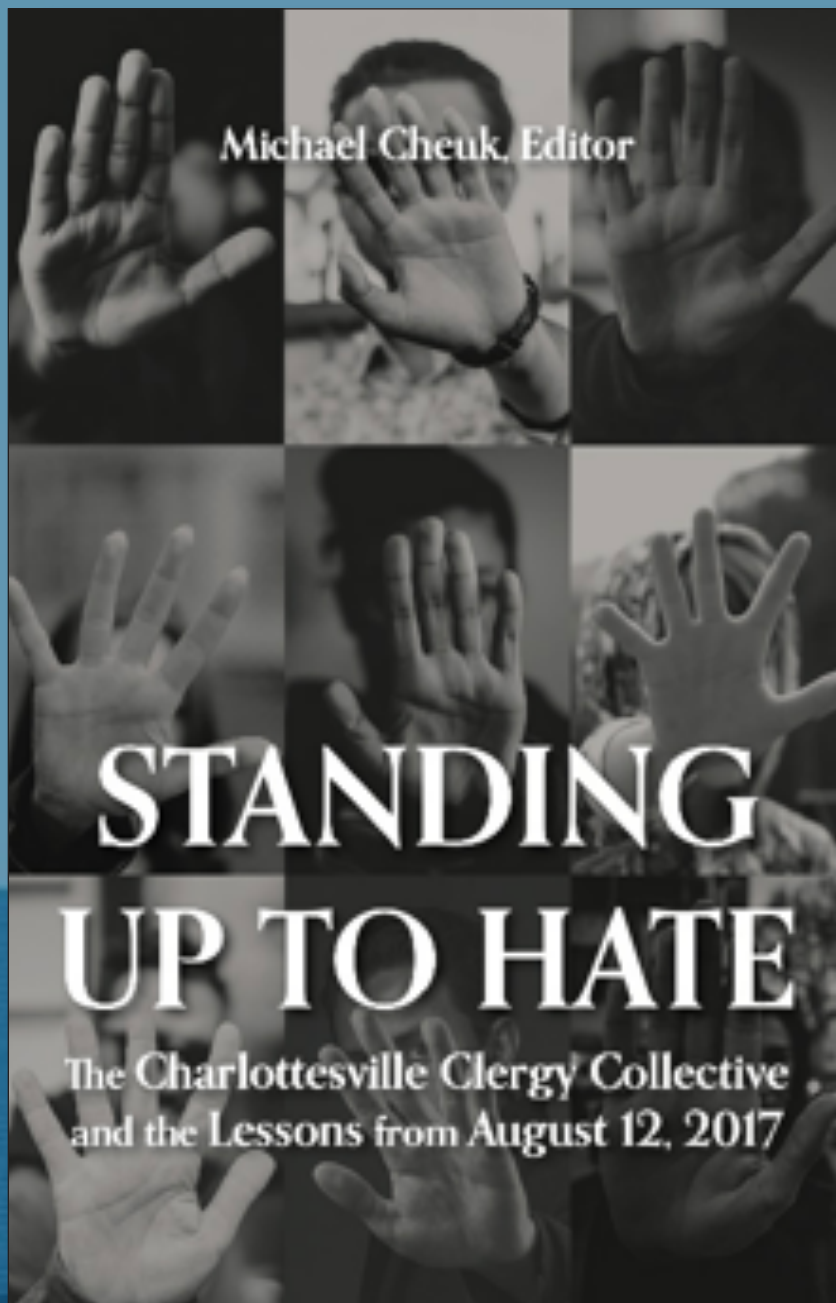
Do we ever wonder what people will say about us when we're gone? It is unlikely that we will receive accolades as unparalleled prophets or miracle workers, but will there be someone to say, "No one could have loved me more than my mother did," or "No one could have been a better role model than my dad"? Will there be someone to say, "I couldn't ask for a kinder friend," or "The church never had a more faithful member"?

Whether we live 20 years or 120, we want our lives to count for something good. We want to be remembered fondly when we're gone. To make that happen, we don't have to be a prophet like Moses, just the best "me," with the opportunities given us, that we can be. **NFJ**

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# AUGUST 12, 2017 IS A DATE CEMENTED IN HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY TOWN OF CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA.

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The “Unite the Right” rally turned deadly when one extremist plowed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters.

Amid the chaos at the moment and in times that followed, the Charlottesville Clergy Collective was on hand. Their trusting relationships across various faith traditions served the community well in facing the tragic realities of racism.

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# ‘MY SOUL IS RISING’

Courage and convictions lead to freedom’s turning point

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

**A**mid a struggle for independence, these words in the American colonies’ Declaration of Independence were the opening statement of “the causes” that led to a separation from Great Britain and the announcement of a new nation.

Signed by members of the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, even as war raged between the old and new worlds with no victor yet in clear sight, the words voiced confidence and hope for a new future of freedom’s expansion.

After the United States of America won independence, July 4 became an annual celebration of independence replete with parades and ceremonies.

## ALL?

In reality, “all men” merely meant “all white men.” For generations Native Americans had been forcefully removed from their own lands and too often slaughtered. Most Black Americans remained enslaved, and white women had little actual freedom.

Eighty-seven years of national independence and two years of civil war passed before the American nation on a

Fourth of July seriously turned its attention toward freedom for any group other than white men.

It was the summer of 1863 that liberty’s gaze fell squarely upon the people of African descent whose forced labor had long been the economic foundation of the nation. Both the historical epicenter of America’s slaveocracy and, now, freedom’s sudden surge, the southeastern Sea Islands had become the barometer of the nation’s future.

And whatever that future might be, no one could say for certain.

Although slavery had long been confined to the South by 1863, many white Northerners nonetheless opposed U.S. efforts to quash the rebellion of the 11 states. Let the self-styled Confederate States of America go their own way, the appeasers demanded.

A resolution from a pro-slavery political convention in Illinois — home state of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, who on January 1 the same year had issued the Emancipation Proclamation initiating freedom for all slaves — succinctly stated the sentiments of many white Northerners as well as most white Southerners:

“[T]he further offensive prosecution of this war,” read the missive, “tends to subvert the constitution and entail upon the country all kinds of anarchy and misrule.”

Within these few short words, the troubled world of a once “united” but white freedom-only nation tumbled forth.

Lincoln the lawyer and president had arrived at a reading of the nation’s Constitution through the lens of the Declaration of Independence, deeming that “all men” should, in fact, be free — an inclusive freedom worth fighting for. Many Northerners agreed with him, but far from all.

Pro-slavery Northerners — pleasing white Southerners — dismissed the Declaration’s freedom ideology and interpreted the United States’ founding documents narrowly, equating racial equality with lawlessness, corruption and social degeneracy.

Spilling white blood to lift up Black lives was ludicrous, insisted many of the millions of men who financially benefited — directly or indirectly — from the enslavement of African Americans.

## DAYS NUMBERED

James G. Thompson lived in both worlds, the young man’s hometown of Philadelphia replete with mansions built by southern slaveowners that loomed alongside long-time radical abolitionist organizations and leaders.

Philadelphian Pierce Mease Butler until recently had reaped enormous wealth from the slave labor camps that he once owned in the Sea Islands of Georgia. Now the Union controlled the islands of both Georgia and South Carolina.

Hundreds of slave plantations on the islands were increasingly being purchased by former slaves, and Thompson was immersed in the new world of freedom forming in the Sea Islands: as an abolitionist he helped uplift former slaves, and as the editor of Beaufort’s Union-supporting *Free South* newspaper he chronicled freedom’s advance.

On July 4, 1863, Thompson — the freedom advocate and newspaper editor — sided with Lincoln’s reading of the Constitution. The “great question” facing the sundered American nation, he declared emphatically in a *Free South* editorial, was “the question of the position and treatment of the black race.”

Slavery, “plainly” wrong, had led to “national corruption.” Now, the evil

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*Editor’s note: This is the fifth article in a series supported by a legacy gift from the former Whitsitt Society.*

institution “is very near its end,” he prophesied.

Black Sea Islanders who read the editorial — and thousands were even then learning to read, thanks to Thompson’s efforts and those of dozens of other northern educators and missionaries laboring among the freedmen of the Sea Islands — nodded in agreement.

Those who were yet unable to read the local newspaper also agreed that slavery’s days in America were clearly numbered.

On this first July 4 following Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation — which legally freed slaves, although not all in practice — Thompson observed Independence Day with former slaves who celebrated their newfound freedom.

Little did anyone in the Sea Islands yet know just how prophetic these pronouncements of slavery’s demise were at the time. At that very moment Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia were retreating in humiliation from a devastating defeat by Union forces at the hamlet of Gettysburg, Penn.

But there was more: As what remained of Lee’s army limped back southward, Union forces scored a second major July 4<sup>th</sup> victory in the surrender of Vicksburg, Miss., to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, ceding control of the strategic Mississippi River to the Union.

Freedom was literally marching forward, the slave-power ceding both physical territory and political momentum to constitutional liberty.

North and South alike recognized the transformational significance of the twin Independence Day victories. The white South had been knocked down, and time would prove July 4, 1863 to be the day from which the Confederacy would never recover.

### MY COUNTRY

Unaware of the great Union victories, Pennsylvanian and Sea Island educator Laura Towne — a Unitarian Universalist — assembled her students in St. Helena Island’s Brick Baptist Church, home to a school for freedmen co-founded by

Towne the year prior. Quaker teachers were also present, including Charlotte Forten from Philadelphia, the school’s first Black teacher.

On the church’s grounds the educators and their students marched “out and stood under the flag” hung “between two magnificent live oaks.” There they sang “The Star Spangled Banner,” followed by a reading of the Declaration of Independence.

Afterward “Mr. Lynch, the new colored Methodist minister, made an oration” and the Black children “sang ‘My Country, Tis of Thee.’”

Then the gathered freedmen community “sang many of their own songs,” including a rendition of the “grand” African spiritual “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” its evolving words a story of escaping slavery clothed in religious allegories.

Many soldiers and officers of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (colored), including abolitionist Col. Robert Shaw — Northerners all, the Black men free-born — were present.

Forten found herself enamored with Shaw: “He seems to me in every way one of the most delightful persons I have ever met.”

One evening the two “had a very pleasant talk on the moonlit piazza, and then went to the Praise House to see the shout.”

Towne had been to many of the island’s exuberant African spiritual gatherings and found this “one of the very best and most spirited that we had had. The Col. [Shaw] looked and listened with the deepest interest, and after it was over, expressed himself much gratified.”

Two days later the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts received orders to depart Beaufort. Stopping at Hilton Head for supplies, the regiment sailed for the islands near Charleston.

In their first battle — the Battle of Grimball’s Landing — the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts arrived at St. James Island just in time to reinforce and save the 10<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Infantry from Confederate forces.

Their mettle and bravery tested and proved, two days later Colonel Shaw led

his regiment down the beach on Morris Island toward Fort Wagner, a strategic Confederate fortification heavily guarded. Soldiers and officers alike understood they had volunteered for a suicide mission, and although some Union men reached the Confederate fortification, they could not take it and were forced to retreat.

Many brave soldiers gave their lives for freedom that day, as did Colonel Shaw. “Poor young Shaw was killed and buried” with his soldiers, Laura Towne wrote after she heard the news of Union defeat at Battle of Fort Wagner.

Wounded survivors had been evacuated to the Union hospitals in Beaufort, where the freedmen of the Sea Islands showed their deep gratitude.

### NOT FORGOTTEN

From their gardens and hen houses the freedmen brought to the wounded Black soldiers “fresh fruit, chicken broth and other suitable delicacies,” editor Thompson noted in the *Free South*.

Soon the supplies of fresh food expanded to melons, “bushels of sweet potatoes,” corn, tomatoes, figs, “ochre” [okra], chickens and eggs — for hospitalized Black and white soldiers alike. Beyond the steady stream of fresh produce and poultry, many women volunteered their time as nurses.

Victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg had demonstrated the superior strength and numbers of Union armies. But the victories had come at great cost — tens of thousands of Union soldiers killed, wounded or missing — as recruitment of soldiers grew all the more difficult.

At this crucial juncture the Battle of Fort Wagner, though a Union loss, convinced skeptical northern whites that Black soldiers were every bit equal to white soldiers, opening the way for eager Black men — former slaves as well as free born — to join the U.S. Army.

Relieved at victories in Gettysburg and Vicksburg, President Lincoln in July pronounced a day of “Thanksgiving, Praise, and Prayer” for Thursday, August 6.

“[S]acrifices of life, limb, health, and liberty, incurred by brave, loyal, and patriotic citizens” had secured the great victories, the proclamation noted. In “triumphs” and “sorrows,” the “power” of God’s “hand” had been evidenced.

“I invite the people of the United States to assemble on that occasion in their customary places of worship and in the forms approved by their own consciences render the homage due to the Divine Majesty,” Lincoln [or more likely William Seward, his Secretary of State] wrote, “for the wonderful things He has done in the nation’s behalf and invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit to subdue the anger which has produced and so long sustained a needless and cruel rebellion.”

Ever searching yet never certain of God, Lincoln hoped “the divine will” would restore “the perfect enjoyment of union and fraternal peace.”

## GIVING THANKS

Southward on the Sea Islands, two services of “thanksgiving, praise and prayer” took place at the once-white but now-biracial Beaufort Baptist Church. First assembled were “the white soldiers of the Union now stationed in this vicinity.”

“Before the exercises were concluded,” however, “the congregation of a sable hue began to collect, and ere long the tap of a drum was heard in the distance, which announced the coming of the Second South Carolina [Colored] regiment.”

As “the first assembly poured out,” the “young Africans began to pour in” the vacated seats with “happy, smiling faces.” Mansfield French, a Methodist minister and founder of the National Freedmen’s Relief Association then educating and training former slaves of the islands, opened the service.

Afterward Gen. Rufus Saxton, military governor of the Sea Islands, beamed that although freedmen “were still in the wilderness, your prospects for liberty were never brighter than now.”

Sylvester V. Clemens, chaplain of the 115<sup>th</sup> New York that fought in the Battle of Fort Wagner, spoke for many

whites: “[O]ur prejudices” against and “delusion” about Black soldiers had to be “destroyed,” before “we were at last ready to put arms in the hands of negroes.”

In time the nearly 200,000 Black soldiers and sailors who ultimately served in the Union Army during the second half of the war would prove pivotal to the war’s outcome.

“Rev. Mr. Hall, a colored missionary from New York,” a former slave and then agent of the Underground Railroad, delivered a message to Black South Carolina soldiers, speaking in “earnest protest against the clamorously proclaimed doctrine of the inferiority of the race.”

“He could not talk of slavery with any patience,” James T. Thompson observed. “The earth was not big enough for him and any man who would seek to reduce him to slavery.”

“[Hall] encouraged the colored troops to establish the reputation of their race for pluck, to prove the Black man was worthy of his freedom by his willingness to fight for it,” Thompson continued, “and he dwelt in detail on the various causes of thankfulness which this country, but especially his own people, had over the events of this war, which whatever else it might lead to was certain to ensure the freedom of every slave.”

Hall’s words would prove prophetic: the continued heroism of Black and white soldiers alike would be needed to make the United States of America a nation of actual freedom.

The soldiers of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, along with Col. Robert Shaw, would not be forgotten in the minds and hearts of Sea Islander freedmen. As they nursed wounded soldiers back to health, in September many gathered at the Brick Baptist Church and from their meager resources contributed \$107 for a monument to the Colonel, while collecting yet more food for the soldiers of the 54<sup>th</sup>.

## CHURCHES

Both bodily and spiritual freedom captivated the Brick Baptist Church, with

more than 400 persons baptized into the Black congregation by the end of 1863.

So rapidly did the church grow and so large was the island that some members departed in good will to form two additional congregations closer to their homes: Adams Street Baptist (1862) and the African Baptist Church (1863). Upriver in Beaufort, the Black Tabernacle Baptist congregation also prospered.

Newly autonomous Black Baptist congregations provided opportunity, too, for proper marriages, a practice prohibited by slaveowners. Freedmen were not the only ones getting married.

*Free South* editor James G. Thompson returned northward to marry Elizabeth Watson in the storied First Baptist Church of Philadelphia. Afterward Thompson brought his bride back to Beaufort.

Pennsylvania itself proved to be a boon and a bane for the freedmen of the Sea Islands, both coming to a head in none other than the Brick Baptist Church.

Thompson and Charlotte Forten — among other Pennsylvanians — were appreciated by many of the island’s Baptists. Less and less so, was Unitarian Laura Towne.

Having previously denied communion to Towne, Black Baptists increasingly made known their wishes for the freedmen’s school — begun and still housed in the church building — to be moved to another location.

Towne, too, was ready for a move. During school hours in the Brick church, making “herself heard over three other classes in reciting in concert” was almost impossible.

Identifying “talkers and idlers among fifty scholars while one hundred and fifty more are shouting lessons and three other teachers bawling admonitions” was impossible, the educator lamented.

Hastings Gantt — a freedmen, businessman and landowner — also recognized the need. In 1864 he donated 50 acres of recently purchased land near the Brick Church House for use as a dedicated school for freedmen. Quakers

in Pennsylvania set to work on a plan for constructing buildings.

For the moment, the Brick Church remained the religious, cultural and educational center of the Sea Islands. But ever-newer winds of freedom were blowing and threatening to become a gale.

## CONSEQUENCES

As the spring of 1864 unfolded, some white overseers of the effort to equip former slaves for life as freed persons advocated for the inclusion of the Union-controlled Sea Islands in the upcoming Republican National Convention, the party of Lincoln and emancipation that was the driving force in the Union's battlefield efforts to defeat the Confederate States of America.

Young William Gannett demurred. Harvard-educated and at 24 years of age among the youngest of Northerners in the Sea Islands, Gannett perceived the shortcomings of many of his fellow whites.

Less than three dozen whites in the Department of the South he considered "decent." That aside, the "whole affair" of northern whites' push for the Sea Islands' representation in national politics Gannett deemed "premature and foolish."

Nonetheless, the die had been cast, and it had unintended consequences. Upon the call to elect delegates to the RNC, Black leaders on the islands exercised their freedom to participate, and in May 1864 "asserted themselves" as "fellow-countrymen by claiming the right to vote" and to represent South Carolina in national politics.

Quickly racism raised its head among the seemingly enlightened white Northerners as "white paired off against black" in selecting delegates to the national convention.

Among Black leaders at the South Carolina gathering was Robert Smalls, Beaufort native and former slave-turned-national-hero, and also a U.S. Navy officer and Baptist layman. Smalls' presence helped quell the tension and stewarded the election of four freedmen as delegates to the Republican National Convention.

The die cast, the path-breaking biracial delegation enroute to Baltimore visited the U.S. Capitol. President Lincoln welcomed the men and listened to their petition to exempt the Union-controlled Sea Islands from war-time trade and transportation restrictions on southern commerce.

Lincoln promised to consider the matter, but nothing would happen right away.

## CURIOSITY

On to Baltimore the South Carolina contingent continued, where they were met "with a good deal of curiosity" as "many distinguished citizens from all sections of the country" called upon them, manifesting "great interest" in "the work of reorganization [into a Union-loyal state] in progress in South Carolina."

But beyond earshot many of the curious dismissed the biracial South Carolina delegation as a spectacle of "three or four army sutlers [peddler of goods to army camps, a reference to whites] sandwiched between contraband [a term for ex-slaves liberated by the U.S. Army prior to official freedom implemented by the Emancipation Proclamation]."

Inherent racism had been stirred up. After being properly seated, the South Carolina representatives were promptly ignored: denied official representation and unrecognized by the convention's chairman, they sat without a voice.

Among the South Carolina delegates, *Free South* editor Thompson observed a "marked effort" to "avoid ... the question of negro suffrage" at the political convention.

The hypocrisy was stark: "All were ready to have the negro fight for the Union, die for it, but were hardly ready to let him vote for it." For the moment, there would be no debate, the voices of abolitionists and freedmen alike muzzled.

Thompson, however, perceived the handwriting on the wall. "Well, we could afford to wait," he wrote mere days after the Baltimore convention, optimistic the Sea Island Experiment was paving the way for Black suffrage. "The attention

of thousands have been attracted to our State ... The way has been opened ... Let measures then be devised to carry on the movement toward civil government."

Not long after the southern delegates arrived back in the Sea Islands, a large crowd of increasingly emboldened freedmen celebrated the Fourth of July on the grounds of the Brick Baptist Church on St. Helena Island.

As people of faith and as citizens of the United States, the Sea Islanders rejoiced in their growing freedoms, their unfolding story pointing America toward a more inclusive future of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

"Little children sitting on the tree of life, To hear the Jordan roll; O roll, Jordan roll, Jordan roll. We march the angel march, O march the angel march, O my soul is riding heavenward, To hear the Jordan roll."

Freedmen sang the old slave song that long masqueraded an escape from slavery in heavenly language. Now they voiced hope for a life of expansive freedom for all Black Americans.

The U.S. government, too, became increasingly focused on the longer-term future of freed slaves, establishing a Bureau for Freedmen, led by whites, within the War Department.

As prospects of the defeat of the Confederate States grew all the greater, perspectives between northern whites and free southern Blacks began diverging all the more regarding the nuances of Black freedom.

Meanwhile, Black Sea Island freedmen, mostly of the Baptist faith and rapidly attaining literacy competence, were on the cusp of overcoming a critical handicap.

With few exceptions historically unable to defend their humanity and their rights through the written word, they were now progressing toward the ability to formally create on paper their own organizations and institutions designed to officially make known their own freedom demands. **NFJ**

# The seasons of life: part 1

BY KEITH HERRON

All of us grow through the same stages of life — from birth until death — following the same path as life is lived. Our lives are lived uniquely, but predictably, across the arc of life.

Carl Jung emphasized that the afternoon and evening of life are very different from the morning. Thus, the values and strategies that apply to one stage of life do not necessarily work for the others.

“Yet where,” he asked, “are the universities to prepare us for the last two-thirds of our living?”

Life is lived on an arc of time and experience, and almost everyone follows this arc as a universal map of experience. The ancients have recognized that map since our earliest stories have been observed.

However, it has only been in the last century or so that those stages of life have been understood so clearly.

Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung both elaborated on these important markers, but it was Erik Erikson who laid out the structures by which we understand “the arc of life,” with his detailed stages of life.

Almost everyone who writes in this field uses Erikson as the reference point that is commonly held as the framework by which one can see the whole of life.

## Childhood: “Here I Am”

We begin at the beginning — where everyone starts as an infant. One of the foundational theological beliefs is that all humans bear the image of God in their being, a belief commonly known as *Imago Dei*.

We make meaning of that belief by recognizing that all humans are born with a self, an inner being we discover as we grow. We grow until we recognize our inner being as who we are in our deepest being.

Let me describe that inner self by switching to first person as adapted from my book *Living a Narrative Life* (2019, Smyth & Helwys):

I am the one behind these eyeballs. I am the one behind the cranium’s facial structure with its latitude and longitude. With this body, I need no words to communicate whole worlds of meanings. I am a walking billboard of meaning with this body of mine.

I am the one with this skin pigmentation, its texture and hues, color-coordinated with hair and iris. I am male or female but not limited in the rich variety of inhabiting my gender with all its polarities, needs and expressions.

I am the one who awakened to consciousness within this body. I was a watcher of the world I could see until I realized I was more than a body as I became aware I had thoughts and emotions, language tender and powerful, wordless emotions savage and raging of the me I was coming to express. Consciousness understood in sensate triggers helped me differentiate hunger, pain and pleasure, and release.

In our exploration of the stages of life that form the arc of life, we will pay attention to the life stages of David. In David, we see him in his childhood, as an adoles-



cent, and through the sequential stages of adulthood until we come to his death.

Other biblical characters can be stiff, cutout versions of real human beings, but David is presented as a complete person. We see the vibrant passion of his life, and we see him broken in sorrow.

The story of David comes up because the prophet Samuel senses God’s regret over choosing Saul to be Israel’s king followed by the surprising choice of David, the youngest of Jesse’s sons, who is anointed as Israel’s next king.

He’s critically important because he’s the first Bible action figure. What he does is so compelling, it seems we can’t keep our eyes off him.

Even God seems under his spell. The Bible tells us David “was a man after God’s own heart,” as if even God cannot keep from watching him.

The light shines bright on him but not at the cost of honesty as David illustrates Jung’s cautionary concept of the shadow self (“wherever there is a great light, there is also a great shadow”).

From our earliest vision, David is heroic and worthy of acclaim for all he accomplished — yet his story is tragic and flawed. The Bible tells us David lived a full, complete life. Most of us are aware of the highlights of his life but we’re getting ahead of ourselves, so we go back to David’s childhood.

We first see David as the youngest son of Jesse who was assigned the care of his father’s sheep. Even today, we can see young boys or girls who are tending the family herd in the Judean wilderness.

This magnificent man began life as the youngest of a long list of sons. The Bible gives us a strong dose of primogeniture (how the birth order was understood as an indication of family favor).

According to typical practice in the Middle East, the eldest son received all the family’s favor and privilege while the

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Editor’s note: This is the first in a series of five articles by Keith Herron on the seasons of life.





younger sons struggled for the scraps. This, however, is one of several biblical stories where the eldest son did not automatically receive the benefits of privilege. Samuel's indication of God's choosing broke that familial pattern.

A part of the arc for each child features those persons of influence who shape their lives. Some will be colleagues or teachers who become mentors. Others will be persons who will either encourage or oppose them in the directions they themselves choose to take. The journey for the child will come in these unscripted persons of influence who shape and mold them toward their destiny.

Pastoral theologian Myron Madden explored the relationships that exist whereby a child receives a blessing for being. This kind of affirmation often comes from within the family, but it is also received from some other influential person outside the family.

The affirmation of being affirms us as we are, not as we would like to be, nor even as we hope to become. It is a blessing for right now in this current moment.

The power of this kind of affirmation can be understood as inherent in creation itself. One is blessed in creation as a gift from the universe.

The blessing is a gift from someone who has a sense of understanding that they can help a child live in hope and generosity. The blessing received has the

power of guiding a child toward fulfillment and discovery.

Our parents were given this first opportunity to envelop us in affirmation in their role as life creators. In the mystery of new beginnings, we were created in the act of passion and this gift of life is ours for existence.

The gift of affirmation, according to Madden, comes in creation not as a reward for good performance. There is nothing done that triggers this affirmation.

We are blessed for our being, and that gives us the foundation upon which we add confidence-building events where we can shape our lives to risk and accept the adventure that life can be. This kind of affirmation is like a blood transfusion, perhaps understood as a life transfusion as an adult, an elder, passes along affirmation to one who is younger with the result that this affirmation has the power to ignite a sense of destiny in the child.

A blessing is a simple affirmation for being. This is a restoration to wholeness. It is a powerful platform of affirmation for one to receive, and its effects are breathtaking.

Madden is clear that this blessing is meant to energize the child beyond the family, giving us the confidence needed to cut the cords that bind us in emotional dependence on parents, siblings and the extended family on our journey of life.

So, what happens when the confidence of affirmation is not granted? Novelist Pat Conroy expressed it honestly as: "I longed for their approval, their applause, their pure uncomplicated love for me, and I have looked for it for years after I realized they were not even capable of letting me have it."

Perhaps for most children it is feast or famine as we all come from a staggering variety of home settings. Parents who are there for a while, then are absent for other periods of time.

Parents can be amazing givers of blessing. But if they are not, there are grandparents or other adult figures who can fill in the gaps.

Children can't see all these forces at first, but they have role models who give them guidance and support and love. A child's world will expand and grow, and they will learn their lessons in life as they become active participants in the act of growing.

When we are loved and affirmed for being, we are like bulbs that are planted in a choice location with the hope, the expectation, that this bulb will accept all the gifts of sunshine and soil and rain until a flower emerges and opens to the glory of God. [NFJ](#)

—Keith Herron is intentional interim minister at Countryside Community Church, Omaha, Neb.

# CROSSING THE CHASM



Creating transformative conversations amid anger, alienation

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

“I don’t know how to talk to those people, so I don’t even try.”

This sentiment about those of opposite political persuasions is heard time and again. Likely, we have all heard such statements and perhaps made them ourselves.

Most Americans are quite well aware that an ideological and political chasm exists in America, an abyss embraced and deepened by — whether we like him or not — Donald J. Trump. It seems fair to say that virtually all politically-minded Americans agree with this assessment.

On one side of the chasm are most Americans, a bipartisan majority who recognizes the reality that Trump is a conman, criminal and essentially a cult leader. This

is nothing new. Previously a longtime Democrat, Trump was the same as he is today, just not on the scale and visibility of more recent years.

On the other side of the chasm is a partisan crowd of tens of millions who remain loyal to Trump. His many heavily documented crimes are willfully ignored or instinctively disbelieved.

Trump’s criminal and anti-constitutional efforts to overthrow the 2020 presidential election are viewed as legitimate; the Jan. 6, 2021 domestic terrorist assault on the nation’s Capitol building and democracy that he inspired is perceived as patriotism; and his gross mishandling of classified secrets is dismissed as irrelevant.

Other than perhaps during the American Civil War, there has never been a vaster and more culturally-driven political chasm.

Some of the January 6 domestic terrorists — as well as many who support them — actually celebrated the assault as the beginning of a “second Civil War”

(as reported by CNN) against inclusive democracy.

Across the chasm, Americans of an inclusive mindset, as well as those of an authoritative worldview, agree that a cultural civil war is being waged on the political front.

This was also the case in the American Civil War, as leaders and common folk on both sides of the chasm of yesteryear agreed that the war was being waged over the enslavement of Black Americans.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century American Civil War over slavery was not resolved until Union military forces overpowered the Confederacy — following some 700,000 deaths in total.

The white South surrendered, their dream of keeping Blacks in slavery defeated. Yet within a few short years, white Southerners began implementing legal codes designed to maintain the artificial construct of white supremacy and Black inferiority — politically, culturally and socially.

Today's chasm is a continuation of our nation's always-halting, never yet fully achieved movement toward equal freedom and equal rights for all Americans.

January 6 — vividly representative of today's cultural and political chasm — once again pitted inclusive democracy on one side and authoritarianism on the other. However, this was not a second civil war, but a continuation of our yet-to-be resolved conflict over our common humanity.

Embracing our common humanity can be difficult for those of us who have benefited from America's historical chasm between white people and those of color. Simply acknowledging the truth of our inherited privilege can be daring and mentally anguishing.

So here we are today, still staring — and sometimes shouting or even shooting — across the chasm.

Advocates of inclusion are on one side and white Christian nationalism on the other. Often the "others" are openly perceived not as fellow human beings created in God's image, but as "evil" people bent on destroying "us."

We have given up on talking to one another because "we" are right, and "they" are wrong. There is no middle ground. End of story.

Or is it? Are we not *all* human beings? And if so, can we find common ground somehow, somewhere?

In some cases, the answer right now might be "no." Some persons cannot imagine being vulnerable enough to recognize the humanity in certain "others" who are so different than they.

But in many cases the answer can be "yes" to finding common ground — if we first abandon the idea of *talking to* one another. After all, who actually wants to be talked *to*?

Who among us wants to be on the receiving end of a one-way conversation in which our response — whatever it may be — is inherently dismissed by the one who is talking to us?

Let's face it: most of us are guilty of *talking to* someone and getting nowhere. Teenagers rarely change when being *talked*

*to* by parents, but the same is true with adults.

When we *talk to* someone, whether admonishing or trying to help, we often communicate a sense of superiority that typically does not sit well in the mind of the receiver.

This is widely experienced on both ends. For example, no matter where one is on the ideological or political spectrum, odds are that at some point each has tried to make someone else change their mind — and failed to do so.

It's frustrating when having a clear sense of being right, holding needed credentials, and offering clear and persuasive arguments. Why is my well-reasoned case not being heard and accepted?

On the flip side, when people of other persuasions talk *to us* in an attempt to change our minds about something, do we change our minds? Probably not.

Talking *to* someone is not a conversation, and conversations are essential to actual relationships — which in turn are crucial to embracing one another's humanity.

However, not just any relationship will do. Bridging the chasm requires setting aside our digital-driven distance and sitting face-to-face.

This should come as no surprise since we innately understand the need for an actual presence in forging genuine relationships. This is backed up by research.

"When technology takes the place of in-person relationships, it has been found to increase loneliness and disconnection and reduce well-being," writes Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha in *Psychology Today*.

"It is helpful for online connectivity to supplement in-person relationships," the psychologist continued, "but if relationships are maintained primarily online, they ultimately do not satisfy."

Unfortunately, the digital industry is intentionally trying to keep "us" from getting to know "others."

Social-media business models intentionally do not drive conversations. Rather, social media is an "attention economy," as MIT professor Sinan Aral notes in his book *The Hype Machine*.

The "essential tension surrounding social media companies," Aral writes, "is that their platforms gain audiences and revenue when posts provoke strong responses, often based on dubious content."

Social media company algorithms are programmed to favor posts that "get you riled up" at "others" and create anger.

In short, the more social media "relationships" we have than in-person relationships, the more likely we are to be angrier people — whether disseminating information (true or false) designed to upset "others," or becoming angry when flipping through posts designed to make us angry.

And when we are angry at one another, the chasm grows wider.

It is easy to say that we are not the ones initiating the anger — and thus widening the chasm — on our social media platforms. Or are we?

The "hype machine" that is social media is designed to promote ourselves by tapping into our sense of self-importance, our need for power or admiration, and our focus on our appearance and achievements.

This applies to us as individuals and as a group. Leading "us" to focus on ourselves over and above "others" physically-distant, social media by its very nature dulls our ability to empathize with others, widening the chasm yet more.

According to psychologist Phil Reed, also writing in *Psychology Today*, data backs up the self-absorbed reality of high social media usage. It reveals that "those high in 'superiority' feelings prefer Twitter, whereas those high in 'exhibitionism' prefer Facebook."

This is a warning to all of us: by the design of digital companies, social media consumption puffs up our [individual and group] perceived self-importance and steers us toward dislike of "others."

If we go along with this program, our common humanity begins fading away.

Increasingly psychologists are studying this clear, if complicated, relationship between social media and narcissism.

"The question for most of these studies," Reed notes, "is which comes first — the narcissism or the social media use?"

# “Authentic, chasm-crossing conversation is both meaningful face-to-face dialogue and the very manner in which we live and conduct ourselves in public life.”

Studies have been conducted on specific social media platforms. “[P]rior narcissism drove later Twitter use, but prior Facebook use drove later narcissism.”

The relationship between social media and narcissism is “different for different forms of social media ...,” said Reed. “The evidence is strongly pointing to the need for a thorough re-evaluation of our relationship with [social media] technology.”

These and other studies of the digital world back up what we already know: *talking to others* — the essence of social media — is not a conversation, and in fact hinders and often prevents actual relationships.

Due to social media, in short, we are now strongly conditioned to *talk to* our “followers” from a remote position of “superiority” and/or “exhibitionism,” while basking in the “likes” that our posts receive.

We are steered away from actual face-to-face, meaningful conversations that move us toward our shared humanity, generate empathy, and lead us to reach out and touch one another — emotionally as well as physical.

“The question of how much [social media] is too much should be explored individually and socially,” concludes psychologist McConatha. “[M]oderate use” is “beneficial,” and “can lead to a sense of self-efficacy and competence, whereas overuse can adversely affect well-being.”

It is no surprise that this period in America’s history is not one of “well-being” — even if we’ve not pondered what is meant by the term.

Generally, “well-being” is defined as being happy, healthy and prosperous. There is a good chance that most Americans today would not describe themselves in that way — even though our nation’s founders envisioned a future America of “well-being.”

Our nation’s Declaration of Independence is grounded upon “self-evident truths” that all “are created equal with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

The opening words of our nation’s Constitution declare that the well-being of citizens — our “General Welfare” — is necessary “in order to form a more perfect union.”

Aspirationally, our nation was founded upon human well-being. Yet almost 250 years later we are far from ensuring the well-being of all Americans, struggling with the seemingly never-ending chasm between individual selfishness and our common humanity.

It does not have to be this way. Simple steps toward our own well-being and that of “others” — and by extension the well-being of our nation — are entirely achievable. Each of us, in fact, has the capacity to participate in this effort.

We can begin by reminding ourselves that someone across the chasm is a fellow human being worth exchanging “sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas” — the definition of a “conversation,” according to Merriam-Webster. Getting to know and seeking understanding of one another despite our differences is the desired result.

But that is only part of the story. A second, somewhat dated definition of “conversation” — courtesy of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* — is the “general course of actions or habits; manner of life; behavior: deportment [personal conduct].”

That is, authentic, chasm-crossing conversation is both meaningful face-to-face dialogue and the very manner in which we live and conduct ourselves in public life.

This may require rethinking our everyday lives in simple ways: slowing our daily routine, putting aside our mobile devices when out and about, and making a point to think of those with whom we casually interact as actual persons worth acknowledging.

How? Develop a curiosity about others. Smile genuinely while making small talk.

It may be shockingly easy — if we are truly curious — to engage in meaningful though brief conversations with those we encounter each day.

It’s a matter of minding our tone and facial expressions and noticing the same of those with whom we are conversing.

Our purpose is not to impress others, but rather to pay attention to what *they* are saying. Rather than criticizing, we might respond with a follow-up question or two, conveying a desire to know more.

We can make it a goal to connect in such a way that the person feels good about themselves. In my experience, a genuine smile and expressed appreciation are typically offered in return — not only during that one conversation but often when seeing that person again.

How do we begin *personally* crossing the chasm that is our cultural, societal and political world?

Perhaps by turning our attention from ourselves and investing our attention and curiosity in another — for no other reason or agenda than this person is a fellow human being with whom we share a common humanity.

In this small way, and at this most fundamental level, we might contribute to a mutual well-being that in time generates transformative ripple effects. It is certainly worth a try. **NFJ**

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# The good, the bad, and the guilty

By Tony W. Cartledge

**D**uring a recent visit to Georgia, my wife Susan and I participated in a basket weaving activity at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park near Macon.



The park seeks to honor the people of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Native Americans who thrived in the area for thousands of years before the American government sent them off to a reservation in unsettled parts of Oklahoma.

That allowed white people to have the land and force Black people to work it. It was a mixed emotions kind of day.

Brittney Cuevas of the Muscogee Nation came all the way from Oklahoma to spend the morning teaching basket weaving. Baskets can be woven from materials ranging from pine straw to sawgrass and bamboo. We were using long strips of thin oval-shaped reeds, probably a type of rattan, soaked in water to keep them flexible.

Cuevas or someone had already done the hardest part: getting a “spider” started, which is basically a circle of reeds woven together so that they splayed out in twos and threes from a central hub.

She showed us how to take a single strip “weaver,” fit one end into the base, and then work it back and forth around the “spider” strips, going around and around until it was used up, then it could be tucked in and another one started.

I figured a nice tight weave would be better than a loose one, but I didn’t realize until too late that the tighter the weave, the more quickly the basket closes up. Instead of

a nice bowl, I ended up with a flat-bottomed pear shape that might hold a couple of pencils if I put rocks in the bottom.

To finish the top, a gentleman showed me how to tuck the ends under and pull them through for a couple of rounds, then cut off the excess.

“I’ve never had a bad day basket weaving,” he said. But I couldn’t help but reflect on all the bad days the basket weavers had known.

Along with Cuevas, John-John Brown had come from Oklahoma to talk about Muskogee history and culture. He was recently honored as a “living legend” for his contributions to preserving and passing on his people’s cultural heritage.

Wearing jeans and a baseball cap with a single small feather hanging down the back, Brown said he had come in case we had ever wanted to ask a “real live Indian” any questions and not worry about causing offense. “You have to laugh,” he said.

Brown’s comments were laced with humor, but also with the acknowledgment that he could rarely visit places such as Ocmulgee Mounds without finding time alone to pray and shed tears in memory of the abuse his ancestors suffered.

Brown spoke of growing up with a traditionalist grandfather who taught him to pray to the Creator and dance through the night on Saturdays, while his Christian grandmother insisted they attend a Baptist church the next morning.

“I’m a Southern Baptist traditionalist,” he joked, with “traditionalist” meaning he still holds to Native American beliefs and practices to honor the Creator in addition to Christian expressions of faith.

Brown described stomp dances in which participants form a ring and dance

around a bonfire, which symbolizes the presence of the Creator. They move counterclockwise, so that their hearts are closest to the flame. The dance promotes peace, with participants not joining in if they harbor a grudge against someone.

One might expect Brown and others to feel perpetual bitterness. But I had the impression that he has learned to channel the pain through grief rather than grievance.

We remember how yet another people suffered ungodly abuse at the hands of those who somehow connected being white and powerful to having God on their side — leading to slavery, oppression, lynchings and mob violence.

Repression continues wherever legislatures dominated by white supremacists (whether they admit it or not) enact voter suppression and gerrymandering laws so they can hold on to power. It likewise continues where legislators bar schoolteachers from teaching their students the truth about the uglier parts of our history, lest it cause some fragile white child to feel bad.

Guilt can be a very good thing when its purpose is to prompt responsibility. White folks like me may not have committed the crimes of our ancestors, but we benefited from them, from the privilege that comes with being white, most often resulting in a stronger financial position than our Black neighbors and the Native Americans whose land we inhabit.

We can never make up for the sins of the past, but we can do far better in the present. If it takes some well-deserved “white guilt” to motivate more generous spirits and get us into the dance of reconciliation with our hearts closer to the Creator, so be it. **NFJ**

# Same song, different verses

By John D. Pierce

Where have we heard those words before? Those strident and defensive words from Southern Baptist leaders who claim full biblical authority for denouncing women as unequal in power and position.

Listen to their words, along haunting echoes from a tragic and shameful past:

“It’s a matter of biblical commitment, a commitment to the scripture that unequivocally we believe limits the office of pastor to men,” said Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler to his fellow Southern Baptists recently.

“Who are we, that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God ... and invent for ourselves ‘a higher law ...,’” said John Henry Hopkins, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, in 1864.

“It’s a question of authority. I think that’s what makes people nervous, but the apostle Paul makes that argument, ‘I forbid a woman to have authority over a man ...,’” said Mohler in a 2019 podcast as reported by Baptist News Global. “If the Holy Spirit did inspire Paul to say that, then it’s the Word of God.”

“The answer is very plain, St. Paul was inspired and knew the will of the Lord Jesus Christ and was only intent on obeying it,” opined Hopkins, author of the tract “Bible View of Slavery” (1861). “And who are we, that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God?”

“I think there’s just something about the order of creation that means that God intends for the preaching voice to be a male voice,” said Mohler in the 21st century.

“Master and slave are, alike, the creatures of God, the objects of his care, the subjects of his government; and, alike,

responsible to him for the discharge to their several stations,” said Presbyterian pastor George D. Armstrong of Norfolk, Va., author of *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery* (1857).

“This is a disappointing departure from the clear teaching of Scripture ...,” tweeted Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Jason Keith Allen in response to Saddleback Church’s female pastoral leaders.

“It is vain to look to Christ or any of his Apostles to justify such blasphemous perversions of the Word of God ...,” said South Carolina Governor James Henry Hammond in his *Hammond’s Letters on Southern Slavery*. “It is impossible to suppose that slavery is contrary to the will of God.”

“To affirm women pastors undermines confidence in Scripture, weakens God-ordained male leadership, and bows to the spirit of the age,” wrote Southern Baptist Scott Aniol, editor-in-chief of G3.

“[Abolitionist efforts] lead to one of the most dangerous evils ... a disregard of the authority of the Word of God ... to suit their own purposes,” stated University of Virginia professor Albert Taylor Bledsoe, writing for *Cotton is King* (1860).

Different times, different issues. But the same arrogant, self-serving and misguided approach to biblical interpretation.

It’s the same certainty that leads to cruelty — not in scale but in consistency. The same cocksure insistence that these preferred acts of discrimination somehow reflect the will and word of God.

And it is carried out by what is isolated and what is ignored.

Isolated are those scattered and limited biblical texts that prop up one’s presupposition. Standing alone or stitched together, they provide the claim that the Bible is clear on this topic — and

that anyone who disagrees is disagreeing with the Bible.

In reality, this approach (hermeneutic) finds a stronger case for human bondage than for denying women prophetic and pastoral roles.

Ignored are not only those verses that speak in contrasting ways but also the larger biblical themes of freedom, equality and grace. And, of course, Jesus is pretty much tossed aside in favor of Paul.

Yet, even the favored apostle is only partially heard — as if Gal. 3:28 (“There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”) barely slipped into the biblical canon.

Those who claim to believe the Bible the most tend to focus on the least of its overall revelation culminating in the life and teachings of Jesus. Yet, they harshly dismiss their fellow Christian detractors as unbelievers.

Of course, limiting women’s roles in church leadership is not equivalent to human bondage in terms of its destructive force.

However, the reckoning of these two issues by slaveholders then and their descendants of Americanized Christianity now follow the same wayward path of using isolated biblical texts while ignoring Jesus’ teachings and larger biblical truths to justify their injustices.

For Southern Baptists, one might think a denomination that grew out of the seedbed of slavery would be more introspective. But no.

Staying this course for centuries is precisely why a large portion of white Americanized Christianity is always the caboose and never the engine of social movements toward justice, equality and inclusion.

They do the same thing to the Bible — and people unlike them — over and over again with lessons never learned. **NFJ**

# SHINY, HAPPY & ABUSIVE

Series shines light on Bill Gothard, religious authoritarianism

By John D. Pierce

“Disturbingly fascinating.”

That was the apt description my friend Susan Harris McDearis of Blacksburg, Va., offered in response to the four-part documentary series, “Shiny Happy People: Duggar Family Secrets,” released earlier this year by Amazon Prime Video.

Arguably, the “lead actor” (or character) in the series is no one in the expansive Duggar family (although they are the focus and appear most frequently) known for their long-running TLC show, “19 Kids and Counting.”

The slimy, abusive fingers of disgraced “Bible” teacher Bill Gothard — and his Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP) — are all over them, other adherents to his teachings, and the well-produced series.

## DAMAGING

While Gothard’s teachings are unfamiliar to some today, their damaging impact on individuals and evangelicalism at large are now well-documented.

In the late 1980s, as a major part of my doctoral work on personal responsibility in decision making, I attended one of Gothard’s 32-hour seminars called Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts.

Thousands of professing Christians — seemingly exchanging their brains for sponges at the door — absorbed his teachings of abusive power as ordained and delivered by God through him.

In my 1990 dissertation I wrote, among other critiques that “[Gothard’s] principles are heavily based on the legalistic



parts of scripture and virtually void of the life and teachings of Jesus.”

Specifically, I observed: “Gothard’s extremely low view of and apparent hostility toward women were very noticeable... There are likely many women who will stay in abusive relationships as a result of Gothard’s teachings.”

Tragically, my assessment written more than three decades ago has played out in devastating detail as painfully told in “Shiny Happy People.”

## LESSONS

My interest in and opposition to Gothard’s authoritarianism began during my own time as a college student and grew when his impact became more apparent during my 14 years as a campus minister.

After teaching many lessons and leading several retreats on the topic of responsible Christian decision making, I took those ideas to Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga., to test them academically.

My major professor and I agreed that attending one of Gothard’s seminars would be beneficial to my efforts. This was

especially true since Gothard’s organization held much of his life and the institute’s work in secret.

Here are a few things I discovered while listening to Gothard’s teachings back then:

- He taught polytheism. He told a bizarre story of a girl’s vision problems being tied to her Cabbage Patch doll, which he claimed was named for the Norse god of blindness.
- He granted enormous power to Satan over Christians — just a wee bit less than God but only if one conforms to Gothard’s teachings.
- A strict legalist, he presented faithfulness as primarily a bunch of do’s with even more don’ts.
- His teachings, rooted in unyielding structures of male authority, were to be unquestioned.
- His overt sexism was revealed not only in his teachings but also in his attempted jokes that demeaned women as “nagging” and inappropriately seeking nice things from their ruling husbands.

## SEXISM

In one lecture, Gothard, who never married, began a sentence with, “If a man gets involved with an immoral woman...” That left me wondering why, then, the man was not described as immoral.

Blaming women, as reported repeatedly in the documentary, was at the center of Gothard’s teachings.

Heather Heath Self, who grew up subjected to Gothard, recalled in the series: “You can’t exist without being accused of tempting a man to attack you.”



The defensiveness of those teachings, I picked up on quickly, was strong. Those of us who pointed out Gothard's misleading and dangerous teachings long ago were often excoriated for "not believing the Bible."

Now we wonder why lessons in discernment are so rarely learned.

Bible teacher Beth Moore, who in a recent autobiography revealed her own experiences of abuse, said on Twitter:

"When I was a young mom, many of the peer families we knew were getting neck deep in Bill Gothard events and materials. [I] couldn't do it. He made my skin crawl. For one thing, I don't trust heavy duty fundies pushing and policing girls' purity... In my view, that's not for protection. That is for training predators and grooming prey."

Those of us who've long pointed out how blindly many will accept false and dangerous teachings aren't taking a victory lap.

We are issuing yet another reminder that toxic narcissists who claim to hold the highest views of holy scripture are often those most likely to abuse vulnerable people for their own benefit and in the name of godliness.

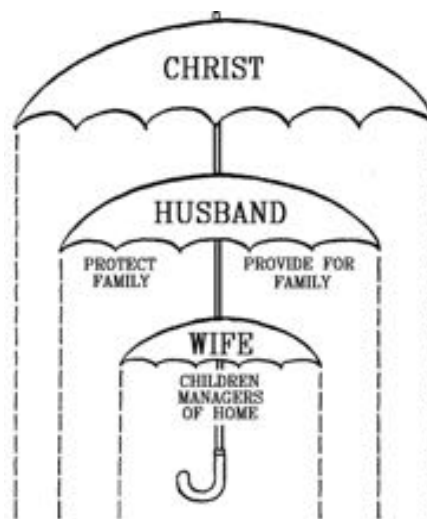
## DISCERNMENT

Gothard's teachings (which became homeschool curricula still being used) are mostly commands — while ignoring the two-fold command that Jesus called the greatest and most encompassing.

In the documentary, damning testimonies flowed from those whose lives have been deeply harmed by living in families and communities — such as and including the Duggars — that strictly followed Gothard's instructions.

Many years ago I developed and taught college students an alternative approach to faithful living that contrasted with Gothard's abuse-fertile authoritarianism and legalism.

My focus was rooted in the biblical concept of being made in the image of God — which places the freedom and responsibility for personal decision making into the hands of each individual through spiritual discernment.



Bill Gothard's "Umbrella of Protection" illustration.

After seeing the docuseries, I want to be even clearer and quite frank: Discernment is more than listening uncritically, praying over something and then getting a good feeling.

It involves possessing an effective-enough BS meter to quickly dismiss nonsensical and dangerous claims (from Gothard and those like him) that God intends for male authoritarians (pastors, husbands, fathers) to lord over others — destroying their value and freedom and setting them up for victimhood.

After sharing these thoughts in an online column for Good Faith Media, right after the docuseries was aired, I received helpful feedback.

## RESPONSES

Two friends, both women, explained that they were discouraged in their youth from forming a healthy sense of discernment.

"We were taught to be fearful of any idea that was different from what we were taught," said one who grew up in Independent Baptist fundamentalism. "We were told that these ideas would seem logical and appealing, but it would just be Satan appearing as an 'angel of light' trying to deceive us."

While not specifically instructed by Gothard, she said his "umbrella illustration" — showing Christ having authority over

men, men over women, and women over children — was very familiar.

"I'm glad the series pointed out that those teachings were more widespread than just one fringe organization," she added.

Another woman was raised outside of strict fundamentalism but recalls being taught restrictive roles for women. She points more to the influence of James Dobson of Focus on the Family.

"It was still authoritarian and legalist as well as patriarchal," she said. "I did not learn any discernment. In fact, I was taught that, as a girl, my judgment would be poor and that I always needed 'protection' — to be overseen."

Being taught not to trust her own feelings, she added, "definitely left me open to choosing relationships with authoritarians and narcissists — which I did. It took years to open my eyes to the problems and the patterns."

## LARGE TASK

Such patterns are seen throughout the docuseries as Gothard made divine claims of male authority that empowered men — like Jim Bob Duggar, patriarch of the expansive clan and former Arkansas State Representative — to embrace an unchecked role of dominance in which abuse often grows and is concealed.

Churches and related organizations have a large task before them in dismantling these perversions of the Christian faith — based on biblical and theological malpractice — and assert the expressions of human equality as taught by Jesus in words and deeds.

Equipping young persons (and all others) with their God-given freedom and responsibility for decision making is theologically correct, spiritually enhancing and emotionally healthy.

At the least, we need to encourage and empower enough discernment that anyone can see that evil forces are more likely found in human claims of divine authority than in a kid's pudgy-faced doll.

In an effort to protect vulnerable people, I and others will keep challenging these abuses until they are gone. **NFJ**

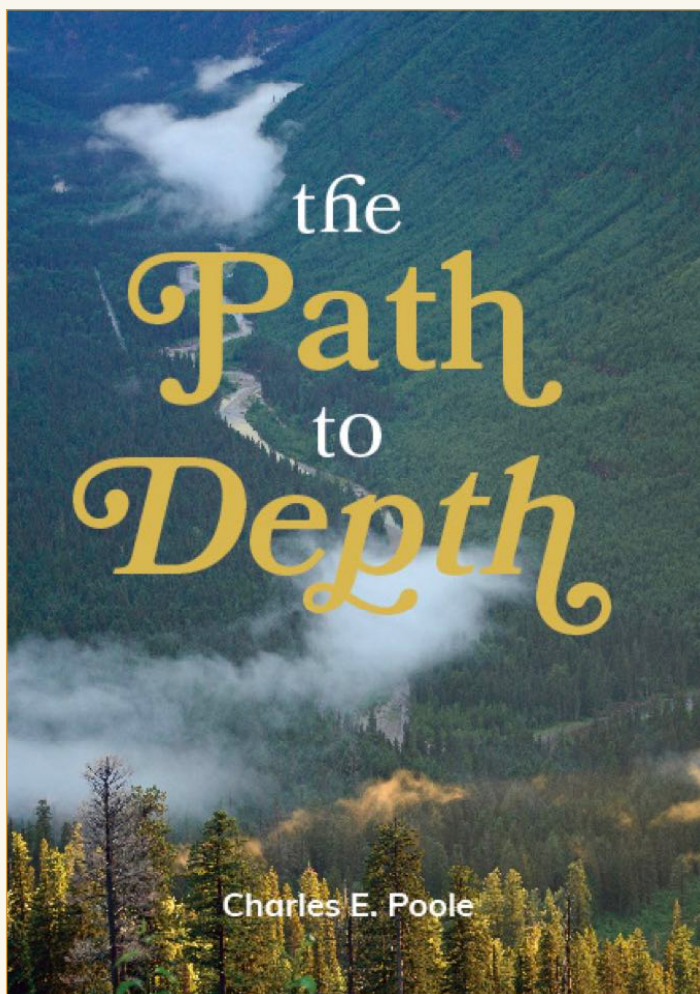
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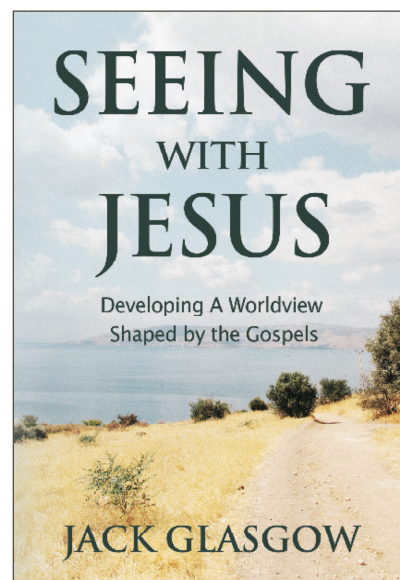
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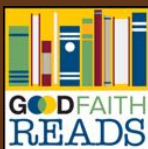


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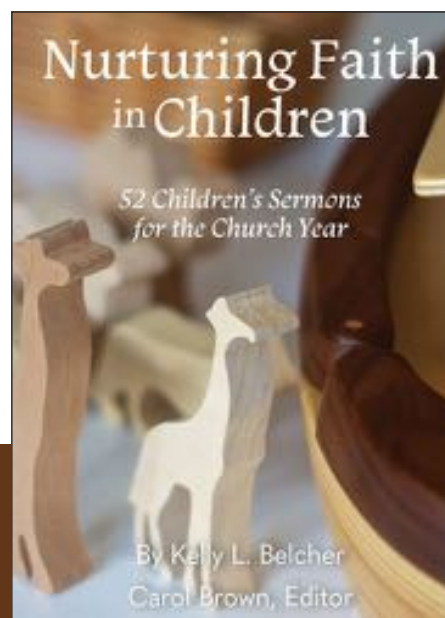
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# FACING CHANGE

For many, Kay Shurden is trusted teacher, wise counsel

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

“We grew up with one set of rules and then the rules changed,” said Kay Wilson Shurden, who has navigated and assisted others through the shifting expectations of women over several decades.

She long carried out “a two-prong job that I really enjoyed” of serving as a ground-breaking marriage and family therapist while teaching others those skills through Mercer University School of Medicine.

She reached more broadly as a teacher and church leader — and for 12 years through writing the column “Family Matters” for *The Macon Telegraph*.

Her writing and editing include two recent books, one in which several marriage and family therapists whom she helped train tell of their personal experiences that led them to careers in helping others.

*Behind Our Therapy Doors: 300 Plus Years of Clinical Mental Health Experience* (2022, Parson’s Porch), is co-edited with Barbara Ann Newton,

Another is *When God Whispers: Stories of Journey Told by Baptist Women Called to Ministry* (2022, Smyth & Helwys), co-edited with Kathy Manis Findley.

## EARLY YEARS

Not only has Kay studied and taught about the various shifts in women’s roles but has experienced those changes firsthand.

Born in Greenville, Miss., in 1937, she grew up in a time and place where her academic aspirations and vocational experiences would not have been the norm for



women. However, some social expectations weren’t the same for everyone.

“We grew up in a dancing town, except for the Baptists,” said Kay, whose Methodist upbringing allowed for the rhythmic movement forbidden by the socially stricter denomination.

Her parents were suspicious enough of Baptists that they didn’t consider Baptist colleges to be options for their daughter. Kay attended Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga., two years before transferring briefly to Millsaps College in Jackson, Miss.

It was not until her marriage to Walter (Buddy) Shurden, a recently converted and called preacher boy who transferred from a state school to Baptist-related Mississippi College, did she cross the denominational line her family feared.

“He was a senior and I was a junior,” said Kay of their wedding on Dec. 22,

1957. “We were both 20 years old when we married.”

Her academic stirrings and broadening understandings would lead her to pursue opportunities many women of that era didn’t even consider.

## MOVES

The Shurdens spent the 1960s in Louisiana — with a brief time in Ontario, Canada. Teaching experience, a master’s in English literature and three children accompanied a move to Jefferson City, Tenn., at the end of the decade.

There Kay taught in the education department of Carson-Newman College (now University) for seven years. She earned a Doctor of Education degree from the University of Tennessee in 1976, writing her dissertation on “Images of women in adolescent literature.”

Moving to Louisville, Ky., that same year, Kay taught high school English along with some other classes at nearby colleges.

“I was teaching a class in the evening called ‘New Horizons’ at Bellarmine College,” she said. “It was for women who had raised their children and were asking, ‘What am I going to do that makes a difference in the world?’”

“We were talking about the rest of their lives,” she added. “We were doing interest inventories and things like that.”

Many of the women raising these questions and making those changes, she said, were having difficulties in their families.

“They’d come to class and say, ‘My husband said that’s fine, honey, but make sure you do the laundry, and that supper is on the table at six.’”

Their anger at these limited, prescribed roles, she said, “was just going up through the roof.”

## NEW FIELD

An unexpected opportunity arose when Kay learned of “a new field called family therapy.”

Buddy had invited pastoral care pioneer Wayne Oates to speak to his classes at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Oates had taught at the seminary before taking a position at the University of Louisville Hospital.

Because of her interest in counseling, Kay asked to join them for lunch. She shared about the women in her class who were struggling.

“Wayne said, ‘Kay there’s this new field called family therapy — and it deals with difficulties just like what you are talking about,’” she recalled. “It tries to look at the family as a system that has roles and rules and how those can change without the marriage breaking apart.”

Kay was intrigued since she was hearing of marriages that were breaking apart.

“I was teaching high school and quit that job and started studying with Wayne.”

While Oates introduced her to this new discipline, she noted how it contrasted with his expertise in pastoral counseling that focuses on the individual who comes for help.

“The whole idea about family systems is that you don’t take sides,” she said. “You are there for everybody in the system, including the children.”

Her three years of study with Oates led to membership in the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapists.

## ROLES

Some families find it hard to think of changing roles — beyond set patterns, said Kay. Adding that it is necessary for growth.

“You don’t just live a role in your life; you are a person with hopes and dreams,” she said. “You may fit the role in some ways and in some ways you don’t.”

“It teaches you flexibility in a family,” she said of understanding these systems. “That’s very appealing to me.”

Studying with a feminist scholar as part of her doctoral work earlier at the

University of Tennessee had reinforced the need for such flexibility.

“She talked about the fact that girls, when they go through the stage of puberty, were being taught to look for a man who has similar interests — but not to take their own interests too seriously,” Kay recalled.

The cultural message being generated, she said, was to “be attractive and alluring.”

However, individual and shared interests are important to relationships — along with a supportive role, she added. It was a shared sense of calling to ministry and mission that brought the Shurdens together 65 years ago.

Kay traced the roots in which her field emerged.

“[Marriage and family therapy] became a discipline when men came back from the second world war and their wives had positions of leadership in the family and in the job market,” she said.

“These men came back in wanting to reinstate their authority and it caused a lot of disturbance,” she said. “So these families were breaking up.”

Psychiatrists were trained to talk to one person and to go deeply into the psyche of that person, she said. But no one was dealing with the larger social dynamics.

“Family therapy was started by psychiatrists who were pretty cognizant that something else was going on here that was larger than just the individual. So we moved to more of a social context.”

As family therapy emerged and expanded in the 1950s and ’60s, it addressed the question: “How do you help these people do what they feel gifted to do in life — and feel fulfilled — and not just filling a role?”

She answered her question: “You listen to people’s stories and get them to talk about what they are good at and where they can find a place to use those gifts — and you bring the family in if you can.”

## SYSTEMS

Her two-prong career came into focus more clearly after moving to Macon, Ga., when she and Buddy joined the Mercer University faculty.

The medical school, she noted, used a bio-social model of illness so that physicians would understand the emotional role illness plays in families.

“To not just treat the illness but the system in which they deal with the illness,” she explained. “Asking how this illness will affect people in the family.”

She said of the students: “It would be helpful for these women and men to understand the dynamics in families.”

Kay began sitting in on small-group learning of about eight to 10 medical students to address these issues. “It was a very interesting way to teach, and I learned a lot too.”

Mary Anne Armour, who had come to Mercer just ahead of the Shurdens, expressed interest in starting a program in marriage and family therapy. It began in the school of continuing education before moving to the medical school — eventually with a satellite program in Atlanta.

“We trained a whole bunch of therapists,” said Kay. “And hopefully had some influence on physicians.”

## CHANGE

“The goal in family therapy is to help people to be independent in terms of pursuing the things that make life worth living,” said Kay, “while at the same time maintaining the relationship. The key is interdependence.”

“You have to know yourself pretty well to do that,” she added. “You have to recognize that the other person has the same needs you do.”

“It’s OK to be who you are, but it’s OK to be in a relationship and support the other person.”

Often people come into marriage counseling when it’s too late, said Kay.

“There are already trenches dug and people have been hurt enough that they don’t want to extend themselves any further.”

Yet she didn’t find her work to be discouraging because, at other times, “people will come in and say, ‘I know there’s a way to deal with this problem; help me here.’”

When people come in with some hope, she said, you latch onto it.

Teaching the Enneagram is a way in retirement that Kay continues with helping people to understand themselves and their ways of relating to others.

“The Enneagram says we grew up in a family that was basically telling us who we should be. They treated us a certain way with certain aspirations for us.”

To survive in the family, those expectations were often met, she said. “But experiences in life change us.”

One’s personality type, however, remains the “basic security point,” she said — noting that she is a type two.

“I’m a helper,” she said. “When all else fails, I try to help because that’s secure to me. But the Enneagram says you overdo what you do well.”

An awareness of one’s tendencies is needed to counter them.

“You can over-help or become codependent,” she explained, “doing things for people it would be better if they did it for themselves.”

Also, Kay said she was drawn to process theology, especially the work of John Cobb, many years ago.

“Process theology says there’s this mystery of life — a process in which every-

thing is changing,” she explained. “Nothing stays the same.”

“Being a therapist, you’ve got to count on that,” she added. “You’ve got to be able to change. Yet I know there are parts of us that don’t change.”

“So process theology says people are always coming up with new ideas and new experiences. And we have the chance to be on the side that brings about more fairness in the world — more things Jesus did — which is including people who’ve been excluded.”

“We have an opportunity to constantly recreate the world,” she said. “I just think that’s a powerful message.” **NFJ**

## Kay and What’s-his-name

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**K**ay Wilson was a student at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga., when a letter from a hometown friend in Greenville, Miss., brought startling news about another local teen.

“Buddy Shurden has become a Christian,” her friend wrote — adding, “He should have changed his name.”

“Buddy was a wild child,” said Kay laughingly of her husband of 65 years who became a respected preacher, teacher and church historian.

Recalling the start of their relationship, she said: “So I wrote him this pious letter welcoming him to the fold.”

The two Mississippi youngsters reconnected when Kay returned home for Christmas break.

“There was a revival at his church, Second Baptist in Greenville, and we went every night,” she recalled. “They passed around a box to put your gum in because anybody who came to seriously hear the gospel didn’t need to be chewing gum.”

A year later, the two married “against my mother’s wishes,” Kay recalled.

“She thought Buddy might wind up on the street corner preaching and that would

embarrass her,” said Kay. “But I thought I was marrying Billy Graham and we’d change the world.”

Indeed church life played a central role for the newlywed couple.

“The Sunday we married we got up that morning and went to the little church [where Buddy was pastor] and I taught Sunday School and he preached,” Kay recalled. “We came back and got married in my church, First Methodist [of Greenville]. Then we drove down to Mississippi College in Clinton [where they were students] and went to church that night. On our wedding night!”

Kay said it was two or three years before they went to a movie — one of many forbidden activities for those in the “Come ye out and be separate” mode.

Decades later, to make up for some of what they missed in Mississippi, the Shurdens took dance classes at Mercer.

Last year, the beloved couple moved to Maryville, Tenn., to be near one of their three adult children. Leaving Macon, Ga., after 40 years brought praise for Kay’s deep and lasting influences.

“She is a renaissance woman, whose understanding of people and life and theology makes her a gifted leader and counselor,” said longtime friend Joan Godsey. “She understands so much about being human, helping people get in touch with their inner life and providing insight-



ful guidance for multitudes of people whose lives she touched and upon whom she has left an indelible mark.”

More personally, she added: “She is my dearest friend who is always present whether I am traveling on smooth or jagged terrain. We have created much of our lives in one another’s company.”

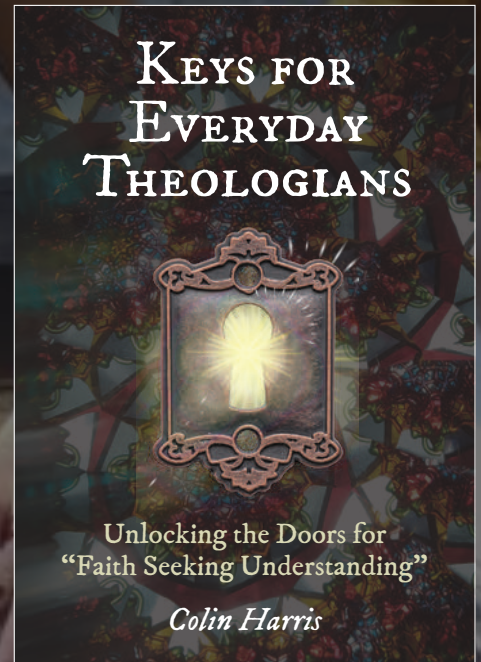
At a going-away gathering at First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Julie Long, a young minister, said Kay has modeled, particularly for women, the kind of person and the kind of Christian many seek to be.

“She uses her voice to teach and to advocate and to connect — but, even more, Kay leads by walking alongside,” said Julie. “She is such a collaborative leader who brings people into the circle in welcoming ways.” **NFJ**

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# Questions Christians ask scientists

What is the connection between the Genesis flood and wonders of geology?

BY PAUL WALLACE

Recently, my wife Elizabeth and I were driving across northern New Mexico. The open skies and long views told us we were far from the hills and tall trees of our home in northern Georgia.

But it was the roadrunner-and-coyote landscape that really grabbed our attention. The land was carved into mesas and canyons, buttes and pillars, spectacular formations in ochre and sepia, composed of innumerable layers of sedimentary rock.

The landscape put me in mind of evolution and plate tectonics and deep time. In a fit of wonder I mentioned to Elizabeth that many of the layers contained marine fossils, remnants of sea creatures that lived many millions of years ago when much of present-day New Mexico rested on the floor of oceans that no longer exist.

A few days earlier, two of our children were traveling through Kentucky and passed the exit for Ark Encounter, which is, according to its website, a “one-of-a-kind historically themed attraction.”

Centered on a full-scale replica of Noah’s ark and run by the creationist organization Answers in Genesis (AiG), the attraction also features zip lines, a petting zoo, and other fun activities for the family.

The point, however, is serious: the so-called Ark Park promotes the belief that the Bible is literally, historically true. This means that the entire globe was flooded exactly as described in Genesis 6–9. This happened, according to AiG, in 2,348 BCE.



The organization maintains that this single global flood is responsible for all the planet’s variegated geologic features, from the mesas of New Mexico and the canyons of Arizona to the valleys of Iceland and the fjords of Norway.

“The Flood of Noah’s day was a year-long global catastrophe that destroyed the pre-Flood world, reshaped the continents, buried billions of creatures, and laid down the rock layers,” states AiG’s website.

So, the flood not only shaped the face of the planet; it also created nearly all existing fossils.

Therefore, according to AiG, dinosaurs lived at the same time as humans, were extant at the time of the flood, and joined the other animals on the big boat. For this reason, model dinosaurs were included on the 510-foot-long ark.

In the world of AiG, dinosaurs died out after the flood due to human activity, climate changes and other factors.

The Ark Park welcomed its 10 millionth visitor in 2021 and is developing a major new attraction based on a replica of the Tower of Babel. Clearly the project has succeeded, and the literal-historical reading of scripture has been promoted in spectacular fashion.

But the fact remains: we have no scientific evidence that supports any of AiG’s claims, and we have a mountain of scientific evidence that contradicts it.

For example, the global flood idea does not account for differing rates of erosion. If all land is the same age, how can the erosion of the Appalachian Mountains be so much further advanced than that of the Rockies?

Also, the physics that leads us to believe that many rocks are millions of years old must be flawed if the flood geology is correct, yet we have no evidence of any such flaw.

Another question has to do with tectonic activity: How did the earth’s crust get broken up into distinct pieces?

AiG relies on a theory called “catastrophic plate tectonics,” a theory that contradicts virtually every successful geological theory and every careful geological observation, and which has no support in the scientific community.

Moreover, the weight of scientific evidence in favor of an ancient and evolving cosmos simply overwhelms the idea that the universe and everything in it is about 6,000 years old, a fundamental assumption of those who believe in a literal wooden ark.



But you don't need to understand this detailed evidence to doubt the factuality of the Genesis flood story.

After all, how *did* Noah build a 510-foot-long seaworthy vessel, capable of housing thousands of animals for an entire year, out of nothing but wood 4,700 years ago?

How *did* Noah fit all the animals on board? How *did* Noah feed and care for all the animals? What kinds of animals did Noah include, and how did today's millions of species come from Noah's animals?

AiG's answers to these questions, when taken seriously, strain credibility. But to merely *ask* these questions should be enough for any adult to begin to wonder about the historicity of this biblical story.

However, one reason for doubt stands above all the others: Why, if the planet is only about 6,000 years old, would the Creator make the earth appear to be billions of years old?

Why, if a single cataclysmic event 4,700 years ago laid down all fossils and shaped the continents, would the Creator form the world to look — in great detail — like these processes took place gradually, slowly, over many millions of years?

Why, if all living animals are descended from those few thousand onboard the ark, would God have made the world's creatures to look as if they had evolved from a single ancestor that lived billions of years ago?

In other words, the greatest reason to reject the historicity of Noah's ark is theological.

Did God meticulously rig the cosmos in all its details to appear to be not just old in a vague kind of way, but also precisely 13.8 billion years old?

The levels of radioactivity in a *variety* of nuclides found in the earth and moon

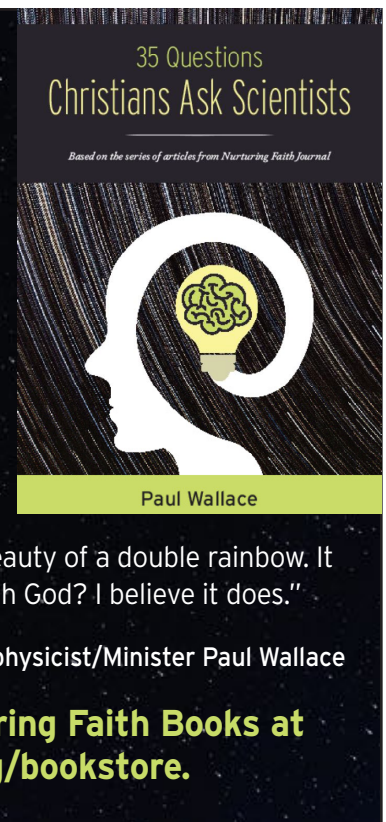
## 35 Questions Christians Ask Scientists

By Paul Wallace

"Drill deep into the heart of matter, and we do not bump into God. Peer outward to the edge of the big bang, and we do not find God. But what we do find is beauty, and plenty of it, all the way down and all the way out. Granted, this is not the obvious beauty of a double rainbow. It builds over time... But does it fill us with God? I believe it does."

—Astrophysicist/Minister Paul Wallace

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point *independently* to ages of 4.54 and 4.53 billion years (respectively). Why would God design the world to look this way unless it actually *is* this way?

Nuclear physics tells us that fossils have been laid down gradually over many millions of years, in such a way that a rational order can be found, and a self-consistent story be told. If this is completely wrong, then we must ask: For what reason would God manipulate the evidence so?

Any God who would coerce the universe in such a way cannot be trusted. That anti-rational agent of disorder would not deserve our devotion and trust.

That God roots for us to reject our own God-given capacities for reason, imagination and creativity. That God bears no resemblance to the Lord of life

and love and reason and wonder to whom the Bible ultimately points.

That God contradicts scripture in ways that *really* matter. Science is neither a conspiracy nor a liberal pressure group.

The scientific consensus on the formation of the earth and the origin of fossils was arrived at by scientists who profess Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism; who are non-religious; who are militant atheists; who adhere to every religious and philosophical tradition imaginable.

Yet despite their various backgrounds, they have all arrived at the same conclusion: the account of a global flood found in Genesis 6–9 did not happen as written. If it had, the world's geology would reveal it without ambiguity and scientists would say so. **NFJ**

**Paul Wallace** is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to [john@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:john@goodfaithmedia.org).

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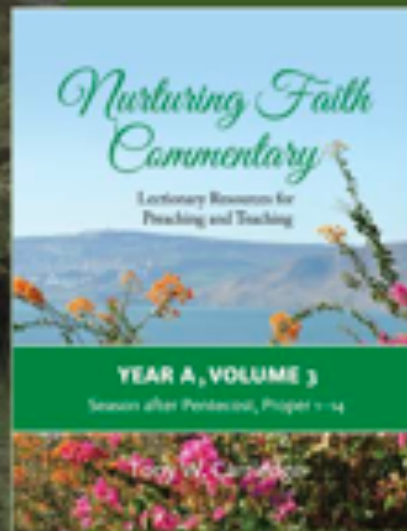
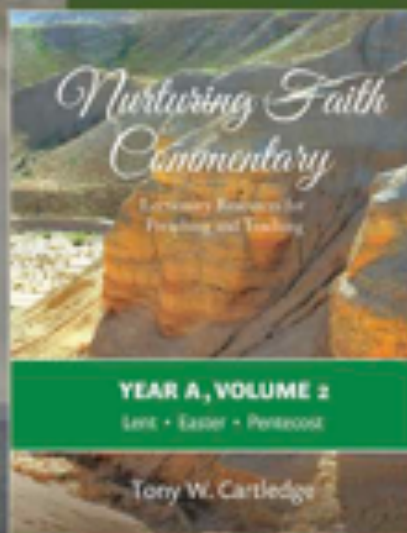
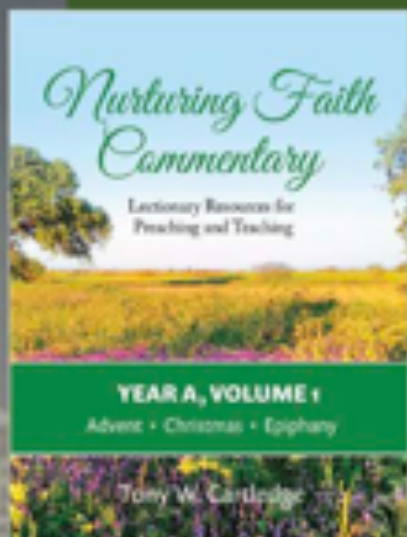


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