JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2024

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

Craig Nash named editor

goodfaithmedia.org

PUEBLO LIFE

Stories of spirituality and syncretism

SALEM REMINDERS

Persecution then and now

HAPPY TRAILS

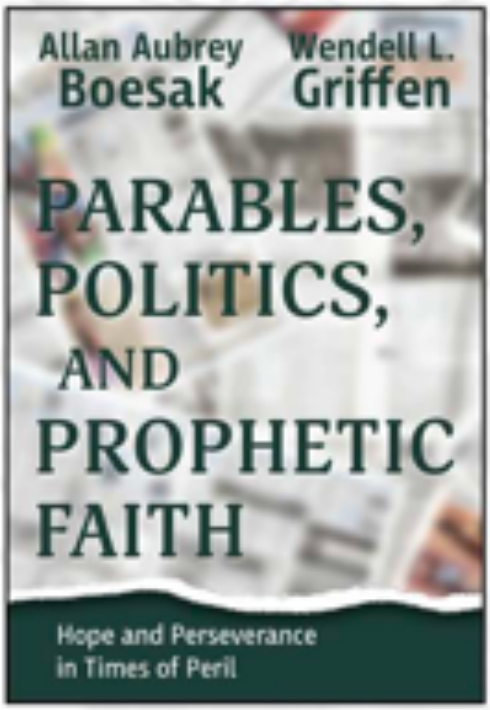
Riding out of West Yellowstone

A publication of Good Faith Media

Authored by South African civil rights hero Allan Boesak and nationally-known Arkansas judge Wendell Griffen—both also pastors—*Parables, Politics and Prophetic Faith* is a powerful and impassioned call for global justice in our troubled 21st century world.

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright–pastor emeritus of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago–calls Boesak and Griffen's work a "powerful volume ... masterfully" crafted.

With "prophetic resplendency," Dr. Forrest Harris–president of American Baptist College and the Kelly Miller Smith Center for Black Church Studies–says, the authors "walk the reader through the emptiness of government without justice, exposing untruth" and "highlighting oppressive habits of regimes." This is a book destined to be a classic.



About the Authors:

Allan Aubrey Boesak

is a South African Black liberation theologian, global human rights activist, professor emeritus of Black Liberation Ethics at the University of Pretoria, and the Chair of the Sankofa Institute for Pan African Leadership and Prophetic Ministry.

Wendell Griffen

is the Pastor of New Millennium Church of Little Rock, Arkansas, a retired Arkansas jurist with a quarter century of experience as a state court appellate and trial judge, co-chair of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference.

Available at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore.

Editor's Letter

Success in a relay race depends on more than speed. Highly crucial is the smooth handoff of the baton from one runner to the next.

This issue of the journal represents my handing off the editorial responsibilities I've long grasped to Craig Nash. You can read about Craig on page 4 and read his first editorial on page 7.

After running nearly 24 laps, I look forward to someone with fresher legs picking up the pace. And I'll be cheering from the sidelines.

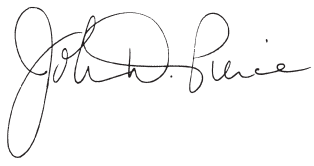
While dated January–February 2024, this issue — the last under my direction — was put together in 2023. It has much to offer. In-house historian Bruce Gourley and I followed the good lead of friend Fred Heifner to explore the shaping religious and cultural influences of Puebloan people in the southwestern U.S. Those image-driven stories begin on page 8.

From an earlier story-fetching trip, I assess what is and isn't persecution by looking to the lesson-bearing tragedies known as the Salem Witch Trials.

Also, a worthy tribute is paid to Benny McCracken for his impactful 25-year ministry in the unique town of West Yellowstone, Montana.

Paul Wallace wraps up a great run with his final "Questions Christians Ask Scientists" column. Thanks to Paul for stimulating our thinking over the recent years. His book, *35 Questions Christians Ask Scientists*, is drawn from his journal articles.

There are many thoughtful columns in this issue and a chance for me to share a few last words. So please read on.



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Executive Editor

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OUR MISSION

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

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

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

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

Craig Nash tapped as senior editor by Good Faith Media

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THOUGHTS

Cover photo by John D. Pierce. A ladder leads to a *kiva* — a ceremonial gathering place — on the ancient mesa-topped Acoma Pueblo. Related stories begin on page 8.

FEATURES

NEW EDITOR

Craig Nash tapped as senior editor by Good Faith Media

Craig Nash has been named senior editor at Good Faith Media. In his new role, he will manage digital and print content for the organization.

Nash joins the staff after an extensive search and brings considerable experience in media and communications. He will be responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of GFM's publications.

"During a time when media and religious institutions are either fading away or fighting for survival by manipulating the worst fears of their audience, Good Faith Media is leaning into a different narrative. Its team consists of truth-tellers who believe good faith is curious, expansive and inclusive," said Nash. "They believe justice matters."

"I am incredibly humbled to join this team and follow in the paths of Zach Dawes Jr., John Pierce and others who have

contributed to the legacy of GFM," he said. "There is always more to tell, and I am eager to start telling."

Dawes, previously the manager and editor for news and opinion, followed a call earlier this year into a career in the classroom. Pierce, after more than two decades at the helm of GFM's *Nurturing Faith Journal*, set his retirement for the end of 2023.

Nash is a graduate of East Texas Baptist University and Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. He grew up in Chandler, Texas, and has lived in Waco since 2000.

Nash previously served as the media and communications director for the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty.

"Craig brings an enthusiastic and creative energy to Good Faith Media," said GFM's CEO Mitch Randall. "His attention to faith, justice and detail extends GFM's commitment to providing the very best reflections and resources at the intersection of faith and culture. We are extremely excited for him to join the team."

Nash's tenure with GFM began on Oct. 23, 2023 in order to assume direction of the online content and to allow for an overlapping time in preparation for assuming the journal's editorship. NFJ

Forever grateful for editor's work

By Lynelle Mason

I want to share what it means to be a writer who has had the privilege of working with John Pierce as my editor.

In 2011 he served as the interim pastor of First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tenn., where I am a member. During that time, I initiated a private meeting with him.

We began by exchanging a few mutual memories gleaned from the 17-plus years my husband Claude Mason served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Rossville, Ga., as well as the times he was interim pastor at Johnny's home church, Boynton Baptist in Ringgold, Ga.

Johnny asked why I had moved my membership to First Baptist of Chattanooga. I explained that since the late 1970s I had increasingly become alarmed over the rise of fundamentalism in the Southern Baptist Convention.

In 1985 I attended my first Southern Baptist Convention meeting, in Dallas, Texas. I left that convention brokenhearted and with a stack of six books. All the way from Dallas to Rossville I read and made notes on my tiny Texas Instruments version of a computer.

I was perturbed over the rewriting of the Baptist Faith and Message statement, and the refusal to ordain women as ministers as well as the predominant battle cry the fundamentalists espoused: Scripture is inerrant!

No one at my church in Rossville seemed bothered over what had taken place in Dallas. I felt like I was someone whose house was on fire only to be handed, in a cavalier manner, a quart of water to extinguish the blaze.

In 1985 the Saturday church news page of the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* gave credence to my growing spiritual hungers. Ruth Robinson, a member of First Baptist Chattanooga, wrote for the newspaper and denounced fundamentalist tactics with fervor.

After spending 30 wonderful years as an elementary school teacher, mostly as a special education resource teacher, I retired in 1993. At that point I turned my attention to the caregiving of my spouse and creative writing.

In 1994 Claude died. I stayed at our church for four years, working in a variety of ways with children. On Feb. 8, 1998, I moved my church membership to First Baptist of Chattanooga, one of the wisest decisions of my life.

Meanwhile, I had started writing my memoir shortly after my husband's death. I wrote, rewrote, and started over many times, trying to decide what to include as well as what to omit. Concurrently, I flooded possible agents and editors as I tried in vain to find someone to publish my work.

Johnny put an end to my quest and told me he would work with me personally to perfect my submission. He also told me that Nurturing Faith was entering book publishing.

He set up a series of meetings with me at Rembrandt's Coffee House in Chattanooga when his travels as executive editor brought him to the area.

His advice to me was, "Tell your story and I'll help you format it into a way that will most appeal to readers."

I followed his advice and after numerous sessions at Rembrandt's and my new home at Alexian Village on Signal Mountain, we began the initial stages of publication.

I signed a contract, obtained endorsements, and began communications with copyeditor Jackie Riley whose work improved the book.

It was an exciting day when my box of books arrived in 2012. The staff at Alexian Village went overboard in helping me with an author's night event and other promotions. So did the staff and members of First Baptist of Chattanooga.

Since 2012, Nurturing Faith has published eight of my books. The entire staff has been excellent in supporting me through my 12 years of publishing with them, but Johnny was the one who was my greatest advocate.

I am also especially grateful for the ways in which he has enriched my daily life as I waffle in my journey of walking with Jesus. I feel Johnny is one of God's prophets for America during a season of hostile political unrest often clothed in pious religious rhetoric.

He boldly addresses controversial issues with empathy: women in ministry, gender issues, racial equality, migrants and, most recently, the rise of Christian nationalism. John Pierce's writings always emphasize the words and actions of Jesus.

And I would add that his devotion to the Atlanta Braves — and pulling for the Georgia Bulldogs football team — only enhances my love and admiration for him. Happy retirement, Johnny! Don't ever silence your voice. NFJ

—Lynelle Mason is a retired teacher who lives in Signal Mountain, Tenn. Among her eight books published by Nurturing Faith, two tell of her compelling life: *Tarnished Haloes, Open Hearts* (2012) and *My Inheritance* (2022).

WORTH REPEATING

"Remember this: secularism, the separation of church and state, was created to protect a minority of Christians from the majority of Christians."

—Theologian Michael Bird (Word from the Bird)

"The U.S. intelligence community has determined that domestic terrorism, rooted in white supremacy, is the greatest terrorist threat we face in the homeland — the greatest threat."

— President Joe Biden to Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law (Heather Cox Richardson)

"Doing so would be a win for people seeking asylum, a win for local communities, and a win for businesses and the economy."

— Fellowship Southwest statement advocating for the reduction of the 180-day period asylum seekers must wait before being able to work

"Most Christians ... come to church to reinforce what they've believed their entire lives. From their perspective, the job of the pastor is not to push them to grow, but to reassure them that they are already on the right track."

— Alexander Lang writing on "Why I left the church" (restorativefaith.org)

"This case always was about performative religion, and the special privileges evangelicals believe they are entitled to but are unwilling to give others."

— Mark Wingfield of Baptist News Global on the Washington State high school football coach, whose religious discrimination case was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, not returning to his job

"The perennial challenge with covering Christian nationalism is distinguishing more moderate commitments of 'ordinary evangelicals' from more extremist operatives, when they can be distinguished."

— Historian Kristin Du Mez

"[We] should focus on being a role model to the world by ensuring the institutional separation of church and state, which protects all of us."

— Amanda Tyler of the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty, testifying before a subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives

"Your love surpasses our distress, and your grace surpasses our worst choice. When anxiety arises, you reach with steadiness of hand to embrace our trembling souls."

— From one of his daily prayers posted on Facebook by Tommy McDearis, longtime pastor of Church on Main in Blacksburg, Va

Gifts in honor of retiring editor John D. Pierce were received from:

Tom and Judy Ginn of Winston-Salem, N.C.
Martha Hammett of Seneca, S.C.
Lynelle Mason of Signal Mountain, Tenn.
Jeff and Rebecca Mathis, Sylva, N.C.
Elizabeth Reese of Corbin, Ky.
—
Todd Heifner in honor of Kevin Heifner.

EDITORIAL

Keep Reading

By Craig Nash

Like many of my peers, credit for my early reading abilities belongs to *Sesame Street*.

Unlike any peers, I practiced those skills throughout my childhood and teen years on two publications that did not have young children or youth as their primary audience.

The first was the *Chandler & Brownsboro Statesman*, the weekly paper that covered news from rural communities in eastern Henderson County, Texas. Its content was largely centered on school and civic activities.

The publication also contained weekly columns by residents of smaller communities, reporting on activities and accomplishments of individuals, families and churches. These reports ranged from gossip to the mundane.

One memorable column came from the Concord community in the mid-1990s: "Bill and I sat down on our back porch this morning for coffee. We saw 21 Canadian geese land on our back property. They sat there for a while, then flew away. Spring must be coming."

As a young adult, I read those words with cynical disdain. Who cares? And who has time to count the geese? Now I see it as the poetry of someone who pays attention.

The second unconventional reading source for me as a young person was *The Baptist Standard*.

Copies of the newspaper — that reported and interpreted events from the life of Texas Baptist churches — would miraculously appear every couple of weeks on a table in the vestibule of First Baptist Church in Chandler, Texas.

As a lifelong chronic early-arriver, I would often show up at least a half-hour before Sunday School began and peruse articles in the *Standard*.

I was intrigued by stories from churches and other Baptist institutions and was fascinated with the idea that there was a larger community who believed, more or less, the same things I believed, and who worshipped in the same context.

Also, with this being the '80s and early '90s, I was exposed to the rumblings of seismic fractures within the Baptist community. I needed to know more, so I kept reading.

Yes, I am very aware of how odd this was for a 9-year-old kid. But as I got older, my world expanded.

I began to read stories from beyond eastern Henderson County and Baptist churches in Texas. I wanted to know the people and communities that had been silenced by these publications. So I kept reading.

For example, Moore Station is a community near where I grew up that was founded after emancipation by formerly enslaved farmers. Since its inception, the population has consisted primarily of those who have been racialized as "Black."

Before the small school districts in the area consolidated, Moore Station had its own school. It has continued to have thriving churches and civic organizations. What it never had, though, was consistent representation in the *Statesman*.

Just as I learned about the stories that were silenced, I also learned that different streams flowed into the rivers of Christian faith, and different rivers flowed into the ocean of the Divine. Much of the past few years of my life has been spent seeking out guides to teach me about these different pathways, in hopes of understanding my own just a little more fully.

I remain a product of eastern Henderson County and of the Baptist churches and institutions that shaped me. Though my accent is gone, I will always call the last meal of the day "supper," and I spend a good amount of my grown-up time sitting in my Baptist church committee meetings.

At the same time, my eyes are fixed on broader horizons of the world and of faith.

Given this context, it should not surprise you that I am humbled and beyond excited to be assuming the role of senior editor at Good Faith Media. In managing, editing and curating the daily content for goodfaithmedia.org, and in the publication of *Nurturing Faith Journal*, I hope to bring this dual sense of rootedness and exploration to the stories we share.

In this role, I will always be mindful of the shoulders I stand on as I seek to elevate and expand the legacy of the communities and institutions that make up the Good Faith Media ecosystem.

I am especially grateful for the decades of service that John Pierce has dedicated to this publication. If I can leave a fraction of the legacy that he has left to Nurturing Faith, I will have considered my contributions a success.

I am also mindful that while many of you are reading these words on a screen, others are holding a physical copy of this journal in their hands, reading about people of good faith who are living the call of Micah 6:8 to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.

It is even possible that you may be a child standing at a table in the vestibule of your church, scanning these pages while waiting for Sunday School to start. If that is you, please know there is always more to tell. Keep reading. NFJ

FASCINATION & EDUCATION

Professor shares 'crown jewels' of Puebloan culture

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Since 1996, Fred Heifner has taught anthropology, philosophy and religion courses at Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tenn. His campus office — displaying pottery and other art — reflects his fascination with the Puebloan culture found primarily in New Mexico.

For the active, octogenarian professor to tell the whole story requires a confession.

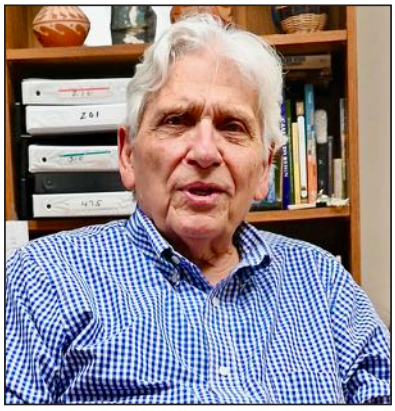
For 22 years Heifner worked for the Nashville-based Baptist Sunday School Board (now Lifeway Christian Resources) that once owned large conference centers at Ridgecrest, N.C. and Glorieta, N.M.

"I used to do conferences at Glorieta every year," said Heifner. "I would slip away sometime, and over the years became acquainted with where the pueblos were."

PUEBLOS

There are 19 pueblos (villages) in New Mexico — each home to a sovereign nation. They vary in size, accessibility and openness to visitors.

Histories of the various tribes have similarities and differences. Yet each displays remarkable ingenuity in the face of colonizing forces and harsh landscapes.



Professor Fred Heifner has taken hundreds of students from Tennessee to New Mexico to explore the culture of the Puebloan people.

Remains of impressive buildings erected centuries ago can be found in various places around New Mexico — and into southern Colorado at Mesa Verde National Park where magnificent cliff dwellings are well preserved.

The Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque provides understanding and guidance for those interested in learning about the Pueblo people of the past and present.

Pueblo core values, the center explains, include love, respect, compassion, faith, understanding, spirituality, balance, peace and empathy.

In turn, guests are expected to reflect such sensitivities. Curiosity and questions are expected; prying and disrespect for privacy are not.

And learning what the Pueblo people consider sacred allows for responding appropriately to ceremonial observances and engaging in conversation.

COURSE

Heifner's love and knowledge of Pueblo culture led him to offer a travel-based course titled "Pueblos, cultures and canyons of New Mexico." It was so popular that he repeated it year after year until the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown.

"Historically, it has been the favorite course of students who participated in it," said Heifner.

He counts more than 700 Cumberland students who've joined him on van rides around the dusty and delicious pathways of New Mexico.

"Many students haven't been west of the Mississippi River," said Heifner. "I want them to experience a world different than they are used to."

The itinerary has varied over the many years, he noted. There are always new discoveries, though Heifner admits to "knowing the area like the back of my hand."

The May term course gives students a first-hand encounter with the subject matter Heifner seeks to convey in the classroom.

"The underlying concept in my anthropology classes is that the culture we assume is normative is not," he said.

Visits include sites preserved by the National Park Service in addition to some

An Acoma Pueblo wedding vase is among the pottery and art in Fred Heifner's office at Cumberland University. Below: Traditional dance is shared with visitors to Sky City Cultural Center at Acoma Pueblo.

of the scattered pueblos — with Heifner knowing the ones most open to visitors.

He prepares the students by dispelling myths and generalizations about Native Americans — along with teaching them the sensitivities they need.

It's common, Heifner noted, for him to hear from alumni who recall how eye-opening and helpful their experience in New Mexico has been to them.

CROWN JEWELS

Heifner has compiled his own "best of" list for traveling to the pueblos of New Mexico whether leading a class or on a personal visit.

"I found Acoma to be very, very open," he said of the pueblo about 60 miles west of Albuquerque.

The Sky City Cultural Center there offers the impressive Haak'u Museum and tours of the mesa-top village. With its roots going back to 1150 CE, Acoma Pueblo is considered by some to be the oldest continuously inhabited community in North America.

A few elected caretakers live each year in the historic village where homes do not have electricity or running water. Other Acoma Pueblo tribe members gladly live in more modern homes on the vast and rugged land.

Other preferred stops on Heifner's visits include the "crown jewel" of Spanish adobe church architecture (Santuario de Chimayo) and a long, bumpy drive into Chaco Canyon.

"Chaco Canyon was a major center of ancestral Puebloan culture between 850 and 1250," said Heifner.

The now remote Pueblo was a hub of ceremony, trade and administration for the Four Corners area — which now links New Mexico with Colorado, Arizona and Utah.

Chaco Culture National Historical Park preserves significant ruins and tells the impressive stories of architecture, art and astronomy.

Heifner notes the significance of places he frequents including Bandelier National Monument that allows for ladder-climbing peeks into ancient cliff dwellings and Pecos National Historical Park — which preserves Pueblo and Pecos cultural remains.

JOSEPHINE

Heifner's suggested "crown jewels" aren't all about artifacts and ancient ruins — or even the best places to find pottery and jewelry.

"One year I read in a magazine that if you've not eaten a tamale by Josephine, you've not been to New Mexico," Heifner recalled. So, he went in pursuit of this crown jewel.

At Santo Domingo — a traditional pueblo also known as Kewa Pueblo — Heifner and his wife Joann met Josephine and struck up a good relationship.

"She was very hospitable," he said. "She invited us to come back at Christmas and 'watch us dance for the baby Jesus.'"

Christmas is one of the pueblo's two major celebrations — the other being the annual Feast Day on August 4 when more than 1,000 Kewa Pueblos participate in the historic and colorful Corn Dance.

But back to the tamales: "They were a work of art."

Invited to Josephine's home, the Heifner family enjoyed the hospitality and culinary delights so much that Fred mentioned he would like for his students to have such an experience.

"Sure," said Josephine — who welcomed his class into her home the next spring.

Josephine's home, Heifner said, is also significant in that the governors of the 19 pueblos in New Mexico hold their meetings there.

While research and planning have their place, Heifner noted that "over the years we've just stumbled into some good things."

LESSONS

Heifner is even more fascinated now by Puebloan people and culture than when he first slipped away from Baptist meetings to explore this vastly different world.

Yet it has not been enough to simply keep these meaningful encounters to himself. He likes to share.

Some of the best education is rooted in experiences beyond books and lectures. It's found in smelling the air, tasting the food and talking with the people.

That certainly applies to understanding and gaining wisdom from those different from us — yet perhaps less different at the most basic human levels than assumed.

Such lessons flow from visits to the historic sites and current homes of the Pueblo people — when following the veteran professor's wise advice.

"You stay low-key and don't go probing," he said. "Be respectful and await invitations and opportunities."

And buy some pottery. NFJ

THE KIVA & THE VATICAN

Puebloans of the Southwest survived, co-opted Catholic colonization

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Standing mere inches from sure death, a young Puebloan man named Jordan was completely at ease. He spoke passionately and vividly of his ancestral heritage — seemingly unconcerned that a mere step backward would have plunged him into a vast canyon.

On a street in the Acoma pueblo, a white ladder signifies the presence of a kiva.

It was easy to marvel at both the passion and courage of the young guide who led us into these sacred, historic and steep spaces.

Standing around a *kiva* — a large, sacred circular underground room — inside a thousand-year-old cliff dwelling, we listened intently as the Mesa Verde National Park intern spoke of the centrality of kivas past and present in his Native culture.

Reaching into his audience's own cultural understandings, he said of the kiva: "Imagine your church, living room and courthouse in one space."

A dozen or so feet deep with a fire pit in the center, the still intact open-air structure of stone — traditionally covered with a wooden roof now long gone — represented the connection between Puebloan people and the spirit world.

"Pueblo" is Spanish for "village." Some 400 years ago Spanish conquistadors by the directive of the Roman Catholic Church invaded the American Southwest, abusing, subjugating and forcefully Christianizing the Native people in the region.

The invaders succeeded in colonizing present-day New Mexico, but not so in their efforts to strip away Puebloan spirituality. Today 19 sovereign nations of Native peoples in the state retain their Puebloan culture and spirituality, even while many also lay claim to elements of Christianity.

EMPIRES

Long ago, some 6,000 miles and the Atlantic Ocean separated two empires unaware of the other. Both constructed large and magnificent buildings, radiated outward from a religious and cultural center, developed far-reaching economic networks and waged wars for control of lands and resources.

Both were governed by politicians, priests and secret societies. In other ways the two empires, one European and the other in the North American Southwest, were quite different.

In Europe, powerful kings and popes crafted laws grounded upon strict Christian theology, mandating the worship of the one true God and adherence to hierarchical social and cultural norms favorable to the elite.

Magnificent churches and castles were constructed — using forced labor — across the centuries. Ordinary citizens benefited little from these dominant religious, economic and cultural achievements.

In contrast, chiefs and spiritual leaders of the North American Southwest perceived themselves as part of a complex system of spirituality in which objects, places, creatures and ancestors each possess a distinct spiritual essence.

More horizontal than vertical, the social and cultural norms of this empire were rooted in family clans. Most people worked as laborers in the building of practical, cultural and spiritual structures complementing the natural landscape and designed to benefit ordinary folk.

The two empires — the European one guided by the Roman Catholic Church in the Vatican and the North American empire in the Southwest, centered in hundreds of family clan kivas — existed independently of one another for some thousand years.

During this time, however, the Roman Catholic pope by decree of the doctrine of "papal supremacy" exercised authority over ecclesiastic privileges, the

actions of monarchs, and monarchical successions.

The Catholic Church and the Roman Empire were effectively one, the Church using "the language, terminology and structure of the Roman Empire," as one website in Rome devoted to the Vatican summarizes. A singular religious belief system was coerced by creed and enforced by sword — with freedom of religion forbidden.

Well documented and well known is the history of Catholicism's historical dominance over Europe from the fourth through 15th centuries. Far less known is the spiritual-centric story of the Native peoples of the North American Southwest during the same time.

VERY COMPLEX

In the Four Corners Region (where New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona and Utah touch in the U.S. today), Native people have been present for some 12,000 years — about 9,000 years prior to Rome's founding.

Those now referred to as Puebloans emerged in this region by about 500 CE, transitioning from a traditional nomadic lifestyle into settled agricultural communities supplemented by hunting.

Initially building underground "pit houses," they established sizable villages. Within a few centuries Pueblo tribes moved out of the pit houses and constructed above-ground adobe structures similar to modern-day Puebloan communities.

Puebloans had long held to a complex religious system centered on the belief in ancestral spirits. Upon settling in permanent residences occupied by family clans they constructed kivas, anchoring themselves to the underground spirit world.

While seeking to explain the kivas in ways modern visitors might somewhat understand, Jordan, the young intern in Mesa Verde, would only say that Pueblo religion itself is "very complex." A bit more information is available at the website nativehope.org — describing Pueblo religion as "a complex spiritual belief system in which 'hundreds of divine beings act as intermediaries between humans and God.'"

These supernatural beings — known as *Kachinas* — are ancestral spirits who live part of the year in the underworld with the gods, and at other times with their descendants on earth.

Sometimes these spirits enter the bodies of dancers during kiva ceremonies. If welcomed and respected, good derives from the interaction.

Other spirits also exist, representative of the natural world — rain, crops, animals, stars and more. And like other Native people, Pueblo tribes have creation myths often inclusive of a god associated with the sun.

For more than a millennium now, kivas by the hundreds if not thousands have each served, in effect, as a tiny Vatican of sorts minus a pope. Around a fire beneath the ground in each kiva a family clan connects with the spirits of their ancestors through religious rituals, administers governance, and arrives at decisions.

CHACO

From kivas in what is now known as Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico, a massive empire arose by about 850 CE. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization describes it as an "urban ceremonial centre that is unlike anything constructed before or since."

Chaco Canyon, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is located in a valley surrounded by cliffs. As many as 25,000 people populated the valley, some living in "Great Houses" towering four to five stories high — the tallest buildings in the present-day U.S. until the late 1800s — and housing 800 residents.

Chaco inhabitants turned the arid valley floor into an agricultural oasis — constructing irrigation systems and creating a large network of roads reaching distances as far as 400 miles. In the canyon they built structures meticulously aligned with the sun, moon and the constellation Orion.

Southwestern North America's equivalent to Rome was Chaco Canyon — minus central theological doctrine and advanced architecture requiring metal implements.

As Chaco soared in power and influence, for reasons not entirely known — though drought likely played a role — the population of Mesa Verde to the north (in present-day Colorado) shrank.

Many Puebloans atop the mesa moved southward to then-thriving Chaco Canyon. But by 930 CE the migration reversed, with Mesa Verde thriving once again and within a few centuries reaching its peak. Returnees brought knowledge of Chaco culture with them.

"The presence of Chaco-style pottery vessels, macaw-feather sashes, and copper bells at some sites indicates that the Pueblo people of the Mesa Verde region were part of a vast trading network that included not only Chaco Canyon but much more distant locations in Mexico as well," some Mesa Verde region archaeologists determined.

Meanwhile, southward of Mesa Verde and Chaco — and about 60 miles west of present-day Albuquerque, New Mexico — another tribe of Puebloan people established a notable presence.

Evolving about 1150 CE into a well-established village atop a towering and almost impregnable mesa, the Acoma Puebloans and their "Sky City" are often recognized today as the oldest known continuously inhabited community in North America.

DISPERSION

Archaeologists do not yet know the full story, but by about 1200 CE the Puebloans of once mighty Chaco Canyon had deserted their enormous houses and extensive roads. Long periods of drought likely contributed to the abandonment of the great civilization, and perhaps conflicts with other tribes also played a role.

As Chaco Canyon's population emptied out, Mesa Verde Puebloans,

Above: Acoma's historic San Estévan del Rey Mission Church. Left: A reproduction of an original ladder in a cliff house in Mesa Verde National Park

amid the peak of their influence, left their mesa-top homes and constructed, all told, some 600 cliff dwellings.

A century later, they once again moved, abandoning their cliff houses and most belongings to move southward. Mesa Verde National Park, created in 1906 during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, protects the mesa-top structures as well as the cliff houses in which Mesa Verde people once lived.

Mystery surrounds both the purpose of the cliff dwellings and the briefness of their occupation. Did they construct homes in cliff alcoves as a defensive measure? Were there violent clashes between different Puebloan peoples?

A recent visit to several of the long abandoned and now publicly accessible Mesa Verde cliff communities required climbing steep ladders and squeezing through narrow passageways in the sandstone rock.

From viewpoints across the canyon one can see the amazing intricacies of the cliff dwellings built more than a millennium ago: the stonework, the windows, the plazas.

Yet when standing inside the dwellings, the accomplishments of Mesa Verde people felt so intimate as to be overwhelming.

Jordan, the young Mesa Verde guide, reached the point in his narrative where his ancestral people had departed the cliffs and the mesa. Wanting a better understanding of why his ancestors had left, he told of asking one of his tribal elders: "What more can you tell me?"

Jordan said the elder, "after thinking about it for a while," responded that the abandonment of the cliff dwellings had been "for you and others in the future." A better future had meant moving to a better place.

Jordan had grown up participating in his family clan's kiva ceremonies. From his own experiences and his tribe's generational stories, he reconstructed what likely happened in that sacred below-ground space in the 12th century.

Around a fire in their kiva, the family clan had debated whether or not to leave. Some wanted to; others hesitated. Eventually a community decision was reached: they would seek a new home. It was a time of sadness and anticipation.

Taking only what they could carry and abandoning the rest — furniture, pottery, kiva — they crawled one by one through the small, 18-inch-wide tunnel that was the only passageway between the cliff dwelling below and the mesa top above.

After finishing his story of the past, he led us to that same tunnel, now a millennium old and still intact. Squirming through that narrow passageway back to the mesa top, my mind went to what Jordan's ancestors might have thought as they passed through the same rock for the last time.

INVASION

In the early 15th century — as the glories of the great Puebloan empire ended and dispersion became the new story of both Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde — European monarchs in alliance with the Roman Catholic Church cast their gaze across the vast Atlantic Ocean in a search of new riches.

Initially the "Age of Discovery" focused on North Atlantic islands and Africa — lands then formally unknown to Western civilization. Men in ships set out to "discover" these new lands.

Blessing and empowering these efforts, popes over the course of the 15th and early 16th centuries issued a series of papal bulls.

Now collectively known as the "Doctrine of Discovery," they proclaimed the right of Europe's Christian nations to take possession of non-Christian lands, subjugate and enslave non-Christians, and reap the riches of the lands.

The first of these, granted in 1452 to Portugal's King Alfonso V by Pope Nicholas V, gave the European monarch this right:

[T]o invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms,

principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.

Other brutal papal bulls followed, expanding the reach and extolling the godly missions of European explorers.

In 1492 explorer and warrior Christopher Columbus — recently victorious over the last of Spain's Islamic invaders— led an expedition (on behalf of Spain's Catholic monarchs) in search of a shorter route to "the Indies" (Asia) and the fabled riches of that region. Any profits would go to the crown.

In a letter Columbus made known his personal wishes to King Fernando and Queen Isabel, requesting that the monarchs "spend all the profits of this my enterprise on the conquest of Jerusalem" — then under control of the Egyptian Muslim Mamluk Empire.

Columbus believed his explorations and plundering of faraway riches would finance the liberation of Jerusalem, leading to the second coming of Christ.

Near the end of his life, Columbus even compiled a book, *Libro de las Profecías* (*Book of Prophecies*), that explained his end-time beliefs.

Deeming himself a "Christ-bearer," Columbus and his crew while sailing across the Atlantic recited "Blessed be the hour of our Savior's birth; blessed be the Virgin Mary who bore him; and blessed be John who baptized him…" Each day concluded with the communal singing of vespers.

Landing not in Asia but on an island in the Bahamas, Columbus and his crew's relatively peaceful initial interactions with Natives soon gave way to the exploitation of islanders and Columbus' enslavement of more than a thousand "Indians."

The tone had been set. Exploitation of and violence toward Native peoples in the name of Christianity would become the overriding narrative of the Spanish New World.

SKY CITY

Catholic missionaries followed in Columbus' wake, the earliest in what would become the United States setting foot in present-day South Carolina and Georgia. Although well-financed by the Spanish government, they failed in the face of Native opposition.

Not until 1563 did the first Christian worship service in North America take place, in present-day Florida, where in 1565 the Catholic town of St. Augustine was founded, the oldest continuing European settlement in the U.S.

Meanwhile, some Spanish explorers journeyed further westward in search of purported riches, exploring a region that had once been home to the Chaco Canyon empire and the Mesa Verde Pueblos. Both of those locations long deserted by the time the Spanish arrived in 1540; the Acoma mesa village was the most notable Native community.

Standing before the towering, sheer-walled mesa, Hernando de Alvarado marveled: "The village was very strong because it was up on a rock out of reach, having steep steps in every direction."

"There was a wall of large and small stones at the top, which they could roll down without showing themselves, so that no army could possibly be strong enough to capture the village," he continued. "On top they had room to sow and store a large amount of corn, and cisterns to collect snow and water."

Native educator Velma Garcia-Mason describes the Acoma pueblo that the Spanish invaders encountered in 1540 as "a village of about 200 men, situated on an almost inaccessible mesa about 400 feet high, with cisterns at the summit, evidence of woven cotton, deerskin, buffalo-hide garments, corn, domesticated turkeys and turquoise jewelry."

Initially the Acoma were friendly toward the Spanish and expressed interest in the strangers' belief system. But in time the invaders' presence in the region grew numerically and became more aggressive.

The conquistadors believed the Puebloans to be hoarding gold, so Acoma was declared to be under Spanish and Roman Catholic rule.

Alarmed at the invaders' increasing militancy, the Acoma retaliated in 1598, killing 15 Spanish soldiers. Months later a larger Spanish force arrived with muskets and cannons.

Firing upon the mesa village from below, the European warmongers successfully scaled the steep rock and invaded the village, sacking and burning many of the adobe structures and killing approximately 1,500 residents.

Those who remained were forced to surrender to the Spanish, many thereafter shackled into slavery. Rebuilding the pueblo, the Spanish forced Catholicism upon the recalcitrant Acoma.

Constructing a Catholic church atop the mesa, Spanish overlords forced the Puebloans to harvest massive 40-foot-long roof beams from a mountain more than 30 miles away and to carry them back to the mesa.

Established to subjugate the Acoma to Catholicism, the San Estévan del Rey Mission Church became functional around 1630. It is one of few still extant early 17th-century Roman Catholic church buildings in New Mexico.

Religious services in the empty "Sky City" church now take place only twice a year — for a feast day on September 2 and then a Christmas service. Otherwise, the historic building is open most days for guided tours.

RESISTANCE

On a bright October day, another young Puebloan, Jeremy, met us on the Pueblo of Acoma's mesa-topped "Sky City."

Like the other guide Jordan in Mesa Verde, Jeremy was a guardian of an ancient spirituality that Spanish Catholic conquistadors ultimately failed to conquer.

Voicing no sympathy for the invaders who had long ago conquered and enslaved

his people, Jeremy expressed no interest in Catholicism.

Casually sitting in front of the church altar, he spoke of the atrocities committed by the Spanish — sins of which the Catholic Church has not repented.

Leading us afterward through the village streets, Jeremy pointed to two cisterns that had once provided fresh water for residents — until the Spanish defiled them with algae.

He also showed us the village's few original buildings left standing from the Spanish invasion. Each adobe structure had two doors — a large, traditional door on the second floor and a small door at ground level.

The Acoma of old built their doors out of reach from the ground below in order to thwart potential invaders, traditionally other Native peoples. Occupants could then pull up the ladders from which they accessed their houses.

But when the Spanish conquered the Acoma's pueblo, they forced surviving residents to construct a second door at ground level, so that they could surveil the Natives. Defiantly, Jeremy recounted, the Acoma intentionally built small doors — corresponding to their short stature — so that the much taller and armored Spanish soldiers had trouble seeing inside.

Forbidden from practicing their spiritual kiva ceremonies, the Acoma deployed another form of clever resistance. Carrying on their religious traditions surreptitiously, they disguised their kivas and cut out a small opening in each one.

Posting a sentry at the hole overlooking the street, upon a signal all in the kiva fell silent when Spanish soldiers patrolled nearby.

But there was another story of resistance from long ago of which Jeremy made no mention.

For some three decades beginning in 1645, Puebloan people under Spanish Catholic subjugation plotted rebellions that never came to fruition — with the Spanish identifying and harshly punishing the plotters.

Finally, during two glorious days in August 1680 the Pueblo, in league with the Apache, successfully rebelled against their European rulers.

Forced to flee the region against the combined Native forces, the Spanish left behind 400 dead, including 21 priests. Celebrating their victory, the Natives ceremonially washed off the stains of their forced Christian baptism, annulled their forced Christian marriages, and burned most of the Catholic churches throughout the region.

San Estévan del Rey Mission Church in Acoma's mesa village was one of few spared — preserved in honor of their ancestors who constructed the edifice.

For 12 years the Puebloans remained free to live and worship according to their own customs, that all-too-brief period coming to an end when the Spanish reconquered the region, forcing Native people thereafter to accept dominant European culture.

Puebloans chose to do so without continued violence, while still powerful Apache and Comanche resisted for a longer time.

Having established themselves firmly in rule of what is present-day New Mexico, Spanish leaders of the 18th century focused their efforts on building their own cities, Albuquerque and Santa Fe most notable.

Present-day New Mexico became a part of the Republic of Mexico in 1821, then was taken over by the U.S. in 1848 following the Mexican-American war. Similar to the Spanish before them, the U.S. government and some Christian groups strove to coerce still-resistant Puebloans to adopt American customs.

Puebloan children were forced to attend boarding schools that mandated the English language and Christianity. For months on end they were not allowed to return home.

Efforts to assimilate Native people into American Christian culture continued even as Puebloans and other Natives obtained the right to vote in 1924.

Despite intense pressure, Puebloan people continued to practice their traditional ways of life and pay respects to their ancestors, including in the sacred ceremonies taking place in kivas.

RECLAMATION

Like other Native Americans who learn their ancestral heritage from elders and then educate interested outsiders, these two young guides — Jordan in Mesa Verde and Jeremy in Acoma — represent a new chapter in Puebloan history.

It is one in which traditional culture and beliefs are celebrated in public and embraced in academia. To these young people and many of their parents and grandparents, the kiva remains sacred and foundational — a center of ancient knowledge and spirituality that is increasingly shared with others.

At the same time, data from the U.S. Census of 2020 indicate that six in 10 Native Americans identify as Christians. Adding to the complexity, however, most Native peoples — Christian or not — also observe some beliefs and aspects of ancestral spirituality.

This fusing of different systems of belief is what scholars call syncretism.

Across the Native American world a creative, dynamic spirituality infused with mysticism allows many Indigenous people to absorb certain elements of Christianity within their own religious traditions.

This is perhaps most true within the realm of creation beliefs that, though varying widely across religions, are present in some form within most religious belief systems.

Creation, in Native spirituality, is often directed by mysterious entities, animal-like beings, or forces of nature — not humans.

Often both father and mother figures (or grandfather and grandmother) are involved in creation, not altogether unlike the first of the two creation stories in Genesis: "Let us [*elohim*, plural] make man in our image, after our likeness," reads Gen. 1:26.

The Acoma people traditionally believe the earth itself is a womb, and the opening from below into this world —

symbolized and ritualized in kivas — is a sacred space.

In the Acoma creation myth, two female human beings were born and lived underground in the dark, unbeknownst to one another. In time a Spirit (*Tsichtinako*) spoke to them and brought them together, directing helpers — in the image of a badger and a locust — to aid them in emerging from the earth below to the earth's surface and in the presence of the sun above.

Once upon the surface of the earth, the two females — Iatiku and Nautsiti' — created the world: food, animals, mountains, directions, and much more.

Anthropologist Matthew W. Stirling — in his book, *Origin Myth of Acoma and Other Records* – recounted these stories as told to him by "a group of Pueblo Indians from Acoma and [nearby] Santa Ana visiting Washington" in 1928.

If singular, the creator figure in some Native belief systems is simply known as "the Great Spirit." The Lakota medicine man Lame Deer once said the Great Spirit "is not like a human being… He is a power. That power could be in a cup of coffee. The Great Spirit is no old man with a beard."

Early Christian missionaries among Native peoples equated their God with the Great Spirit in hopes of converting people they perceived as "heathen."

Native people, while sometimes perceiving common spiritual ground on this point, nonetheless chose not to fully embrace a religious belief system that deemed them less human than white persons.

Today among many Euro-Americans there is more openness to Native beliefs.

Indigenous people conceive of creation "as a living process, resulting in a living universe in which a kinship exists between all things," said Native historian Jack D. Forbes. "Thus the Creators are our family, our grandparents or parents, and all of their creations are children who, of necessity, are also our relations."

Creation, they affirm, is ongoing.

"Native people are not only trying to clean up uranium tailings, purify polluted water, and mount opposition to genetically engineered organisms," Forbes noted. "They are also continuing their spiritual ways of seeking to purify and support all life by means of ceremonies and prayers."

Ruins of an ancient Great House in Chaco Canyon, now preserved within Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

Perhaps to some degree the centrality of mystical "ceremonies and prayers" in Native religion as well as in Roman Catholicism — though expressed differently in each — explains in part the presence of religious syncretism within some Native communities.

Decentralized, complex, and absent universal doctrine, creative Puebloan spirituality has always been both pragmatic and resilient.

REVELATION

Acoma's guest-friendly Sky City Cultural Center includes the Haakú Museum. It is described as "both a moving voyage through the complex history that shaped the Acoma people, and an introduction to the life of the Acoma Pueblo, both past and present."

One exhibit displays many of the Christian artifacts removed from the now empty church atop the mesa.

Today most of the Acoma people live in modern houses down below while elected caretakers take turns doing limited stints atop the mesa — where the homes lack electricity and water — in observance of certain customs.

Down below in the courtyard of the cultural center on a Sunday afternoon, visitors witnessed a sacred Acoma ceremony in which dancers represented various native animals — buffalo, elk and big horn sheep.

Around the perimeter of the courtyard Acoma artists sold their handcrafted wares, including distinctive pottery with exquisite artwork often incorporating depictions of animals: cats, lizards, bears, turtles, owls, dogs, birds, deer and more.

Strolling from table to table, I learned of the spiritual significance of those animals and other symbols.

Having grown up in and always feeling a spiritual kinship to nature, it was easy to understand — at least to some degree — the Acoma people's reverence for living beings other than their own.

In the courtyard of the Acoma it was also easy to sense being among a redeemed people — yet not a Christian symbol was in sight. NFJ

HOW THEY LIVED

PHOTO ESSAY BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Many of the ancient ruins of Pueblo tribes in what is now New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona are not that ruined. That reality speaks to their ingenuity.

The stonework shows lasting craftsmanship. Even some of the woodwork that is protected from the worst weathering remains intact centuries later.

Water collection, air flow and accessibility were well considered and executed.

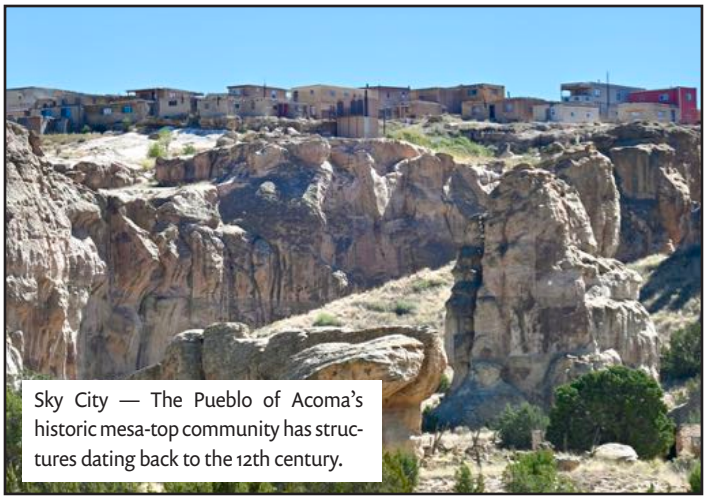
While many answers have been found through excavation and other studies, some questions remain about the Native people who built these early structures and vibrant communities — some in valleys, some on mesa tops and some in the alcoves of steep canyon walls.

Discussions about the cliff dwellings tend to begin with concerns over safety — from intruders, harsh weather or other threats. But those are mostly speculations.

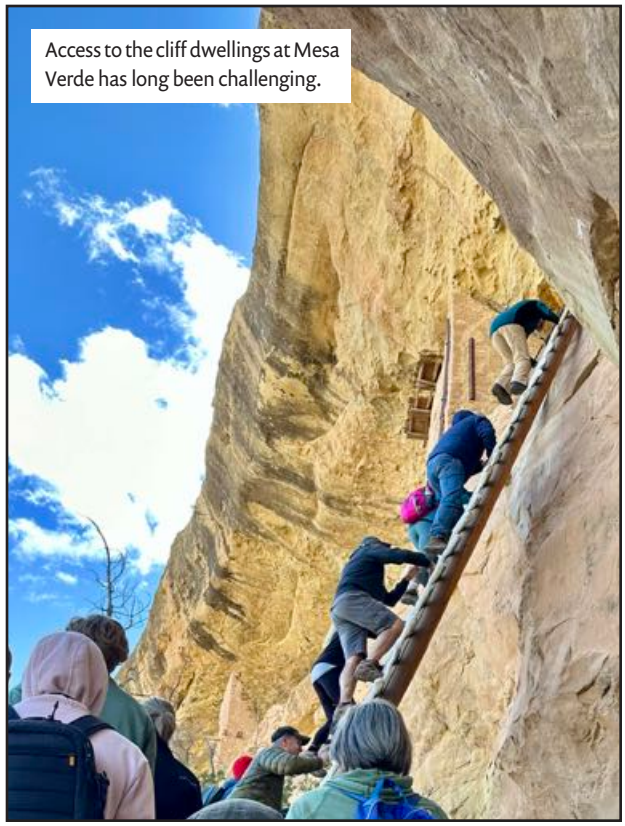
One interpretive ranger with the National Park Service suggested: "Just maybe some people liked living in cliffs like others enjoy living by the ocean."

Whatever the setting, visits to the various Pueblos — past and present — are thoughtful reminders of the importance of community. Shared work, joyful festivities, common good, and spiritual connections that give life meaning are worthy pursuits. NFJ

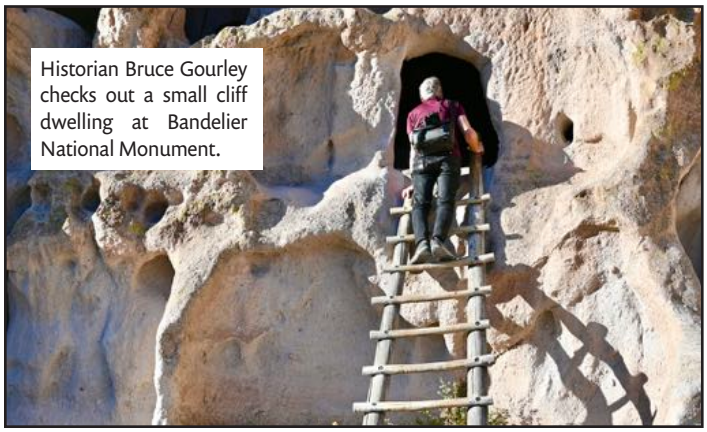
Cliff Palace, the largest of 600-plus cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, has more than 150 rooms and 20 ceremonial kivas. It has been well preserved for seven centuries.



Sky City — The Pueblo of Acoma's historic mesa-top community has structures dating back to the 12th century.



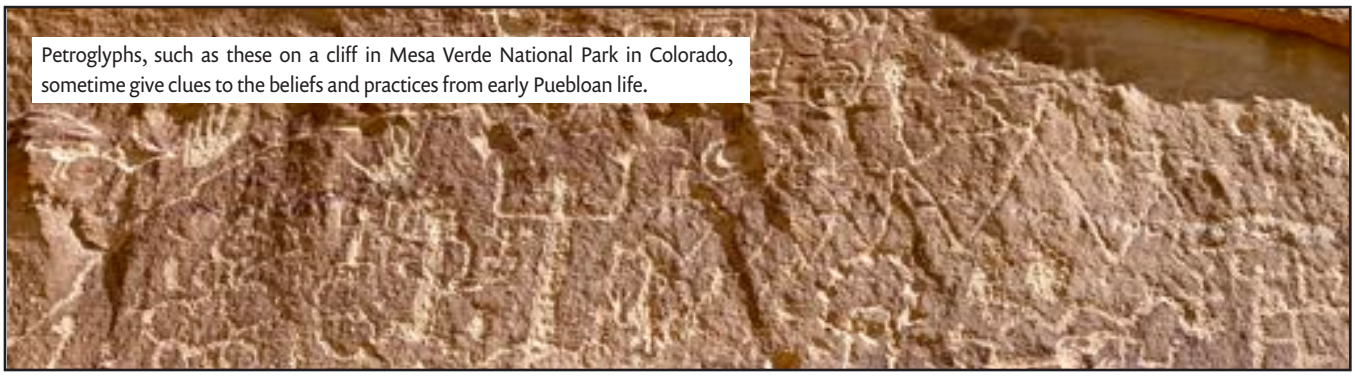
Access to the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde has long been challenging.



Historian Bruce Gourley checks out a small cliff dwelling at Bandelier National Monument.

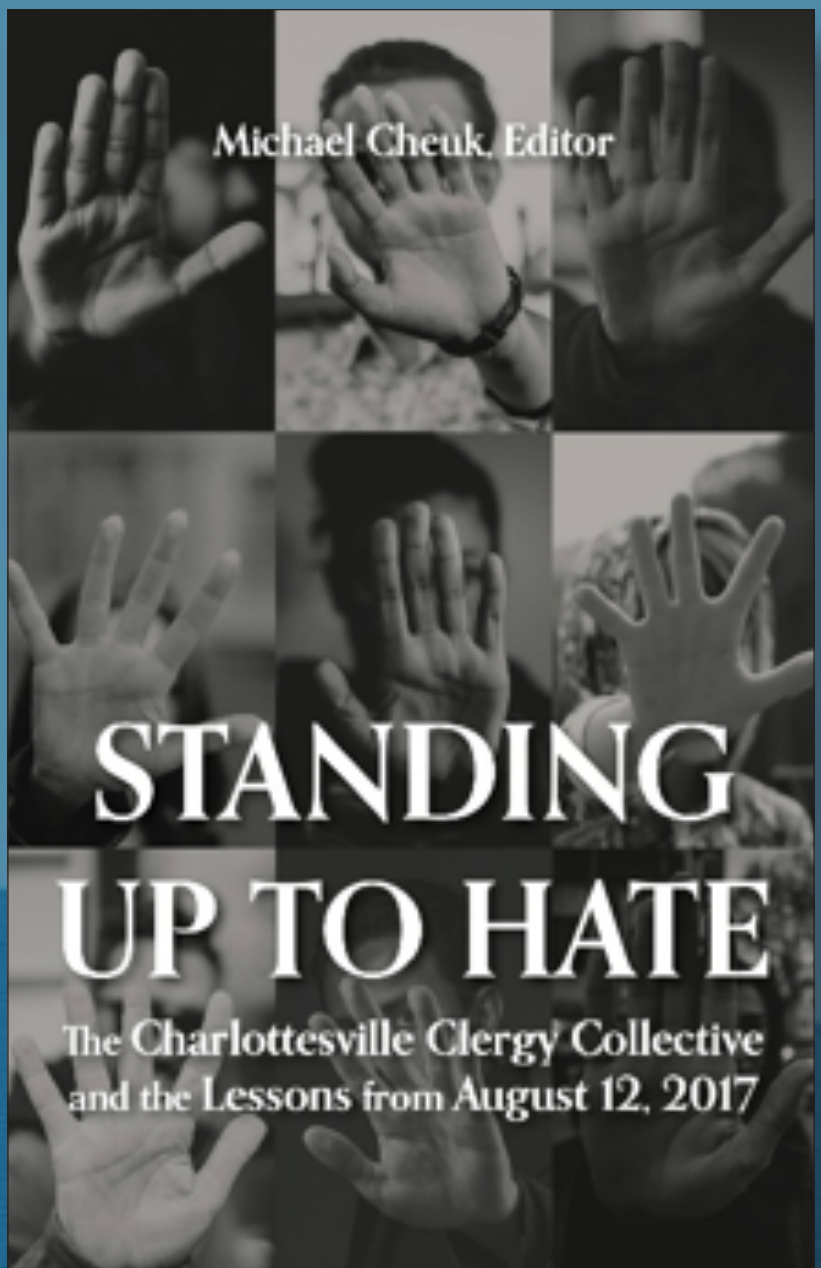
Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico preserves homes and territories of ancestral Puebloans with structures from two eras dating from 1150-1600 CE.

Round, inground Kivas — where Puebloan family clans gather for ceremonial and governing purposes — remain in good condition at Pueblo Bonita in Chaco Canyon.



Petroglyphs, such as these on a cliff in Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado, sometime give clues to the beliefs and practices from early Puebloan life.

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



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.

Edited by Michael Cheuk, these clergy recall the experiences of that time and offer lessons on how preparation and collaboration are needed — especially in times of crisis.

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"Through the experience of love, one becomes aware that he or she, however named or labeled by self or others, is completely understood, accepted and free."

Howard Thurman's love ethic can lead to a more loving world

By Xavier L. Johnson

There are daily reminders that we live in a world far less loving than it should or could be.

The often-vitriolic nature of both public and private discourse and the continued dehumanization of the "other" in society — joined with a groundswell of policies, laws and public practices that appear to be intentionally crafted to perpetuate inequality — remind us that our world can be cold and cruel.

Drawing on the work of Howard W. Thurman, let us explore how we might create and cultivate a more loving world.

In his "Foreword" to Thurman's book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, theologian and historian Vincent Harding frames Thurman's understanding of Jesus and his message.

Thurman's relationship with Jesus (and his message), writes Harding, took him "beyond the central orthodoxies of American Christianity."

From this relationship and understanding came Thurman's belief that every member of the human family — regardless of race, religion or social condition — is a child of God.

That belief was his rationale for embracing the love ethic he found in the "good news" of Jesus Christ and for seeking to build the radically-loving community he considered a logical outgrowth of Jesus' teachings.

For Thurman, as Albert J. Raboteau notes, community was God's intention for creation. In Thurman's study of the myths and origin stories from various cultures he found a deep and abiding longing for both a lost communion and community "with the self, the other, and the created world."

These stories were evidence of an innate longing in human beings for what Raboteau calls "a latent memory of the soul, a memory of lost harmony" — that served as a constant reminder that the divine intention was for members of the human family to live in harmony.

Persuaded that the intention of the Divine for creation was community and a world free of hatred and violence, Thurman thought deeply and spilled much ink on how we might make that intention a reality.

He concluded that a world guided by the love ethic found in the teachings of Jesus was a potent means by which to achieve it.

In Jesus he found a way to tame and subdue the "persistent hounds of hell" that terrorize the human family: fear, deception and violence.

To create a more loving and just world, Thurman called for meeting each person where they are and treating them as if they are where they should be. Walter L. Fluker's definition of Thurman's love ethic is helpful and instructive.

In his chapter "The Inward Sea: Mapping Interior Landmarks for Leaders" in the book, *Anchored in the Current: Discovering Howard Thurman as Educator, Activist, Guide, and Prophet*, Fluker writes: "Thurman defines love as 'the experience through which a person passes when he [she] deals with another human being at a point in that human being that is beyond all good and beyond all evil.'"

Love, he concludes, "is the power that overcomes barriers that separates individuals, groups and nations from one another. Through the experience of love, one becomes aware that he or she, however named or labeled by self or others, is completely understood, accepted and free."

For Thurman, this is what it means to love and be loved. It is the love he found at the heart of the teachings of Jesus, a love that understands and accepts people without assigning blame or praise while at the same time encouraging them to live up to the possibilities of their best selves.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman offers an example of what this kind of love looks like by recalling the story from the Gospel of John of the woman caught in adultery.

Jesus, Thurman concludes, met the woman where she was and treated her as if she were already where she now willed to be.

"Jesus 'believed' her into the fulfillment of her possibilities. He stirred her confidence into activity. He placed a crown over her head which for the rest of her life she would keep trying to grow tall enough to wear."

This was the kind of love that Thurman found, preached and practiced — and commended to us as a means for creating a more loving world. It is Jesus' way of loving people not just where they are but into where and who they can be.

It is the kind of love, as Thurman describes in *Meditations of the Heart*, that is "tender without being soft; gracious without being ingratiating; kind without being sentimental; and understanding without being judgmental."

It is the kind of love that will make the world a better place. NFJ

—Xavier Johnson is Assistant Professor in the Practice of Preaching and Black Church Studies at United Theological Seminary in Trotwood, Ohio.

$acred, $neaky Fundraising

By Brett Younger

If there was a first-century class in persuasive letter writing—persuasive on the edge of manipulative letter writing—St. Paul could have taught it. When we need to raise money, we can learn a lot from Paul. This is sort of what he writes in Rom. 15:22-33.

Dear Friends,

I have heard about your fantastic congregation and have wanted to visit your church for a long time, but I have been busy starting new churches and visiting struggling ones that are not doing nearly as well as you are. Now there is no place left without a church where I can start one. Ha! I am making a trip to your area, so my plan is to enjoy a Sunday with you.

I hope that at the end of the day, you will send me off with a warm hug and God's blessing. Best be up front about it, "God's blessing" means an offering for the hungry.

I have been traveling all over the world asking churches to help starving people. The best churches are the ones that care about the hungry. I am guessing there are good Christians down the street from you at the Methodist church and across town at First Presbyterian who care about hungry children. They are glad they can help the hungry, but they know that it is not really an optional activity for genuine Christians.

If we are going to follow Jesus, we have to share. If we do not give to the hungry, should we even call ourselves Christians? You care about your own children, so you must care about God's children, too.

I am sure that you have generous people at your church. Some of you are good at making money. You are smart and capable and have done well for yourself. This is a chance to share what you have made.

I will come to your church and pick up what I am sure will be a big offering. My visit will be a great day of celebrating God's love and your amazing generosity.

I hope you will pray about it. I worry about this offering because nothing is more important. I am looking forward to being overwhelmed by your huge-heartedness.

Love to all of you,
Paul

Paul used guilt, pride, threats, love and everything he could think of to get a bigger contribution. This offering was central to the early church's understanding of the gospel. When they took up a collection during worship, the money did not go to support the institution, but to feed the hungry. If Paul was writing to our congregations, he would be disappointed that we still need hunger offerings.

Every day, 730 million people wake up with little hope of enough to eat (by the way, 195 million of them are Christians); 258 million are dealing with malnutrition; 25,000 people a day, including 10,000 children, die of hunger-related diseases: 100 will starve to death in the time it takes to read this column.

We might think liberal churches would latch on to the issue of hunger, but most do not. When we talk about racism, immigration, human trafficking, climate change or LGBTQIA issues, liberals are sure they are not the bad guys, but when it comes to hunger, liberals are part of the problem.

We might think conservative churches that say they take the Bible literally would take the 3,000 verses on sharing with the poor literally. If worship themes were in proportion to the attention given in scripture, churches would focus on hunger several months each year, but church leaders have figured out that feeding hungry children on the other side of the world will not increase attendance.

One of the few things left- and right-wing Christianity agrees on is that our churches are not going to worry about hunger. We lose sleep over problems at work, difficulties at school and troubles at home, but few of us lose sleep over children starving. We tell ourselves there is nothing we can do about it, but that is not true.

Christians who make their voices heard make a difference. We should push our politicians to use foreign aid to dig water wells, build fish ponds, improve agriculture, teach nutrition and make sure there is help when disasters hit.

We make a difference when we refuse to be comfortable with the tragedy of hunger and stop pretending nothing can be done. When we give significant gifts to feed the hungry, some who would have died without those gifts will live.

This column is called *The Lighter Side*. Here is what the prophet Isaiah says about being on the side of the light, "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday" (58:10).

That sounds like something Paul would write. NFJ

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

Nurturing FAITH BIBLE STUDIES

LESSONS FOR
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024

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

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

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Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

January 7, 2024

Acts 19:1-10

A Gospel Quartet to Remember

The turn of a new year often leads us to ponder where we are in life. Have we accomplished what we had hoped by this stage of life? Are there areas in which we need to grow, or new skills we need to develop? Such thoughts may lead us to determine that we will adjust our behavior in the coming year. Will our resolutions last?

When Paul arrived in Ephesus during his third missionary journey and met a group of John's disciples, he wondered if they had advanced beyond their allegiance to John. In so many words, he asked, "Are you there yet?"

As we consider our own lives as followers of Jesus, it's helpful to check on our own spiritual progress and ask ourselves, "Are we there yet?"

Disciples of John (vv. 1-3)

Today's text continues a narrative from the previous chapter. Near the end of his second missionary journey (described in Acts 18:18-21), Paul and his partners Silas and Timothy had traveled to Ephesus in the company of Priscilla and Aquila. Luke was probably in the party, too. As narrator, he had begun using the pronoun "we" after 16:10.

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Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." (Acts 19:4)

Paul stopped in Ephesus only briefly, paying a visit to the local synagogue for a discussion with Jewish leaders, who wanted him to stay longer. Paul declined, but he promised to return (18:19-21). He then set sail for Caesarea and traveled to Jerusalem for a visit with church leaders before venturing back north to Antioch.

Priscilla and Aquila remained in Ephesus, where they took Apollos under their wing, teaching him a fuller and more accurate understanding of the gospel before sending him on to Corinth (18:24-28). Sometime afterward, Paul traveled through the interior highlands of Asia Minor (now Turkey), moving westward on his way back to Ephesus, a bustling city near the southeastern coast. After his arrival in the city, Paul happened upon a dozen disciples who still had much to learn.

Biblical evidence suggests that the movement sparked by John the Baptist had continued for some time after his death, rather than being wholly subsumed by the Jesus movement (see Matt. 9:14, 11:2; Luke 7:8, 11:1; John 1:35, 4:1; and Acts 18:25).

Luke first describes the group as "disciples" (v. 1) before quoting Paul's question to them: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" We might have expected him to ask if they had been baptized in the name of Jesus, but Luke was more focused on the Spirit. The group responded that they had "not even heard if there is a Holy Spirit" (v. 2). That suggests they had not yet come into contact with Priscilla and Aquila, who were at work there. Ephesus was a large and pagan city, however. Artemis was the patron deity and Christians probably needed to keep a low profile, so there easily could have been pockets of believers who did not know each other.

Paul's question about baptism led to an explanation that group members knew only the baptism of John. Whether they had also heard about Jesus, or sought to follow him, is not said (v. 3).

Disciples of Jesus (vv. 4-7)

Paul explained that John's work was not complete, but preparatory. He had called people to "believe in the One who was to come after him, that is, Jesus" (v. 4). The group required no additional persuasion, for Luke reports: "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5).

The story isn't just about baptism, however, or whether the name of Jesus was invoked, so much as it is about the Holy Spirit. In conjunction with their baptism, Paul laid his hands on them, with powerful results: "the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied" (v. 6). The coming of the Spirit and its effects recalls earlier accounts in which Jewish believers received the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), and Gentile believers in Caesarea had a similar experience (Acts 10), though neither of those involved the laying on of hands.

The letter of Second Timothy, which claims to have been written by Paul, instructs Timothy to "rekindle the gift of God that is within you through

the laying on of my hands" (2 Tim. 1:6). "The gift" is probably a reference to the Spirit.

But what about modern readers? How do we know if we have received the Holy Spirit? Are we deficient if we haven't spoken in tongues or prophesied? Many Pentecostal or charismatic Christians believe in a baptism of the Spirit that is secondary to water baptism, and often use the laying on of hands as a symbolic way of invoking the Spirit. Tongues or prophecy are typically expected as signs of the Spirit's presence.

On the other hand, while a similar practice is sometimes described in the New Testament, it is not necessarily normative. We have no record that Jesus taught his followers to baptize new believers and then require evidence of receiving the Spirit. Luke usually connects baptism in Jesus and the reception of the Spirit as a single event, with or without the imposition of hands.

Perhaps we are to understand that unusual manifestations such as tongues speaking were important during the early days of the church, effective within that culture as a public sign of God's new work in Jesus and a needed reminder that, despite Christ's ascension, he remained present through the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Baptists generally hold that God's Spirit is always present with believers and does not need to be invoked through special ceremonies. The process of baptism by immersion necessarily involves placing hands on the candidate, and no further imposition is necessary.

Believers may or may not experience tongues or "prophesy" through public testimony, for the presence of the Spirit can be manifested in many ways. A variety of "spiritual gifts" or "fruits of the Spirit" allow us to demonstrate the Spirit's presence and power as we show love, kindness, and generosity to others. Other New Testament texts also speak of spiritual gifts or spiritual fruit as characteristic behaviors and functions that benefit the church (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-10, 28-30; Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 4:10-11).

Joseph A. Fitzmyer has noted that Luke's primary intent in this text was not so much to explicate doctrine regarding the Holy Spirit as to show how Paul was able to win over related groups and bring them into the mainstream faith of the early church, a process that included the presence or guidance of the Holy Spirit (*The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 31 [Doubleday, 1998], 642).

Could it be significant that Luke made a point of saying that "there were about twelve of them" (v. 7)? There could have been more, or less – but invoking the number 12 would no doubt lead readers to think of the 12 tribes of Israel, or the 12 apostles. Perhaps Luke wanted readers to imagine those 12 as emblematic of believers in Asia, or as symbolic of John's disciples as a fringe group that had become fully legitimated by the presence of the Spirit and empowered to do the work of the kingdom though their community.

Disciples at work (vv. 8-10)

Following the encounter with John's disciples, as Luke depicts it, Paul shifted to his usual strategy of going to the synagogue in hopes of persuading local Jews to accept Jesus as the promised messiah. There he "spoke out boldly," Luke says, "and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God" (v. 8).

Surprisingly, the synagogue leaders in Ephesus allowed Paul to preach about Jesus for three months: in Thessalonica, Paul had been thrown out of the synagogue and forced to leave town after just three weeks (Acts 17:1-9). The apostle's welcome eventually wore out, however. "When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus" (v. 9).

Luke's language recalls Old Testament references to the "stubbornness" of Israel during the exodus from Egypt. As rabble-rousers there had criticized both Moses and God, some synagogue members "spoke evil of the Way," leading Paul to relocate. "The lecture hall of Tyrannus" was probably a type of school, perhaps a place for philosophers to wrangle. Whether Paul rented the space or used it freely is unstated. In either case, it is impressive that his daily exhortations attracted so many believers that they apparently could not fit into a house, as they did in other cities.

Paul remained in Ephesus for at least another two years, using it as a mission hub for preaching and teaching, making disciples, and no doubt sending followers to preach in the surrounding area. Luke enthusiastically claimed that "all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord" (v. 10). Even allowing for considerable hyperbole, that's an impressive assertion.

While readers may get hung up on questions about receiving the Spirit or speaking in tongues, this is the bottom line – we are called to believe and live out the gospel so that all might see the Spirit at work in us, and the word of the Lord will be heard in our land, too.

Are we there yet? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

January 14, 2024

1 Corinthians 6:1-20

Getting It Straight

Is there room for me in God's kingdom? One might wonder after reading this chapter: Paul could be both strict in his expectations and severe in his judgment. He could also be plain-spoken and abrupt, showing little patience with church members who did not live up to his expectations.

As we engage this text, we must recognize that Paul was a child of his times. Some things that bothered Paul may not disturb us, while other practices Paul seemed to accept (such as slavery) strike us as horrifying. It's helpful to keep this in mind as we consider Paul's letter to the troubled church in Corinth, and the verbal missiles he fired their way.

Fire one (vv. 1-8)

Paul had a long history with the Corinthian Christians, one that included both personal visits and correspondence. After moving on from Corinth to Ephesus, Paul had visitors from "Chloe's people," who reported on a serious division in the church. He also received a letter from the church requesting his advice, and Paul wrote what we now call 1 Corinthians to address the various concerns.

Paul began the letter with an appeal to unity based on the centrality of Christ and the gospel of the cross (chs. 1–2) before addressing issues arising from immaturity, factionalism, and arrogance

> *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Cor. 6:19)*

within the church (chs. 3–4). In ch. 5 he argued that persons who were "sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard or robber" should be put out of the church (5:11-13).

Similar concerns arise in ch. 6, where Paul expressed dismay that some members had filed suit against each other in civil court. Christians at the time were a small and probably persecuted minority. Paul thought believers should settle matters between themselves rather than exposing themselves to embarrassment "before the unrighteous" (v. 1).

Citing a belief that Christians would participate in the final judgment, Paul argued that if "the saints will judge the world" in the hereafter, they should be competent to judge trivial cases in the present (vv. 2-3).

Using rhetorical questions to incite shame in his readers, Paul asked "Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another?" (v. 5) The thought of church members taking one another to court before pagan authorities was abhorrent to Paul, as it would besmirch the Christian witness.

Indeed, the very existence of lawsuits between believers was a sign of defeat, Paul said. It would be better to suffer loss in silence than to charge one another in civil courts. What was worse, Paul said he had heard that some believers were defrauding other church members (vv. 7-8). One can almost see the fiery apostle shaking his head in unbelief that fellow believers would cheat each other and then fight it out in the public square.

Paul did not cite Jesus, but Matthew's gospel holds that Jesus also encouraged believers to work things out among themselves (Matt. 18:15-17).

Fire two (vv. 9-11)

The apostle's growing ire led him to launch into a catalogue of perceived "wrongdoers" who, he said, would not inherit the kingdom of God (v. 9a). His list includes several categories previously mentioned in 5:11-13 (idolaters, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and robbers), while expanding the list of sexually immoral persons to include "fornicators … adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites" (vv. 9b-10, NRSV).

Several of these terms are difficult to translate. The NRSV's rendering "male prostitutes, sodomites" is translated "men who have sex with men" by NIV11. However understood, the terms apparently refer to same-sex practices among males, which Paul condemned.

Some modern readers assume we should accept Paul's judgment as an incontrovertible and unchanging rule, but are we required to do so? In first-century Roman culture, the notion of genetically influenced same-sex gender identity could not have been conceived, and the concept of long-term committed relationships between same-sex partners was not on the table. A frequent practice involved wealthy men who kept boys for their

sexual pleasure. That kind of activity involved molestation and a misuse of power, rather than a caring relationship between equals.

We might also consider behaviors that were *not* on Paul's list – such as slave-holding and human trafficking. The practice of slavery was ubiquitous in the first century. Paul not only accepted the practice, but he instructed slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22). Today we consider the notion of owning another human being as abhorrent.

Whether Paul would have felt differently about slavery or same-sex relationships if he had lived in our day is an open question, but the juxtaposition is a reminder that context is important. What we consider to be acceptable behavior is often a social construct, and Paul was writing within a very different cultural setting.

The heart of Paul's message is that believers should take the lead in practicing relationships that are mutually beneficial rather than abusive. His heated sermon is a reminder that believers who have been "washed … sanctified … justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (v. 11) are called to leave selfish and harmful behaviors behind and adopt new and loving lifestyles.

Fire three (vv. 12-20)

It appears that some believers in Corinth had adopted a dualistic libertinism that separated the spirit from the body, holding that Christ had set their spirits free, and it didn't matter what they did with the body.

Paul confronted these ideas, apparently, by repeating things said among the Corinthians, and then refuting them. This is not at all evident in the familiar KJV, but most modern translations put statements Paul wanted to refute in quotation marks.

For example, v. 12 begins with "All things are lawful for me." With no quotation marks, Paul seems to be saying that any behavior could be acceptable. When punctuated as a quote, however, "All things are lawful for me" could be Paul's quotation of libertine church members, with "but not all things are beneficial" being his response. We note that Paul did not deny the statement outright, and he may have used it himself in specific contexts such as a debate about whether Christians were compelled to follow the dietary restrictions of Judaism.

Though it might be true in some cases to say, "All things are lawful for me," Paul insisted that not everything was good for a person. Some things have the power to dominate one's life (v. 12). Making money, eating sweets, drinking wine, and taking naps may all be lawful and appropriate to a degree, but letting any of those dominate our life can cause serious physical and relational problems.

"Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food," some might have said, perhaps an argument related to controversies over whether Christians needed to eat only kosher food, or whether it was necessary to avoid meat that might have been offered before an idol before being sold in the marketplace.

Paul reminded his readers that neither food nor the stomach were permanent (v. 13a). He then made an interesting shift from eating to sex: "The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (v. 13b). Notice the parallel construction: instead of "food for the stomach and the stomach for food," the more important concept is "the body for the Lord and the Lord for the body."

Though the body is destined for death and disintegration, Paul reminded them, "God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power" (v. 14). We can't pretend that what we do with our body doesn't matter. There is more to sex than a physical act, and those who think casual sex has no spiritual consequences are mistaken (vv. 15-18).

Paul believed that when people invite Christ to take over their lives, their bodies take on a sacred dimension: "… do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (v. 19). It's not obvious from the English translation, but Paul used plural verbs and pronouns in v. 19. The Spirit's presence and believers' behavior are not just individual concerns: both involve the community.

We no longer belong to ourselves, Paul said. We have responsibilities to God and to others. "For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (v. 20).

When we look at our own lives and consider what behaviors are appropriate, perhaps the most important question is not what is wrong with something, but what is right with it. Will it add something positive to my life and to others, or is there potential for harm? Will it draw me closer to God, or lead me away?

What we do or don't do with our bodies – how well we care for them and how we use them – can bring glory or shame to the God we serve, to Christ who indwells us through the Spirit.

When we're considering any action that could be questionable, that's an appropriate thing to keep I mind. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

January 21, 2024

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Considering the Time

What do we do with a text based on a premise that turned out to be incorrect – at least in the way the author expected? That's precisely what we find in 1 Cor. 7:25-40, where Paul based a series of opinions about marriage on the assumption that Christ's return was just around the corner and life as usual was coming to an end (vv. 29-31).

He was wrong. Almost 2,000 years later, the world is still chugging along. But Paul was also right.

People who follow Jesus no longer belong entirely belong to the world as it is. They are called to live as citizens of God's kingdom who consider kingdom values in their daily living – including decisions they make about marriage.

Many choose to ignore this text, while others misinterpret it. Let's see if we can take a helpful approach to Paul's comments about sex and marriage in an uncertain world.

Personal opinions (vv. 25-28)

We begin with a word of context. Chapter 7 marks a clear shift in 1 Corinthians, as Paul turns from issues brought to him by "Chloe's people" in chs. 1–6 to questions raised in a letter he had received from the church.

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

> *I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short .... (1 Cor. 7:29a)*

In ch. 6, Paul had addressed an apparent faction of church members who had adopted an anything-goes approach to sex outside of marriage. In ch. 7, Paul responds to some who apparently promoted the ideals of a celibate marriage – which could have contributed to the problems addressed in the previous chapter.

Paul never mentions having a wife, and he apparently traveled as a single man. Still, he understood that sexual relations are an important aspect of marriage that should continue, lest people be tempted to seek sex outside of marriage (vv. 1-2). Husbands and wives should willingly engage in conjugal relations with their spouses, he said (v. 3), recognizing that each has a certain claim to the other's body (v. 4). Paul conceded that spouses might abstain from relations for a set period to focus on prayer, but only by mutual agreement, and then to avoid temptation (vv. 5-6).

While Paul wished that others shared his choice to remain single, he saw celibacy as a spiritual gift that few people possessed (v. 7). He encouraged unmarried persons to remain unmarried and focus on Christian service, but also recognized that marriage was preferable to frustration for those who did not have the gift of celibacy (vv. 8-9). He furthermore held that married people should stay married, even if one partner had converted while their spouse had not (vv. 10-16).

After digressing to state a general belief that all believers should remain in the state they were in when called to faith (vv. 17-24), Paul returned to the questions asked by the church, one of which had to do with "virgins" (v. 25).

We can't be certain, but Paul was probably addressing a question about whether young people who were engaged should proceed with their marriages. Here he chose to tread carefully, noting that he had no clear "word of the Lord" on the subject, but was willing to share his opinion "as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy."

Paul was not short on opinions. He believed it was better for believers to remain as they were, whether married or unmarried. The basis of Paul's opinion was "in view of the impending crisis," or better, "in view of the present necessity" (v. 26) – his belief that Christ would return soon.

Those who were married need not dissolve their marriage, and those who were single need not search for a partner, he said (v. 27). Speaking from the perspective of a bachelor who cherished his freedom from marital obligations, Paul added: "Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that" (v. 28b).

Paul shows no evidence of having experienced the positive and fulfilling aspects of a good marriage in which a shared life between compatible adults can reduce stress and multiply joy. But he had apparently observed some marriages that were ridden with strife.

Eschatological assumptions (vv. 29-31)

With v. 29 we come to the crux of Paul's position: "I mean, brothers and

sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away" (vv. 29-31).

Paul's advice in this chapter is largely situational. His eschatological outlook rendered long-term planning about marriage, work-related matters, or other cares of the world almost irrelevant. In his view, even states of mourning or happiness had become immaterial. Likewise, poverty, wealth, and social engagement would become inconsequential if the present world was about to end.

Paul was speaking to a very different situation than the one in which we live. He was dealing with a church in which some had responded to eschatological expectations by thinking it didn't matter how much sex they had, or with whom – while others thought any sex was inappropriate as they awaited the end of the age.

Many years later, it is evident that Paul's apocalyptic predictions were misplaced, and we have no reason to think we should not be planning for the long haul in life and in relationships, while still understanding that our life on this earth could end at any time.

Thus, Paul's opinion that concerns about marriage were entirely secondary to evangelizing the world before Christ's imminent return may seem less persuasive to modern readers. Jesus' teachings suggested the expectation of a quick return, but he also made it clear that no one knew when the end would come, and that even he did not know (Mark 13:32 and parallels). That means we *do* need to be thinking about long-term commitments such as marriage and child-raising and involvement in matters affecting both society and the environment.

This is one of those cases where too much attention to a single biblical text – without an appropriate understanding of its situational context – can be more harmful than helpful. Some modern Christians, for example, see no need to be concerned about global warming, the depletion of energy resources, or overpopulation, because they believe the second coming of Christ will circumvent any need to care for the environment.

None of us can say how long we will be on this earth – whether our end comes through death or through divine intervention – but all of us should live responsibly and with concern for future generations as well as our own.

Devotional distractions (vv. 32-40)

In the latter part of the chapter, Paul continues discussing the pros and cons of marriage, though clearly from a satisfied bachelor's point of view. In vv. 32-34, he said "I want you to be free from anxieties," but what he meant was "I want you to be more focused on pleasing God than on pleasing your spouse."

It is true that married persons have responsibilities and cares that celibate singles do not have. It is also true that the steady love and mutual support one finds in a good marriage can nurture a stable foundation for effective Christian living, but such a thought does not seem to have crossed Paul's mind.

At least Paul was honest about his motives: he preferred being single but did not wish "to put any restraint" on those who chose to marry. His motive was "to promote good and unhindered devotion to the Lord" (v. 35), which he thought marriage could impede.

This thought carries into vv. 36-38, which are difficult to translate, because we do not know if Paul was addressing fathers who were concerned about giving their daughters in marriage, or young men who were engaged. In either case, Paul congratulated those who kept their desires under control and thus chose to refrain from marriage, which he believed to be the better course (vv. 37-38).

Paul closed the discussion of marriage with a word to widows, noting that they were free to marry another believer ("only in the Lord"), though he thought any widow would be "more blessed if she remains as she is" (vv. 39-40). He closed with a reminder that he was speaking his own opinions, though confident "that I have the Spirit of God."

If 1 Corinthians 7 were a song, it would have several verses, but all on the same theme: Paul's belief that the end was near and that the ordinary human concerns associated with marital obligations should take a back seat to devoting oneself to serving Christ full time.

As responsible readers, we must keep in mind the situational nature of Paul's advice. While we are indeed called to follow Christ's teachings and live out kingdom values from day to day, we need not base our decisions on Paul's fervent belief that the days were short. Indeed, if the church is to have a future, it will be important for Christian couples to demonstrate the positive aspects of marriage as one means of inspiring future generations of disciples. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

January 28, 2024

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Practicing Flexible Faith

> *Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)*

People of a certain age may remember when it was common to argue that Christians should never patronize restaurants that served alcohol. Classes or groups who wanted to hold a fellowship meal in a local eatery limited themselves to alcohol-free "family restaurants" to ensure participation from members who did not want to appear supportive of the alcohol industry.

These days, as most counties have gone from "dry" to "wet," bars in local restaurants along with aisles of wine and beer in grocery stores have become so commonplace that many of us rarely think about the issue. Young people might find the whole idea to be completely alien.

Some readers might think it equally strange to consider a hot-button topic raised in 1 Corinthians 8: Is it permissible to eat meat that had been ritually sacrificed at a pagan temple before being brought to market?

A troublesome question (vv. 1-3)

The point of contention, which Paul deals with over the space of three chapters, is broader than the question of eating meat ritually offered to idols: it concerns the larger issue of the relationship between a believer's individual freedom and his or her concern for the larger Christian community.

How does one live as a Christian within a culture where other gods or ideals predominate? Before asking the question of ourselves, we must understand the context of the question at Corinth. After all, we are reading someone else's mail, and we need to appreciate their situation.

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city steeped in Greek and Roman traditions that included the worship of numerous gods. The temples also served as social hubs where people gathered for banquets in dining halls attached to the sanctuaries. Animal sacrifices around outdoor altars were a customary part of worship there, but very little was burned: most of the meat was cooked and served in the temple banquet halls or sold in local markets.

Some believers in Corinth thought eating such meat was wrong, while others saw it as a non-issue and had little patience with those who quibbled. They seemed to think of temple banquets as little more than themed restaurants, and their attitude suggested that everyone should know better than to think it should matter.

The division of opinion probably had social roots. The church's wealthier and more educated members were more likely to be invited to temple banquets, which they may have seen as a necessary aspect of business or societal networking, such as attending a Rotary Club meeting at a local restaurant or celebrating a friend's wedding at a private club. Poorer and less educated members probably ate little meat to begin with, and they may have been more prone to lingering suspicions about the pagan gods' power.

Paul's initial response was to change the direction of the question: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (v. 1). With this statement, Paul insists from the beginning that love trumps knowledge. Those who think they are so smart – "who claim to know something" – still have things to learn, he said (v. 2). What's important is not what we know, but *that we are known by God* (v. 3).

This is a reminder that salvation arose from God's initiative: it's not what we know about God that counts, but that God knows us. We did not earn our salvation or gain it through obtaining knowledge, and we should not let what we know (or think we know) lead us to look down on those we consider to be less enlightened.

The heart of the problem (vv. 4-6)

Those who had no qualms about eating meat offered to idols reasoned that in Christ they had come to know the only true God. If other gods did not exist, then pagan idols had no substance and meat waved before them was only meat (v. 4). In responding, it's likely that Paul was quoting from the letter he had received, apparently penned by the faction that favored eating meat from the temples.

Paul did not disagree with their logic, but he questioned its application.

He acknowledged that the pervasive "gods and lords" of Corinth and elsewhere were only "so-called" gods rather than real entities – but that did not change the widespread acceptance and power of their pervasive cults (v. 5). Later, Paul would connect sacrifices to idols with the worship of demons (10:20) – not all believers saw the idols as meaningless.

Continuing his effort to keep the focus on the believers' relationship with God, Paul cited what may have been part of a hymn known to the Corinthians: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (v. 6).

The point for Paul was not whether other gods existed, but that all things existed because of God, and Christians existed because of Christ. Believers have a purpose beyond themselves: we are to live for God. As such, our priority is to love God and to love others, rather than to serve ourselves.

The loving thing to do (vv. 7-13)

Paul then returned to the matter at hand, beginning with the claim some were making that "all of us possess knowledge" (v. 1), a way of saying "we all know that idols aren't real." Paul begged to differ, arguing that "… not everyone … has this knowledge" (v. 7a). Some in the church had worshipped idols for so long that "they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol" (v. 7b). Being "weak" in the faith on this matter, the thought of going back to the temple or eating "idol meat" disturbed them.

Paul's response indicated that the "we all know" faction was excluding fellow church members who thought differently. They might legitimately argue that eating meat offered to a non-existent god would not affect their relationship to the real God (v. 8), but Paul insisted they should "take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" (v. 9).

The word rendered "liberty" in the NRSV normally means "authority." Paul's concern was that stronger believers should not focus on their rights but should also consider others when making decisions. Suppose one convinced a weaker believer that it was okay to dine at the temple, but the experience of eating there drew the weaker brother or sister back into the sway of the pagan cult they had known for so long (v. 10). "So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed," Paul wrote (v. 11).

Paul used strong language: the danger was not that the weak would be offended by others' exercise of "knowledge," but that they would be *destroyed*. Paul reminded readers that Christ had died for those believers. If Jesus gave his life for the sake of the weaker brothers and sisters, shouldn't the stronger believers be willing to change their eating habits to preserve them?

Those who sin against family members by "wounding" their consciences also sin against Christ, Paul said (v. 12), citing his own willingness to forgo meat altogether rather than to lead weaker members to violate their conscience and go astray (v. 13).

Good enough: but how might this matter apply in our own day? We may also know fellow Christians who choose not to eat meat, not because of scruples involving idol worship, but out of concern for animal rights or for the environment. In either case, the central message of the text is that love and concern for one another are more important than exercising one's prerogatives.

But the text also raises the question of where the idols are in our own day. Are we tempted to put such trust in the materialistic ethos of our culture that we disregard the poor or seek only "our kind" when doing outreach? Are we so concerned with our own pleasure that we fail to consider others' needs? Are there some who put allegiance to the nation on par with allegiance to God, leading weaker members to confuse patriotism with faith?

While we must take Paul's point seriously, we must also be careful, as Richard B. Hayes has noted, not to let "the most narrow-minded and legalistic members of the church" hold the rest of the Christian community hostage to their strict interpretation of how Christians should behave (*First Corinthians*, Interpretation [Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 145). We may have different opinions about whether dancing or drinking wine or same-sex marriages are acceptable, for example, but those are not issues that should lead weak persons to desert the faith.

On the other hand, Hayes notes, we must remember that "idolatry *can* actually lead to destruction." Our world has its own idols, he wrote, and "If we are tempted to be casual about dalliances with the idols that rule our culture's symbolic world (primarily the gods of wealth, military power, and self-gratification), we would do well to reread 1 Corinthians 8 and consider the possible risks for those among us who are seeking to escape the pull of these forces" (Ibid.).

Eating meat offered to idols may not be an issue for us, but Paul's discussion of it still provides us with plenty to chew on. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

February 4, 2024

1 Corinthians 9:16-27

Getting It Right about Rights

I grew up in a county that has a nice population of both wild turkeys and turkey hunters. The local newspaper faithfully publishes a photograph of the first hunter to kill a turkey each season, along with the turkey's weight and the length of its "beard."

Local woodsmen know both where and when to look for (and sometimes to bait) potential prey. They know how to use a turkey call to attract the big toms. The same hunters may also be proficient in the use of a duck call, or in rattling old deer antlers to simulate two battling bucks, but when they are hunting turkeys, they stick to a turkey call.

Most of us don't have to look far to discover churches that are hunting turkeys with duck calls or deer antlers, and it doesn't take a strategic analyst to discern why they are not succeeding. Churches that do effective outreach make the effort to identify the cultural backgrounds and the prevailing attitudes of their communities. They understand that you don't reach young apartment dwellers with rundown facilities and tired, repetitive worship. They can see that retirement communities will probably not respond to contemporary praise worship. They recognize that many techniques used effectively in the 1950s or the 1990s may fall flat today.

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16)

Appreciating the importance of effective communication and flexibility is nothing new. When the church was still so young that it struggled to emerge from its cradle, the Apostle Paul emphasized the importance of understanding other people, adapting to their needs, and communicating on their level.

A question of rights (vv. 16-18)

For Paul, a positive witness begins with the believer's own sense of identity before Christ. In the previous two chapters, Paul addressed issues of contention within the church. Did people have the right to marry (ch. 7)? Did they have the right to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols (ch. 8)? Paul acknowledged that while believers may have certain liberties, they should remember that building relationships is more important than preserving rights.

Chapter 9 may appear to go on a different track, but it is really Paul's continuing argument that one should not let personal rights get in the way of encouraging other believers: he came back to the subject of eating meat offered to idols in ch. 10. We may not worry about meat offered to idols, but many people still harp about their "rights."

Paul began this chapter by making an extended case for why those who devote themselves to preaching the gospel have every right to financial and other support from the churches (vv. 1-7). Soldiers don't have to provide their own food. Vine-keepers drink wine from their grapes, shepherds drink milk from the flock, oxen eat from the grain they thresh, and priests share in the offerings brought to the temple (vv. 8-13). "In the same way," Paul said, "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (v. 14).

Though he defended the right of other missionaries or pastors to receive pay, Paul pointedly refused to demand support for himself. He may have been the premier evangelist of his time, but he did not expect large honoraria or posh lodgings. He didn't wear tailored clothes and ostentatious jewelry as a purported sign of God's blessing, as modern "prosperity preachers" do. For that matter – though he had the right to benefit from his missionary efforts – Paul didn't expect anyone to buy him lunch or cover his travel expenses: he found enough work to support himself.

Nor did Paul brag about his accomplishments. He didn't see his missionary career as a path to material rewards or popular praise, but as a divine obligation, saying "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" (v. 16). His work was not a self-directed enterprise, but a commission from God (v. 17), and he considered the privilege of unselfishly preaching the gospel to be all the reward he needed (v. 18).

Intentional adjustments (vv. 19-23)

Paul's basic approach was to put other people first. He regarded himself as free in Jesus – freed by grace from

legalistic obligations and bound only by the law of Christ. Yet, Paul recognized the gospel imperative of sharing the gospel in effective ways, and he knew that started with building relationships. He also understood that cultivating relationships with people of different cultural backgrounds could impose some restrictions on him, but he accepted those limitations gladly because he recognized their purpose (v. 19).

"To the Jews I became as a Jew," Paul said, "in order to win Jews" (v. 20). When Paul was living and working in a Jewish town, for example, he followed their customs of eating kosher food and observing Sabbath rest. Paul recognized that he was no longer bound by Hebrew purity rules or the extensive oral tradition of the rabbis, but he was willing to live "as one under the law" to win "those under the law" (v. 21a). When he worked and taught among Jewish people, Paul accepted their customs: he did not ask for milk with his mutton or fail to wash his hands in the accepted way.

Likewise, when Paul worked among Gentiles who had never been subject to Jewish law, he acculturated himself to local practice (v. 21b). He accepted the food that was offered to him without concern for whether it was kosher, or whether it was killed in ceremonial fashion with a rabbi's blessing. Early Judaism accepted proselytes from other backgrounds, but only on its own terms. Paul sought to persuade people by reaching out to them on their own terms.

This does not mean that Paul felt free to do whatever he liked. He did not practice immorality just because he worked among an immoral people. He did not adopt foul language so he could relate to profane persons. Paul exercised reason and common sense in his dealings with others. He recognized that he was never free of his obligation to God's ultimate law of love as revealed in Christ (compare Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14, 6:2). Paul was never free to become hateful to others or to be unethical in his dealings, but he was just as free to adapt his eating habits as he was free to switch between languages when the situation required.

Paul spoke not only of persons with different cultural backgrounds, but also differing levels of maturity. Some people in Corinth, perhaps harboring old superstitions, refused to eat any meat that might have been offered to an idol. Paul regarded such scruples as a sign of weakness, yet he still chose to adopt their practice if it meant winning more people to Christ and causing fewer to stumble: "To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some," he said (v. 22).

Paul hoped that others would follow his example. "I have become all things to all people" sounds like a remarkable capitulation, but Paul made it clear that his adaptability remained within the bounds of "the law of Christ," and that it functioned for the purpose of reaching others. Paul recognized his own radical freedom in Christ, but never forgot that the freedom Christ gives is subservient to the obedience Christ deserves. That obedience is not without reward (v. 23).

Disciplined effort (vv. 24-27)

Paul did not believe in wasting effort, either through carelessness or a lack of personal discipline. His evangelistic efforts were based on intentional strategies for mission (vv. 19-23) and personal self-control (vv. 24-27). He illuminated this with the familiar illustration of running a race. Paul did not just run for the sake of running, as recreational joggers do: he ran to win, and encouraged others to "Run in such a way that you may win" (v. 24).

Though stressing the importance of winning, Paul was not suggesting that only one winner would gain entrance to the kingdom. The race of faith is not a competition with others, but with ourselves. Can we practice self-discipline and trust so firmly in Christ that we can avoid getting side-tracked, slowing down, abandoning the race, or prematurely concluding that we have arrived?

As athletes learn to practice self-control, so believers need to run with discipline, Paul said (v. 25). The goal is not so much to outrun others but to run with purpose, to complete the course, and to avoid being disqualified (vv. 26-27). If we finish faithfully, we win.

We learn with experience that the race we run is not on a level track or always in daylight. It may lead us into places we didn't expect to go, and many tempting detours may lead us off the track. Often our race is more like an obstacle course run in the fog, or even in the dark.

Sometimes it is all we can do to see the path and put one foot in front of the other: it takes both commitment to the task and focus on the path to persevere.

Paul challenges us to ask how our own race is coming, and that of our church. Our challenge is not to capitulate to our culture, but to understand it and reach out in effective ways as we call others to join us on the kingdom course. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

February 11, 2024

Psalm 50

Learning What God Wants

> *Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. (Ps. 50:14)*

Psalms come in many shapes, sizes, and even temperatures. This one comes in hot. Psalm 50 sounds as if it came straight from one of the prophetic books, and we can safely assume that its author thought of himself as a prophet. Like Psalms 73–83, the text bears a superscription that associates it with Asaph, who David reportedly installed to lead the music program in the temple.

Psalm 50 sounds more like preaching than singing, however. It is a foot-stomping, toe-bashing, finger-pointing sermon that could have set the congregation's ears ringing.

As a pastor, I learned that while most congregants squirmed at the thought of such sermons, there were always a few who found a pulpit-pounding, sin-condemning peroration to be cathartic and helpful in spurring personal repentance.

Convicting or not, our study of Psalm 50 should lead us to ponder whether we might find ourselves as targets of the psalmist's sharp tongue. The Revised Common Lectionary reading comprises only vv. 7-15, but if we are to grasp the writer's meaning, we should consider the entire psalm.

When God is scary (vv. 1-6)

The psalm begins with a theophany. It is not the kind of majestic and inspiring appearance that we find in Psalm 104, but a frightening show of power and storm. God is identified as "The mighty one, God the LORD," an unfortunate translation that masks the psalmist's sequence of three divine names: "*'El*, *'Elohim*, *Yahweh*," perhaps a reflection of Josh. 22:22, which uses the same sequence twice.

'El is singular and could be used as a generic name for any god. *'Elohim* is plural and can mean "gods," but was used mainly as an alternate name for Israel's god, *Yahweh*. Hebrew was written without punctuation, so another translation could be "God of gods, Yahweh."

The multiplied title contributes to the powerful image of God as Lord of all the earth, who "speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting." The reference to God's shining "out of Zion" speaks to the belief that God's earthly presence was centered in the Jerusalem temple, "the perfection of beauty" (vv. 1-2).

God's rule is not only universal, but also powerful. God does not come in silence or speak in even tones, but "before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him" (v. 3).

The fearsome imagery of God approaching in a storm leads to a courtroom scene similar to the prophetic motif of a covenant lawsuit such as those found in Isa. 1:18-20; 3:13-15; 41:1ff, 21ff; 43:9ff; Jer. 2:4-9; Hos. 2:4ff; and Mic. 6:1ff. Psalm 82 has a similar form.

Here, God "calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people" (v. 4). And who are the defendants in this case? That would be the entire people of Israel, who had entered into a covenant with God at Mount Sinai: "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice" (v. 5).

The inaugural covenant ceremony had been accompanied by elaborate sacrifices and dashing of blood on the altar, with Moses also sprinkling blood on the people and saying, "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exod. 24:3-8).

Having set the earth as a courtroom with witnesses and defendants in place, the psalmist portrays God presiding as judge over the case (v. 6). In practice, God also acts as the prosecuting attorney and chief witness, as we see in the following section.

When sacrifices are meaningless (vv. 7-13, 16-22)

The poet/prophet then speaks for God, who addresses Israel as "my people" and testifies: "I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me" (v. 7).

Sacrifices alone were not the issue. God had a complaint, but it wasn't a lack of animals being slaughtered at the temple. The problem was two-fold. First, the people may have had a misplaced concept of sacrifices as something God needed, perhaps accompanied by an idea that sending God smoke from burning meat was the extent of Israel's responsibility.

God rejected this idea: "I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine" (vv. 9-11).

Babylonians and Assyrians imagined that their gods depended on them for sustenance as well as the cleaning and maintenance of their images. The Gilgamesh epic's version of the flood story, for example, depicts the gods as "swarming like flies" over sacrifices offered by Utnapishtim when he gained dry ground, because they hadn't been fed during the flood.

The Israelites imagined that God expected sacrifices and appreciated the pleasing aroma, but God did not need them for sustenance. Rather, "If I were hungry, I would not tell you," God said, "for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" (vv. 12-13).

More important than the people's misunderstanding, however, was their misbehavior. Verses 16-22 charge the people with specific sins that render their sacrifices hypocritical. "But to the wicked God says: 'What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips?'" (v. 16). Ritual worship is meaningless when offered as a payoff rather than as admiration and thanksgiving.

God charged the people with despising discipline and ignoring the law, saying "you cast my words behind you" (v. 17). They consorted with thieves and adulterers, spoke deceitfully, and slandered their own relatives (vv. 18-20).

Perhaps the people had thought they were getting away with their misbehavior, or that God really was not so different from themselves, but God put that notion to rest: "These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one just like yourself. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you" (v. 21).

Those who had abandoned God and followed their own desires could not do so without consequences: "Mark this, then, you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver" (v. 22).

"You who forget God." Those are chilling words. The verb is a participle: a literal translation would be "God-forgetters." The people might forget their covenant God, but God would not forget them – though they might wish otherwise.

But there was still an option to change their behavior, for the little word "lest" intervenes: "Consider this, you God-forgetters, lest I tear you apart …" The conjunction *pen* can mean "lest," "otherwise," or "else."

How could Israel change their ways and avoid the ugly fate of God-forgetters?

What God wants (vv. 14-15, 23)

What God wanted was for people to worship with faithful hearts, and to understand that the sacrifice God desires most is not a bloody animal, but sincere thanksgiving and praise. Such persons could expect God to hear the prayers they offered.

"Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me" (vv. 14-15). This is one of several psalms that extol heartfelt thanksgiving and praise as superior to sacrifice.

"Pay your vows" is not code for "keep the covenant," but refers to specific promises people may have made in conjunction with making special requests from God. It speaks of people who live in a trusting relationship with God and feel confident in offering prayers of both praise and petition.

The closing verse of the psalm makes it clear that more is involved. Worshipers should not only understand God's attitude toward sacrifice, but also pay attention to God's teachings and treat one another rightly if they are to come with clean hearts that are acceptable to God. Ethical behavior is more important than ritual practice.

"Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way

I will show the salvation of God" (v. 23). Note the connection between going "the right way" and seeing "the salvation of God."

Christian believers do not live under the same covenant described in this psalm. We do not bring animals for sacrifice when we come to worship, but those who follow Jesus are also challenged to follow the right way.

Jesus spoke of choosing a narrow way rather than following the wide and easy road that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13). For Christians, to walk in the right way is to follow Jesus. That begins with denying our selfish desires (Matt. 16:24) and obeying his command to love others as he loved us (John 13:34-35).

That is the sacrifice Jesus taught – one that might involve a sacrifice or time or money or even pride, but all in the name of love. It's easy for modern Christians, like the Israelites, to fall into the trap of ritual behavior we think is "just enough" to get by and still be considered in good standing with God or the church.

Psalm 50 challenges us to consider whether we are God-forgetting people paying lip service, or true followers who "go the right way." NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

February 18, 2024

Psalm 25:1-10

Can I Be Forgiven?

How many ways can you say "sin"? Hebrew has three primary words for it, usually translated as "sin," "iniquity," and "transgression." It also has terms commonly rendered as "evil," "offense," or "wrongdoing."

English has all of those, plus words such as wickedness, unrighteousness, immorality, vice, impiety, impiousness, and more.

We also have a variety of words related to repentance for sin: contrition, regret, remorse, sorrow, self-reproach, shame, guilt. None of those words are particularly pleasant, but we've felt them all. We've disappointed God, disappointed others, and disappointed ourselves. We've made bad choices, taken wrong turns, and generally messed up.

We have all felt the sting of shame, and we long to be forgiven by those we have hurt, and forgiven by God, as well.

That's what today's text is about: Psalm 25 is a prayer for forgiveness, offered in trust to a gracious God. It's the sort of prayer we all need to pray from time to time.

The Revised Common Lectionary reading includes about half of the 22-verse psalm. Typical of acrostics, the poem jumps about thematically, but the primary message can be found in the first 10 verses, so we will focus on those.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! (Ps. 25:7)

Hear me ... (vv. 1-3)

Like several other psalms, Psalm 25 is an acrostic poem, written so that each couplet begins with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It also, like many others, has an editorial superscription with the expression *ledawîd*, which could mean "to David," "for David," or "belonging to David."

The psalmist seeks forgiveness but offers no clue as to what sins have been committed. That works to the reader's advantage, for the poem's lack of specifics makes it easier to put ourselves in the psalmist's sandals. When we read the psalmist's plea, we may think of the sins that plague our own consciences.

The petitioner begins with an open heart: "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul." The use of the covenant name "Yahweh" (LORD) reflects the intimate, personal nature of the prayer. The word translated as "soul" (*nefesh*) describes one's essential being, the source of life and identity. To lift up one's *nefesh* is to be as open as one can be.

The psalmist can present himself to Yahweh so freely and deeply because he trusts God to hear the prayer and respond with care. We may have had the experience of confiding in someone who didn't understand or who told other people what we had revealed in confidence. Fickle friends may let us down, but God can be trusted to hear and understand our innermost fears, thoughts, or confessions – even our doubts.

The psalmist appears to have sought some outward sign of divine favor that would silence the smug criticism of "enemies" who would find satisfaction in his failure. The word for "put to shame" appears three times in vv. 2-3. The poet pleads that God would not bring shame to those who patiently trust ("wait") on God but would humiliate those who are deceitful or disloyal.

We may wonder if the psalmist had experienced hurt or embarrassment at the hands of someone he had trusted. We may know how that feels – or we may have been the person who betrayed another's trust and caused them pain. We all could benefit from a good dose of divine guidance to help keep us on the right path.

Guide me ... (vv. 4-5)

The psalmist prayed for God's guidance in no less than four different ways, asking Yahweh to "make me to know your ways," to "teach me your paths," to "lead me in your truth," and, simply, to "teach me" (vv. 4-5a).

All four expressions acknowledge that the poet is not only willing but also anxious to hear God's instruction. "Your ways," "your paths," and "your truths" were favored terms among Israel's teachers of wisdom. The terms could refer to any commandments and laws to be found in biblical teaching, but they go beyond that.

One could learn the commandments and other rules of community living from a human teacher, but the psalmist seeks more. He longs for God's personal guidance as he deals with everyday situations or makes

life decisions that aren't covered by written laws.

We are constantly faced with choices as we go through life: where (or whether) to attend college, what job to pursue, who (or if) we will marry, whether we want to have or adopt children.

We make daily choices about how we will spend our time, our money, and our energy. Do we give these choices a thought beyond our personal preferences, or do we stop to ask God's guidance? God may not care what we have for dinner, but larger decisions or moral judgments call for deeper reflection. If we want our choices and our lives to honor God, and if we want to be known as upright and faithful people, we need to consider what God might have us do.

Those who claim that God has a detailed life plan mapped out for us overstate the case. Whether we work for company A or company B may not be of divine consequence as long as we work faithfully and ethically. Whether we marry now, five years from now, or never may not concern God, but how we behave every day clearly does.

The point is, if we don't seek God's guidance and consider whether our plans are in keeping with God's teachings, we increase the chance of making a wrong turn.

This is not to suggest that God will always respond clearly or quickly. The psalmist expressed his trust in Yahweh as "the God of my salvation," for whom he was willing to "wait all day long" (v. 5b). As we read the psalm through the lens of the New Testament, we naturally think of God's salvation as being an eternal pardon through Jesus Christ. The psalmist's idea of "salvation," however, would likely have involved deliverance from some difficult situation or person.

Both acts of deliverance involve a change of course. We can't count on a heavenly voice or an angelic finger to point us in the right direction, but as our hearts remain open to God's leadership, we are more likely to sense what path would be most pleasing to God – and thus most appropriate for us.

Forgive me ... (vv. 6-7)

After humbly beseeching God to hear and to guide, the psalmist turns to a theme that will be repeated in vv. 11 and 18: a plea for forgiveness. We do not know if the poet has a particular sin in mind. Indeed, the request that God not remember youthful sins and transgressions may point to a person of some age who is reflecting on life and hoping that God will overlook former indiscretions in favor of better days.

The psalmist does not claim to deserve forgiveness but pleads on the basis of Yahweh's constant mercy and steadfast love, which "have been from of old" (v. 6). This reflects covenant language, a clear echo of God's self-description to Moses: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod. 34:6-7).

Thus, the psalmist appeals to God's faithfulness rather than his own worthiness. Knowing that his life decisions have fallen short, the poet asks for grace rather than what he deserves.

The poet's request that Yahweh would not remember his past failures but "remember" him according to the divine nature of steadfast love and goodness involves more than just hoping God will keep him in mind. In texts such as this, "to remember" is an internal act that has external consequences: God might remember someone because punishment is in order or remember the obedient by bestowing blessings. The psalmist knows he has not earned God's favor. That's why he appeals to God's mercy, love, and goodness.

Believe me ... (vv. 8-10)

The psalmist turns from prayer to testimony in vv. 8-10, no longer addressing God but whoever might read the poem or hear it recited in worship. Believing that God has heard his prayer, the author declares that Yahweh is indeed "good and upright," a God who willingly "instructs sinners in the way" (vv. 4-5).

Such guidance is offered to those who respectfully seek it, for "He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way" (v. 9). This reflects the poet's own reverent approach.

The psalmist does not envision a revolving-door relationship of repetitive sin and forgiveness, as if our wrongdoing doesn't matter so long as we can call upon God's mercy. He believes that "All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness," but he also holds that such love and faithfulness are intended "for those who keep his covenant and his decrees" (v. 10). The more the psalmist learns about God's ways, the more he trusts, and the more faithful he wants to become.

As the psalmist has come to believe these things about his relationship with God, he wants others to believe that they can also turn from their transgressions and experience undeserved but wondrous grace.

There's a good reason why "Amazing Grace" is a perennially favorite hymn. The more we understand the demands of following Jesus' call, the more we know that we need it.

NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

February 25, 2024

Psalm 22:19-31

Can I Be Confident?

Do you understand God? During a nine-year stint as editor of a religious newspaper, I once received an ad from a church seeking a pastor "with the mind of God." I don't know if the church's search committee ever found someone with an inside track to comprehending God's thought process, but the psalmist could not have been among them. He did not understand why he suffered so much – but that did not stop him from trusting God.

Our thoughts often turn to Psalm 22 during the Lenten and Easter seasons because Jesus quoted from its opening words on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Other images in the first part of the psalm appear similar to the sufferings Jesus experienced, so it is often thought of as foreshadowing the work of Christ. We should not let this cause us to overlook the real-life grief expressed by the original psalmist, however – a misery that may sometimes affect our own lives.

The psalm begins with a lengthy complaint as the psalmist describes his deplorable condition, pleading for divine intervention that will bring him relief (vv. 1-18). A shift occurs in vv. 19-21a as the poet prays with increased confidence. This leads to a closing section in which the psalmist praises God for deliverance he has apparently received (vv. 21b-31).

For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. (Ps. 22:28)

A desperate prayer (vv. 19-21a)

The psalm begins with a feeling of total abandonment by God (vv. 1-2), who had delivered the ancestors (vv. 3-5), but not him. He felt like nothing more than "a worm" and a target of derision (vv. 6-8). His God-fearing family (vv. 9-11) had brought him no divine protection. Lost in misery, he felt sick unto death and surrounded by fierce adversaries who gloated over his impending demise (vv. 12-18).

Having poured out his complaint, the psalmist prays as if with his last breath, pleading for God to hear and respond to his need: "But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, and my life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion!" (vv. 19-21a).

The reference to fierce animals surrounding him – strong bulls in v. 12, wild dogs in vv. 16 and 20, lions in vv. 13 and 21 – suggests his sense of both isolation and peril. Still, the prayer makes one thing clear: the poet still had *hope*. The very act of praying – even when the prayer is a complaint – expresses an inner belief that it's not over until it's over, that God may yet come through.

We should never underestimate the power of hope. When all else is lost, hope keeps us going. Only when hope is lost are we truly out of options, but sadly, that happens all too often. Many of us remember the social isolation associated with the Covid pandemic. Pervasive addiction to mobile media has made many people more solitary than social. An epidemic of depression is widespread, especially among young adults, where suicide is a leading cause of death.

We don't know what kind of obstacles or powers troubled the psalmist, but it's not hard to identify issues in our lives that go beyond teen angst and troubled relationships. Legislators (and their supporters) who press for measures that benefit the rich while suppressing women, people of color, and immigrants may seem to us like the brawny bulls, the hungry dogs, or the roaring lions so feared by the psalmist. So might uncaring landlords, oppressive employers, or abusive people with whom we have relationships.

But the poet had not given up. He was down, but not out: he held tightly to hope.

A happy result (vv. 22-24)

Psalms of lament often shift unexpectedly from plea to praise, and this one is no exception. Verse 21b marks a sharp turn, for the psalmist now declares deliverance: "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me."

The change in mood is palpable. Is this a later addition to the earlier plea, an update on the psalmist's condition? Or was the psalm written all at once, moving from dilemma to deliverance like a roller coaster laboring up a hill before rushing freely down the other side?

It matters not: the psalmist's hope has borne fruit; his prayers have paid off. "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you," he says, addressing his audience (and later readers) with newfound confidence. "You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!" (vv. 22-23).

References to the offspring (literally, "seed") of Jacob and Israel recall his earlier recollection of how the ancestors had found deliverance when they put their trust in God (vv. 4-5). Now the poet testifies of his own experience, though in the third person: God had seen the afflicted one, heard his cry, and looked on him with favor (v. 24).

The NRSV changes the pronouns to first person: "he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him." Whether in first- or third-person, the testimony is clear: the psalmist felt that he had been delivered from his afflictions, whatever they might have been.

Two images stand out: The claim that God did not "hide his face" recalls the Aaronic blessing of Num. 6:25-26: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." One does not have to see God's face to believe that God has looked upon them with kindness and deliverance.

The second image involves hearing: "when he cried out to him, he heard" (a literal translation). The verb is *shām'a*, "to hear." From a human perspective, when humans truly hear God, they obey. From the divine perspective, God's hearing leads to a response. Thus, after Hannah made a vow to God, asking for a son and promising to return the boy to God's service, she named the child Samuel – *shemû'ēl* – "heard of God" (1 Sam. 1:20).

When we pray, we do so with hope that God will *see* our need and *hear* our plea. We don't always get the response we long for, but we can be sure that God does not ignore us.

A promise to keep (vv. 25-31)

With v. 25, we learn that the psalmist, like Hannah, had punctuated his fervent prayers with a vow. So, we can read vv. 21-22 as a votive request followed by a promise. I translate it this way: "Save my life from the sword, my only one from the claws of the dog; Save me from the mouth of the lion, and from the horns of the wild ox: answer me! (Then) I will tell of your name to my brethren, in the midst of the assembly I will praise you."

The author of Psalm 22, like others (Ps. 61:7-8, 69:29-30, 109:29-30), had promised to repay God's blessing with praise – and not just private praise, but through uplifted testimony among those gathered for worship. "From you comes my praise in the great congregation," he declared: "my vows I will pay before those who fear him" (v. 25).

As testimony, he expressed confidence that the poor would yet eat and those who seek God would yet offer praise (v. 26). Such words could offer comfort to others who still faced trials, but without apparent relief.

The psalm closes with a paean of praise extolling God's universal power, such that "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him" (v. 27). The psalmist was not a universalist in the modern sense of the word, but the poet felt confident that all peoples would ultimately recognize the one who has dominion over the world, and who "rules over the nations" (v. 28).

This thought carries forward into v. 29, which is difficult to translate and often emended on the assumption that the text has become corrupt. The general sense of it, however, is that everyone, if only in death, will come to bow before God.

People may die, but worship goes on. In v. 23, the psalmist challenged the descendants (literally, "seed") of Jacob and Israel to praise and glorify God. In vv. 30-31, he declares that "Offspring will serve him, will testify to a generation; they will come and tell of his justice, to a people being born what he has done" (my translation). The wording is odd, but the message seems straightforward: one generation is called to teach the next about God.

The psalmist, at least, was determined to do his part in telling the story. Through the whole of the psalm, his testimony reminds us that it is perfectly fine to have questions and doubts, even to yell at God with the unfairness of it all.

He also reminds us as well that hope and despair are not mutually exclusive. On given days, we may feel more of one than the other, but as long as we maintain the slenderest thread of hope, our connection with God remains open.

The psalm contends that anchors of hope can be found in what we believe about the nature of God, in what we have heard about God's work in the past, and in what we ourselves have experienced.

In the end, the psalmist insists that prayer, though often pained, is essential to hope, and may yet turn into praise. NFJ

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Epiphany

Getting Off to a Good Start

January 7
Acts 19:1-10
A Gospel Quartet to Remember

January 14
1 Corinthians 6
Getting It Straight

January 21
1 Corinthians 7:25-40
Considering the Time

January 28
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Practicing Flexible Faith

February 4
1 Corinthians 9:16-27
Getting It Right about Rights

February 11
Psalm 50
Learning What God Wants

Lent

Questions to Ponder

February 18
Psalm 25:1-10
Can I Be Forgiven?

February 25
Psalm 22:19-31
Can I Be Confident?

March 3
Psalm 19
Can I Be Good?

March 10
Psalm 107
Can I Be Grateful?

March 17
Psalm 119:9-16
Can I Be Whole-Hearted?

March 24
Psalm 31
Can I Be Safe?

Easter

Acts to Remember

March 31 (Easter)
Acts 10:34-43
Good News for Everyone

April 7
Acts 4:32-35
True Community

April 14
Acts 3
Why the Suprise?

April 21
Acts 4:1-12
This Is the Way

April 28
Acts 8:26-40
What Hinders Me?

May 5
Acts 10:44-48
Can Anyone Deny?

May 12
Acts 1:15-26
The Unknown Disciple

May 19 (Pentecost)
Romans 8:18-27
The Spirit Who Helps

After Pentecost

May 26 (Trinity Sunday)
Romans 8:12-17
In the Flesh, of the Spirit

Mark My Words:

June 2
Mark 2:23-3:6
Future Fundamentalists

June 9
Mark 3:20-35
Real Family

June 16
Mark 4:26-34
Two Seedy Stories

June 23
Mark 4:35-41
The Weatherman

June 30
Mark 5: 21-43
Touching God

July 7
Mark 6: 1-13
Home and Away

July 14
Mark 6: 14-29
The Death of the Party

July 21
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
No Rest for the Weary

Some Things Never Change:

July 28
2 Kings 4:42-44
The Miracle Man

August 4
Exodus 16
What Is It?

Aug. 20, 2023
Matthew 15:1-28
When Crumbs Are Enough

August 11
Psalm 34
Call and Response

August 18
Proverbs 9
Listen to Lady Wisdom

August 25
Joshua 24: 1-25
Make Your Choice

September 1
Psalm 15
Who Gets Close to God?

September 8
Psalm 125
Presuppositions and Prayer

September 15
Psalm 116
When the Answer is Yes

September 22
Psalm 54
Same Old Same Old?

September 29
Esther 7:1-10, 9:20-22
Celebrating Vengeance?

Hard Sayings:

October 6
Mark 10:1-16
Hard Words and a Soft Heart

October 13
Mark 10: 17-31
The Trouble with Treasure

October 20
Mark 10: 32-45
First and Last

October 27
Mark 10: 46-52
What Do You Want?

Looking Ahead:

November 3
Ruth 1:1-2:23
From Tears to Action

November 10
Ruth 3:1-4:21
From Empty to Full

November 17
Daniel 12:1-3
Future Dreams

November 24
1 Samuel 1:1-28
Longing for a Son

Advent

Someone's Coming

December 1
1 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Anticipating

December 8
Philippians 1:1-11
Longing

December 15
Philippians 4:1-7
Rejoicing

December 22
Hebrews 10:1-10
Out of the Shadows

Christmas

December 29
Colossians 3:12-17
Resolution Clothes

Statement of Ownership,
Management and Circulation

1. Publication title: *Nurturing Faith Journal*
2. Publication number: 10727787
3. Filing date: 09/19/2023
4. Issue frequency: bimonthly
5. No. of issues published annually: 6
6. Annual subscription price: $30 U.S
7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication:
   4008 Dornoch Lane
   Norman, OK 73072
   Contact person: Mitch Randall
   Telephone: (405) 761-2662
8. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office of publisher:
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070
9. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor and managing editor:
   Publisher: Good Faith Media, Inc.
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070
   Editor: Craig Nash
   Good Faith Media, Inc.
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070
   Managing Editor: Jackie B. Riley and Bruce Gourley
   Good Faith Media, Inc.
   P.O. Box 721972
   Norman, OK 73070
10. Owner: Good Faith Media, Inc. (nonprofit)
    P.O. Box 721972
    Norman, OK 73070

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

11. Known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities:
    None
12. Tax status: The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes
has not changed during the preceding 12 months
13. Publication title: *Nurturing Faith Journal*
14. Issue date for circulation data below:
    09/19/2023
15. Extent and nature of circulation
    National and limited foreign
    Total number of copies: *4,143
    Paid and/or requested circulation
    Paid/requested outside-county mail subscriptions stated on Form 3541:
    Paid in-county subscriptions stated on Form 3541: — **—
    Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales and other non-USPS paid distribution: *— **—
    Other classes mailed through the USPS: — **—
    Total paid and/or requested circulation: *4,143
    Free distribution by mail
    Outside-county as stated on Form 3541: *— **—
    In-county as stated on Form 3541: *— **—
    Other classes mailed through the USPS: *— **—
    Total free distribution: *116
    Total distribution: 4,259
    Copies not distributed:
    Total:
    Percent paid and/or requested circulation: *97%
16. Publication statement of ownership: Publication required. Will be printed in the January / February 2024 issue of this publication.

*Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months
**No. copies of single issues published nearest to filing date

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The seasons of life: part 3

BY KEITH HERRON

There's an ancient norm from the Bible that a full life is measured as "three score and ten years." That's 70 years in Shakespearean math.

So, the stage of young adulthood builds to a midlife crescendo. One could easily not know when crossing the threshold — and may not know of moving into the second half of life.

In this first stage of adulthood, the lines are drawn loosely. It's murky leaving adolescence and even murkier crossing the midpoint of life. One may only see the signposts after passing them.

What life markers help us imagine this stage of young adulthood?

A sample checklist includes leaving home, establishing personal values, surviving serious stress, finishing formal education, landing a full-time job, balancing friendships, enriching life through spirituality, surviving failure, handling personal debt, discovering one's identity, enjoying one's mobility, sex (or not), beginning a family (or not), embracing one's own inner cynic, and exploring a balance in one's materialism and spirituality.

Welcome to the ambiguity of this first stage of adulthood!

Leaving home is a concept loaded with meaning. It should be understood as a part of the natural journey through adolescence toward independence, or better, toward interdependence.

Young adulthood is the transitional season between adolescence and middle age. At the end of this third decade in life (give or take a few years), we will be looking inquisitively over the horizon and observing that the arc of life is cresting. And even from the end of this stage, one might get a sense of the early stages of decline.

John Claypool, in his 1978 book, Stages: *The Art of Living the Expected*, rightly claimed these three stages of adulthood form the longest stretch of life.

If adolescence is the most intense stage along the way, he said, adulthood is the most demanding. Not only is the topography of adulthood complicated, but there are many difficult challenges a person is forced to face simultaneously.

That complexity is what Gail Sheehy called "concomitant growth" — indicating her awareness that we are called to grow simultaneously on multiple fronts in ways we haven't had to struggle prior to this stage.

There is work, vocation, one's selfhood and all manner of challenging relationships.

Looking back at the young biblical David in this first stage of adulthood, we see he is living a big life. It is difficult to plot all the drama of his life's story in early adulthood, but some things stick out.

He navigated a testy relationship with King Saul. In fact, David had early insight into the end of Saul's reign: when David was a child, the prophet Samuel unexpectedly showed up at his father's camp seeking to anoint the one who would replace Saul as the king.

Samuel was doing what God told him to do and didn't go to Saul to inquire what the king thought of this idea. So, from his boyhood, David had the idea that sometime in the future, he would take over after Saul stepped off the stage.

King Saul treated David abusively for years. Saul tried several times in fits of anger to kill David by hurling a javelin at him. The historian tells us of David's loyalty to the king, but we see Saul's insecurity that led him to act unmercifully toward him.

Sometime later, Saul and his son were both killed on the field of battle and David went into pronounced mourning. That led the northern tribes of Israel to ask David to

serve as their king, and he then navigated the consolidation of both the north and the south into one unified, powerful nation.

David led the merged armies of Israel and Judah, the armies of the southern and northern kingdoms, against the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem had fended off multiple Israeli attacks in the past.

David's unified army defeated Jerusalem, a mid-sized village on the highest land and paved the way for designating Jerusalem as the city from which the unified nation could rule over the region as the crossroads of the world linking Europe to Africa to Asia.

For a bright shining moment, Israel was one nation and able to defend itself against any that would wish to sweep through the country to control this strategic crossroads.

This article on young adulthood is the third in a five-part series on the seasons of life.

David led the unified nation to assert itself as a regional power, capable of self-rule and confident of its ability to protect its borders.

Soon after, David moved the Ark of the Covenant from its temporary home and led the chorus of worshipers who were ecstatic that it was being carried to Jerusalem in a parade beyond description. Full of songs and cheers, the young king was so full of joy that he was out of his mind dancing before the ark as it made its way to the city.

David paid no mind to the fact that he was dancing energetically, dressed only in a linen ephod (something perhaps like the wrappings akin to those worn by sumo wrestlers). Michal, Saul's daughter and David's wife, says she "watched from an upper floor window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart."

She was embarrassed at his lack of decorum and felt it was beneath his dignity as king. In a sarcastic rebuke of her husband, Michal accused him of "going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls as any vulgar fellow would."

Undeterred by her criticism, David doubled down, telling her it was the Lord he was dancing before, and he was quite willing to abase himself in the Lord's presence: "I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes."

David's deep passion and exuberant worship are part of what make him so charismatic and relatable. He expressed his adoration of God in a variety of ways: through his music, his writings and his public displays.

David was a king in his young adult stage. He was a vibrant leader with fresh ideas and a passion about life that made him dynamic.

Richard Rohr, in *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, suggests that the task of the first half is to create a proper container for one's life and answer the first quintessential questions: What makes me significant? How can I support myself? Who will go with me?

The container is not an end in itself but exists for the sake of one's deeper and fuller life, which is largely unknown to oneself. The task of the second half is to find the contents this container was meant to hold and deliver.

Rohr probes the core issues of younger adults who are trying to piece together a direction in life and how they intend to relate to the key figures they've enlisted as friends, lovers and cohorts.

If one can make a path toward a meaningful challenge in life, one will begin to build the platform that will guide one to a complete life. This is the period when the right friends, the right adventurers can add meaning to this fragile but exciting life.

In this first stage of adulthood, time looks open-ended. In reality, it is fractional and brief before it morphs into something unexpected.

The end of young adulthood comes when it comes. Young adulthood is not necessarily contained by a single decade — and one faces concomitant growth challenges on multiple fronts on this journey to the middle of life.

King David was planting in the soil of who he was, the promise of who he would become. So do we. NFJ

—Keith Herron is intentional interim minister at Countryside Community Church in Omaha, Neb.

Indigenous in America

By Mitch Randall

At the end of last year, two films were released chronicling the heart-wrenching and infuriating story of the Indigenous peoples of North America.

Award-winning documentarian Ken Burns paralleled the anguishing journeys of the American buffalo and Indigenous peoples in his two-part series, *The American Buffalo*.

"The first time I looked into the eyes of a buffalo, it was like looking into the past and future at the same time," Dan O'Brien said in the film. Before the European invasion of North America, Burns recalled the symbiotic relationship between the buffalo and Indigenous peoples.

The buffalo was a sacred animal, respected and valued in Indigenous peoples' cultural mythologies and practices. Origins stories tell of the buffalo emerging from what is now called Mt. Scott in Oklahoma, preparing the way for humans to walk upon the earth.

The Great Spirit created buffalo to provide humans with the necessary resources to survive and thrive. Every part of the buffalo was used by Indigenous people after a hunt, with hunters expressing their thankfulness to the buffalo and the Great Spirit for helping them live.

All of this began to change in 1492 when Europeans showed up on the eastern shores of North America. Fueled by a deep desire for economic, cultural and theological superiority, European explorers began the process of conversion, conquest and control.

The story takes an even darker turn as European Christians interjected the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny into the relationship.

Pope Alexander VI issued the Doctrine of Discovery on May 4, 1493, in a papal bull titled *Inter Caetera*.

The bull stated, "the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself."

Later, in 1823, Supreme Court Justice John Marshall's opinion used the Doctrine of Discovery to justify Western expansionism using Manifest Destiny in Johnson v. McIntosh, "that the principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands."

White Christian superiority coupled with greedy capitalistic notions spelled doom for the Indigenous peoples and the American buffalo. After several hundred years, both the people and the buffalo stood on the brink of extinction.

The other film told the brutal 1920s story of the Osage people being murdered by white settlers living in Eastern Oklahoma. The settlers were after Osage land rights when oil was discovered in Indian Territory.

The Osage were the only relocated tribe that negotiated a land deal with the U.S. government, giving them mineral rights to their lands. Once oil was discovered, the Osage became some of the wealthiest people in the world.

The white claims of the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny could not allow Indigenous peoples to hold any kind of economic superiority over them. Therefore, they devised a plan to gain land rights by killing the Osage people.

Based on the book by David Grann, award-winning director Martin Scorsese produced an epic movie called *Killers of the Flower Moon*. The book and movie tell the story of an Osage woman, Mollie Burkhart.

Burkhart's husband, Ernest, was a pawn in a larger diabolical plot created and orchestrated by William King Hale, a cattleman living in Indian Territory. While the movie centers on Burkhart and Hale, Grann's book suggests the same plots were carried out throughout Indian Territory.

Some of the most famous oil names in the country were complicit in this type of murderous behavior. The tragic and painful plight of the Indigenous peoples once again emerged as white Christians perpetuated the idea that they were superior and everyone else needed to succumb to their will.

As a citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation in Oklahoma, my Indigenous body, mind and spirit have been troubled by what I've learned over my 53 years. As a Christian, my blood boils, realizing that Christianity has been used as a tool for such barbaric cruelty.

To be completely honest, stories such as *The American Buffalo* and *Killers of the Flower Moon* have given me pause to reconsider my Christian faith. How can I continue claiming to be a Christian, knowing the death and destruction my faith has wrought?

There is one person who keeps me believing and hoping—Jesus.

Jesus was a Palestinian Jew living among a tribal community with more connections with the Indigenous peoples of North America than most bearing his name, especially the Christian nationalists promoting a perverted gospel.

Jesus has convinced me more and more to reject the oppressive faith bearing the title of Christ to embrace a more inclusive and just faith bearing his name, teachings and actions.

While I have not abandoned my Christian name given to me within this colonized existence of America, I am finding more solace and peace in the name given to me by a Comanche chief when I became an adult.

For now, I remain Mitch Randall, but as the days pass, I am becoming *Numu Kutsu*—Sacred Buffalo. NFJ

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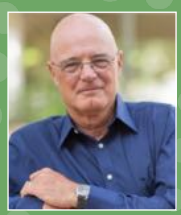
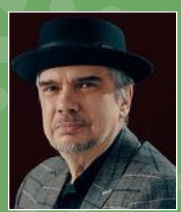

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Lessons from the Ride

By Larry Hovis

In October 2023, I conducted the third Welcome Ride, a multi-day bicycle ride across North Carolina to raise awareness and funds for the Welcome House Community Network, a ministry that serves housing insecure populations, especially refugees and asylum seekers.

The large, well-organized ride—taking seven days and covering 460 miles—crossed the state from the mountains to the coast. Here are a few lessons gleaned from that experience.

Solitary vs. Social

For the first four days, I rode with a group of friends; during the last three days, I rode solo. Both approaches were enjoyable.

As a fairly social person, I like being with others. But I also like "me time."

Riding with others requires some adapting concerning pace, rest stops, and taking care to not touch tires together. Those are not concerns when riding alone, allowing for getting lost in one's thoughts.

The same is true of the Christian faith. There is no salvation by proxy. Discipleship is a personal decision. No one can profess faith for another. Yet, we need others to accompany us on the journey of faith. Faith is both solitary and social.

Unity in Diversity

I was amazed at the diversity of riders who participated in this experience. Young and old, large and small, male and female, riders who looked like they could compete in the Tour De France, and those who looked like they wouldn't be able to ride for one day, much less seven. Likewise, the bikes came in all styles—road, touring, mountain and e-bikes. They ranged in cost from a few hundred dollars to many thousands.

In the midst of this diversity, everyone had one thing in common: a passion for cycling that brought us together.

With so many varieties of Christianity today, I sometimes wonder if we are all part of the same religion. It can feel like I have more in common with some people of other faiths and no faith, than with some other Christians.

Yet all Christians have in common a shared profession of Jesus Christ as Lord. When frustrated with Christians who have different viewpoints, I remind myself that they, too, love Jesus, and that we all "see through a glass darkly." Jesus is the tie that binds.

Stuff Happens

On the fourth day, with about 90 percent of the day's route completed, I had a flat tire. My riding partner and I replaced the inner tube pretty easily and resumed our ride.

A few miles later, the same tire flatted again, only seven miles from our destination. We then realized the tire had a spot that was severely worn and beyond repair.

That night, I was scheduled to stay in the home of a pastoral colleague. I called him and he sent a church member in a truck to pick me up and take my bike and me to a mechanic with a new tire.

In the journey of faith, stuff happens. Sometimes we contribute to the problem, as when I failed to notice my worn tire before starting this experience. Sometimes it's beyond our control. "The rain falls on the unjust."

As Christians, we shouldn't feel exempt from experiencing bad things. Sickness comes. Death visits. Children go astray. Financial hardships occur. Churches decline and even close.

The beauty of Christian community is that we don't have to travel this road alone. We have companions on the journey to help us get through the difficulties.

"You Got This"

Our daughter lives overseas, but thanks to communications technology, we stay in touch regularly and easily. Prior to the ride, my wife told her I was nervous, having never attempted a ride of this magnitude. The day before I was to start the ride, she texted me, "Dad, you got this."

That simple message boosted my confidence. Her faith in me lifted my spirits and strengthened my courage. Doubt didn't completely leave me, but it diminished and was no longer a cloud hanging over me.

These are discouraging times for many Christians, especially pastors. The old ways of "doing church" are not working as well as in previous times.

Pastors feel responsible for the declining institutional metrics of their churches. A growing number are leaving vocational ministry. They need encouragement.

They need both pastoral colleagues and members of their congregation to say to them, "You got this. We appreciate you. You are doing a great job in a difficult environment. You have our support."

Albert Einstein once said, "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."

The same is true for Christian faith. The destination is important, but so is the journey. And the journey is not without its challenges.

Thank God for those who travel with us… and for Jesus, who whispers in our ear, "You got this." NFJ

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

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For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations. -Psalm 100:5

"Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it."

LESSONS from SALEM

False claims of persecution damage those who truly suffer

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Are you being persecuted? Probably not. Persecution is not what it's often claimed to be.

Sarah Good was one of the 20 persons, mostly women, wrongly put to death in Salem in 1692.

Until we understand what persecution is and isn't, we risk falsely applying this tragic term in self-serving ways — and doing a disservice and perhaps additional damage to those who genuinely suffer for their convictions.

Tracking the full extent of worldwide religious persecution can be challenging with various organizations reporting the tragedies.

"There are continuing acts of intolerance and violence based on religion or belief against individuals, including against persons belonging to religious communities and religious minorities around the world, and the number and intensity of such incidents, which are often of a criminal nature and may have international characteristics, are increasing."

So stated a report from the United Nations on "Human rights related to freedom of religion or belief." The U.N. promotes an annual international day to raise awareness of religious persecution and to remember these victims.

The U.S. Department of State is also charged with reporting to Congress each year on the state of international religious freedom. Also, Pew Research Center measures restrictions on religious liberty around the world.

FALSE CLAIMS

Religious persecution has been defined as "the systematic mistreatment of an individual or a group of individuals as a response to their religious beliefs or affiliations or their lack thereof."

Too often Americanized Christians, who've enjoyed a life of majority influence, find growing cultural diversity and the American ideal of equal religious liberty for all, to be uncomfortable.

The term persecution can be embraced when faced with any loss of that privileged position.

However, persecution is not a matter of mere disagreement or inconvenience — or being exposed to ideas that do not align with one's own.

Someone is not being persecuted just because others resist their attempts to have majority religious beliefs and practices imposed on them.

False claims of persecution — or justifications for persecution — are often tied to historical misrepresentations.

Social media and agenda-driven "news" channels selectively shape and widely advance various revisionary and romanticized descriptions of the past that often ignore reality.

This is especially true regarding the emergence of America's constitutional guarantee of religious liberty for all. One only has to log onto social media or listen to certain talking heads on TV to discover wildly fabricated tales being presented as truth.

These intentional misrepresentations are formed to validate misguided attitudes and actions — including claims that one's religion is superior to others and justifiably advanced with the helping hand of government.

ASSESSMENTS

Two assessments of misapplied persecution — picked up in various places — ring quite

true. Their original source, however, has been untraceable.

The first is: "*When you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.*"

Growing up in a majority culture can lead one to expect to have outsized influence over those who look, think or live differently. Any challenge to that familiar and controlling power is threatening — and too often misrepresented as persecution.

The second assessment is: "*Accountability feels like persecution to those who have never been held accountable.*"

This statement relates to power-holding as well — and is particularly well timed.

Today we are watching numerous persons being held accountable who have long behaved as if they are beyond accountability due to social status or other justifications.

The "p-word" gets employed to express outrage at mere accountability that has long been applied to others.

"They've *persecuted* these people," a former U.S. president said of the Department of Justice for holding accountable those whose unlawful and violent siege of the Capitol building he instigated on Jan. 6, 2021.

However, accountability — or as church people say, having your sins found out — is not persecution.

True persecution is executed by those in power toward those who lack such social, political and economic standing.

In many places around the world today, people are experiencing the harshness of such persecution. We do a disservice to them when making false claims of our own.

HYSTERIA

History is a good teacher for understanding persecution — as is looking at those places in the world today where people genuinely suffer for their beliefs.

The late-17th-century atrocities in colonial Massachusetts — known as the Salem Witch Trials — are tragic reminders of how religiously zealous people can be the purveyors of persecution.

It is sobering to stand over the memorials in Salem — dedicated in 1992 by Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel — and read the names of the victims and the descriptions of their unwarranted deaths.

"The trials have become a metaphor for hysterical persecution, unfounded accusations, and confessions that have no reasonable explanation," writes Elizabeth Reis in *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (1997, Cornell University Press).

Hysteria is the familiar descriptor of what fueled this ugly chapter in early American history.

The whole episode was built on ignorance, religiously-fueled hostility, devilish doctrines and fear-based violence — with those same factors often at play in ensuing acts of persecution.

TARGETS

Actual persecution is often a means of scapegoating or vengeance.

"Witchcraft accusations often emerged out of the context of personal disputes, with one of the parties attributing some personal adversity to the diabolically supported malevolence of the other," writes Carol F. Karlsen in *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (1998, Norton).

As both Reis and Karlsen's books explore, women were targeted in particular during the witch trials.

"If witchcraft episodes were extraordinary, they did not emerge out of thin air," writes Reis.

Nealy 200 persons were accused of witchcraft during the Salem episode, said Karlsen. Of the 185 who are identifiable by name, "more than three-fourths were female" and "nearly half the males were husbands, sons or other male relatives of accused women."

"Derogatory cultural images of women fueled witchcraft accusations and proceedings," writes Reis, "and women's guilt over their perceived spiritual inadequacies could even lead them to confess to specific transgressions they apparently had not committed."

In many cases, discrimination and even persecution tend to have targets marked by the "derogatory cultural images" placed on minorities whose proposed equality is a threat to those in power and seeking to retain such positions.

The context, as Reis notes, matters. In this case, it was the religious culture of New England Puritanism. These Puritans, she added, "were as familiar with Satan's wily ways as they were of Christ's unfailing goodness."

Someone's belief being considered heretical (not what the majority deemed and policed as orthodoxy) was often linked to accusations of witchcraft. Karlsen also notes that, unsurprising, the demise of witchcraft accusations and Puritanism were simultaneous.

What hasn't disappeared, however, are the widespread theological justifications for male superiority within the large and influential religious bodies. These are often expressed today by claims of gender equality — yet qualified by assigned roles in which only men hold power.

Targets tend to be those persons who by gender, race or other identifications are assigned a lesser status.

LESSONS

The lessons from history are plentiful — as are the ways Americanized Christians today so often aggressively reject having their ideological priorities that are at odds with Jesus' life and teachings pointed out to them.

So often they will claim persecution.

Using religious and political power to impose one's beliefs and practices is highly dangerous. Even a sense of such superiority is what leads to discrimination against — and even persecution of — targeted persons by those who tend to claim persecution for themselves.

Posting on social media, Benjamin Cremer rightly notes: "Sadly, some of us Christians are unable to tell the difference between being 'persecuted' for our commitment to Jesus and simply being held accountable for mistreating others while claiming to follow Jesus."

Those who actually experience persecution are doubly harmed when those who are merely inconvenienced or rightly held accountable make that claim. NFJ

FAMILY ESTRANGEMENT

Ministering to those with broken parent-adult child relationships

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

In 2021, David Brooks wrote a column in the *New York Times* titled, "What's Ripping American Families Apart?"

As other observers have done, he pointed to a 2015 study reported in the *Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Science*, revealing that at least 27 percent of Americans are estranged from a member of their family.

The research further noted that about 40 percent of Americans have experienced estrangement at some point.

SILENT PAIN

So among the sources of silent yet unrelenting pain someone who shares a church pew, classroom, workplace or neighborhood might be experiencing is the loss of relationship between a parent and an adult child.

Some congregational leaders are finding this particular concern to be largely unaddressed and in need of more careful attention along with other family-related matters. It is often a sensitive issue. Therefore, the suffering can be concealed.

Likely, it's not that church people don't care, but that they don't know how to care when the situation involves a very private, perhaps even embarrassing family situation.

Yet in the same ways churches provide support for those experiencing divorce or the death of a family member, the estrangement of a parent and adult child needs a sensitive response.

Perhaps providing a support group — in the same way other painful losses are addressed — could be a good approach. Those experiencing this pain may self-identify and opt in.

DISENGAGEMENT

Responses are best tied to showing compassion rather than taking sides. Factors vary for why some parents are disengaged from those they raised.

Sometimes the divisions develop over conflicting religious and political ideologies. And since the study was released in 2015, ideological division in American society at large has only deepened.

Abuse, of course, is always a valid reason for needed separation. And there are other matters impacting this painful relational breakage.

Whatever is at the root and wherever the blame might lie, many parents know the daily pain of no longer having their adult children, and in many cases grandchildren, in their lives. And, conversely, adult children can experience this sense of deep relational loss as well.

Recognizing this growing problem of older parents estranged from their adult children, Fe Anam Avis founded the PEAK (Parents of Estranged Adult Kids) Support Network in 2019.

Described as an "entrepreneurial humanitarian," Avis has broad experience from working in satellite reconnaissance and in pastoral ministry.

He has led movements to address faith communities in transition, suicidal persons, victims of domestic violence, internationally displaced persons and abandoned HIV children.

"Family estrangement in general and parental estrangement in particular are major, unaddressed issues in our society today," he told *Nurturing Faith Journal*. "Fifty to 70 million adults over the age of 18 indicate they are estranged from a family member."

He added that "five million parents are estranged from an adult child, and there are another 15 to 20 million downstream estrangements that result."

LOSS & HOPE

As with mental health and other issues that impact individuals and society at large, family estrangement is often downplayed or hidden.

"The stigma around the issue is so deep that parents do not feel safe disclosing it," said Avis.

"Many people tell me that they do not know an estranged parent," he added. "My response is always the same: 'You know an estranged parent; they just haven't told you yet.'"

Among the 20 books he has written is *PEAK — Parents of Estranged Adult Kids: A Resource for Recovery*, with an updated edition released in 2023.

He defines parental estrangement as "one or more adult children intentionally choosing to end contact with a parent." In the book's introduction, Avis gets personal.

"There are few situations more agonizing in life than to find that your adult child has cut off communication with you and possibly you from your grandchildren," he writes.

"Personally, I have experienced the loss of a best friend in war, the tragic death of my only sister in a car accident, the murder of my sister-in-law, the total loss of every financial asset, and despair so deep I nearly took my own life."

Yet he concludes: "I can say without qualification that the estrangement from my adult children and grandchildren has been more painful than any of these other experiences."

Out of his own experiences and studies, Avis has not stayed mired in despair — adding "I can say with equal conviction that estranged parents can find hope and healing."

FACTORS

Pastor John Roy of Pelham Road Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., said he was

surprised to learn the large scale of parent-child estrangement. So he asked Avis to discuss the topic in a YouTube interview titled "Intersections."

Estrangement, said Avis, is different from conflict that may cause a temporary breakdown, but the relationship remains connected to a significant degree.

Some conflict between parents and their teen or young adult children, he noted, is common.

"We're talking about adult children over age 25," he said.

Factors — a term he prefers rather than causes — are varied, he said. Most often, there is third-party involvement — possibly a divorced parent, an in-law or even the internet.

Other factors include mental issues, drug addiction or differences in temperament. Sometimes a situation such as military service or work reassignment can create physical distance that exacerbates the alienation.

"We know that 95 percent of the time it's the adult child who is cutting off the relationship," said Avis.

Roy told *Nurturing Faith Journal* that he values the work Avis' organization does working primarily with parents who suffer from estrangement from their adult children.

Yet, as a pastor, he also considers it important to reach out and listen to the adult children. Broken relationships, he noted, are not one-sided.

"From the pastor's perspective there are girls estranged from fathers due to sexual abuse," said Roy. "Further there are children estranged from parents because a parent remarries and then drives a wedge between the kids and their parent."

"There is always the other side of the story," he noted.

RESPONSES

Avis' book, *PEAK*, is designed as "a resources for recovery" for individuals or groups. Each chapter ends with suggested questions for reflection or discussion.

Additionally, Avis leads what he calls SPEAK (Serving Parents of Estranged Adult Kids) training to help faith community leaders focus on what can be done in ministering to persons experiencing family estrangement.

The session explores why parental estrangement is a major health problem, and the impact it has on parents, grandparents, grandchildren, siblings and others.

Also addressed are examples of estrangement in the Bible, how to have a "faith-based, life-affirming conversation with an estranged parent," and ways to raise awareness of this issue within the church or other faith-oriented places.

In general, said Avis, church leaders might consider doing these four things:

1. Explicitly welcome estranged family members into the church.
2. Address the concern in sermons (the Bible is full of family estrangement passages), prayers and liturgy.
3. Educate the congregation about how to have meaningful, healing conversations with estranged parents.
4. Provide recovery groups for members of the community dealing with this issue.

The one consistency in broken relationships, Avis and Roy said, is the need for intentional, compassionate responses. NFJ

CHC
Center For Healthy Churches

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

Why pastors will miss Johnny Pierce

By Bill Wilson

One of the things I have appreciated most about editor Johnny Pierce is his willingness to speak truth to difficult topics.

With profound insight and just the right amount of humor and humility, he has consistently poked and prodded moderate Baptists to think more deeply about our tendencies, habits, biases and foibles.

He has also taken on complex social issues and named behaviors that fall short of God's intention for humanity.

He has exposed the blatant abuses by Southern Baptist leaders and their private kingdoms of excess and largess. He has named the idolatry of blending politics and religion as being the norm for our current reality.

In all of this, he has remained steadfast for the truth and adamant about integrity. In short, Johnny has personified what many pastors can only wish they could do for their congregation.

Being able to speak freely about the implications of being a Christ-follower in an increasingly secular world is something many pastors no longer know. The infiltration of demonic secular political behavior into the life of local churches has created an untenable conflict.

Speaking truth to power has been the hallmark of healthy church and clergy life since the inception of the church. Now, however, that ability is being eroded and sabotaged as churches conform to the societal norms rather than seek to transform them.

Paul exhorted us in Romans 12 to seek out a higher priority than simply reflecting the practices and mores of the surrounding culture. Clearly, he knew that our tendency would be the path of least resistance and that we would eventually be indistinguishable from the world around us.

Paul's hope for us was a renewing of our minds and hearts in the face of such secular headwinds. He is begging us to focus on Jesus and his message of love, grace and mercy, rather than the old way of heavy-handed law, punishment and forced conformity.

Sadly, most pastors live in a state of fear that their prophetic words will result in a slew of critical emails, encounters and conversations. One pastor recently told me that "even quoting Jesus has gotten me in trouble" with certain constituencies.

When a congregation allows political priorities to matter more than the words of Jesus, then we have become fully "conformed to the world."

Johnny has been vocal in espousing an alternative to such a skewed approach to congregational and clergy life. The Jesus Worldview Initiative suggests we have lost our focus on Jesus and must reconnect with our founder if we hope to survive and thrive in the future.

I love the idea that a group of people might be willing to counter the polarization of our culture by lifting up Jesus as an alternative. The one who assembled a band of followers from every part of the prevailing culture and transformed them by uniting them around him can certainly do the same for us.

The question is: Do we really want to follow Jesus? To do so is to choose the narrow path and forego the easier and wider path in 21st-century America. We should remember that we are not the first ones to face this dilemma.

It has always been easier to live in the spirit of the Pharisees and Sadducees than to be a Jesus follower. It's always been easier to be a bully than to be a servant.

It's always been easier to worship money and acclaim than to forego possessions and be a follower. It's always been easier to crave attention than to embrace humility.

It's always been easier to promote ourselves than to point to Jesus. It's always been easier to build kingdoms on this earth than to invest in eternity.

Over the years, Johnny has helped us find our voice and recalibrate our efforts to be Jesus-followers. He has consistently asked the right questions in the right way and has said the things many of us have thought but were not free to say.

As he transitions into his encore career, we all owe him a huge debt of gratitude for his pastoral and prophetic voice of leadership.

Thank you, Johnny, for showing us a better way than going quietly into the night of conformity and acquiescence.

Thank you for suggesting that we can be transformers and not conformers. Thank you for making us laugh at ourselves.

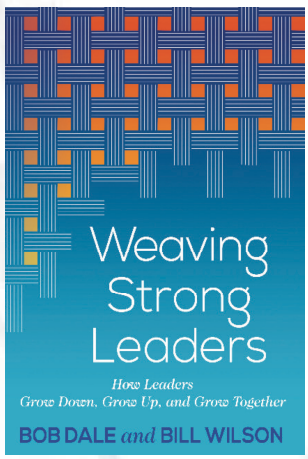
Thank you for encouraging us to do the right things, even when they are hard. Thank you for showing us how many emperors really have no clothes.

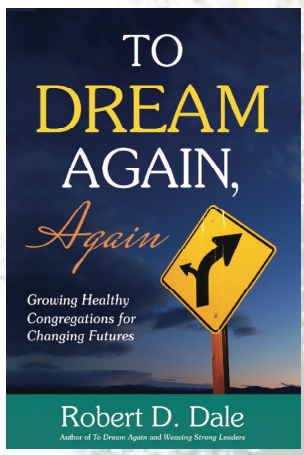
Thank you for calling us to be more of the people God intended us to be. Thank you for saying what too many ministers are too fearful to say.

Thank you for introducing us to so many other Christ-followers and fellow pilgrims. Most of all, thank you for lifting up Jesus and inviting us to follow him. NFJ

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

HEALTHY CHURCH RESOURCES





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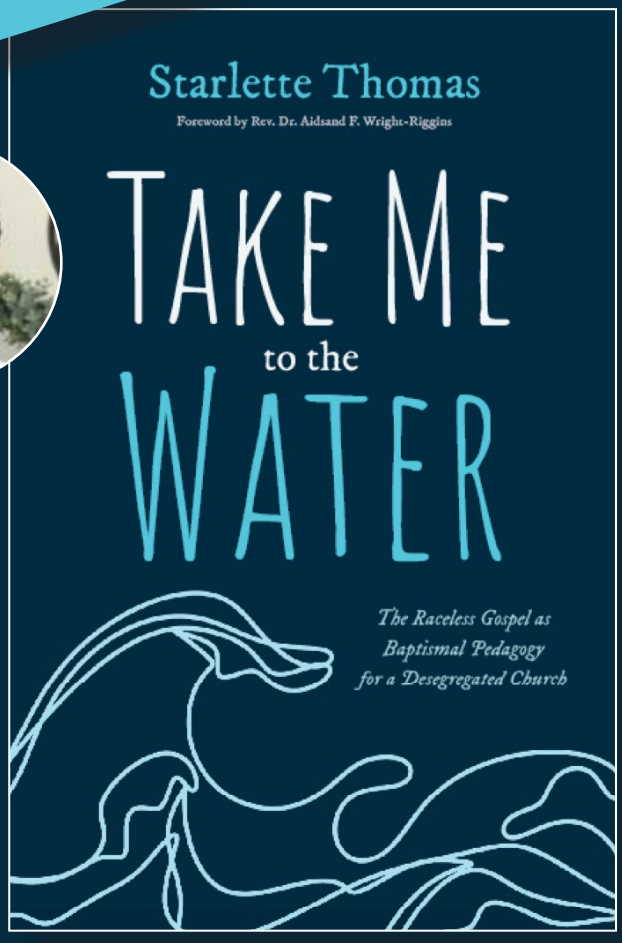

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING:

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Take Me to the Water

By Starlette Thomas

They told us to wear white — the color of purity, righteousness and holiness. We couldn't afford baptismal robes. But it didn't matter to me then, and it doesn't matter now.

At Bibleway Holiness Church #3 in Foley, Ala., we heard: "Give your hand to the preacher and your heart to God!" This was presented as our only way out of a world of hurt.

Pews were on either side but not much else. Hand fans doubled as funeral home advertisements, and boxed ones were in open windows.

It was a sight to see a new convert walk the aisle. Those many hours of testifying to God's goodness and our evil ways had paid off.

It gave us a sense of communal purpose and was a welcomed interruption to the predictable routines of those who prematurely figured they didn't have much else to give. Those whom American society had discarded were being used by God.

We would talk all week about how that child sang, how the Lord used the deacon or the church mother to usher in the Spirit, and how the preacher gave a word today.

We looked forward to Sunday mornings and afternoons, weekday Bible study meetings and weeklong revivals. We didn't have anywhere else to find communal affirmation and lifelong support.

The church would always be with us, which is why it was assumed that I would be a Christian. The church was my grandmother Eva Mae's house of faith, and so it made sense that I would first visit and then join her there.

There were no stained-glass windows or an official communion table — just a small, repurposed one from Deacon Joe's home.

The church clerk knew my name, but now I would be an official member. I was going to become a baptized believer in Jesus Christ.

The water of baptism made all the difference. At 12 years old, I was told this was a life- changing decision. Yet, it would have no impact on my impoverished condition, my racialized existence.

Instead, the church leaders told me to "keep on believing" that things would get better and if not, then there was always heaven. Every service had the same eschatological end: "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing it will be!"

We talked about our sufferings but exchanged simplistic arguments around theodicy. It wasn't considered our place to question God and especially not as it related to the miserable state of our lives.

There was no shortage of songs and catch phrases that would later dismiss my pushback against systemic oppression and systematic suffering: "We'll understand it better by and by." "No cross, no crown." "God won't put more on you than you can bear." "Everything happens for a reason."

Those church leaders tried to drown out my questions with their heartfelt confessions of faith, passionate testimonies and soulish longings for life after death.

Sunday morning feel-good sermons only lasted so long. Yet I kept coming back week after week.

It was this euphoric feeling, this sweaty state of seeming entrancement that led me down the aisle. I wanted Jesus to save me, so I called on his name.

The church mothers said I had been changed — "saved, sanctified, Holy Ghost-filled and fire-baptized." Well, that last part would have to be done later.

We didn't have a baptism pool. We would make a long trek into the woods and use the river once we got enough new converts.

I couldn't swim then, and I can't swim now. I was afraid I'd meet my Maker the same day.

Unfazed by the fear in my eyes, the saints started singing, "Take me to the water; take me to the water; take me to the water; to be baptized."

When I sing it now, it sounds like a funeral dirge. At 12, I had already experienced unwanted touches and learned it was better to keep those memories buried deep down.

I prayed that my body would be made new. I just wanted to start over and if Jesus could give me a fresh start, I would gladly serve him for the rest of my life.

The preacher introduced me to the baptismal water, and I felt its cool embrace. This daring sense of "somebodiness" was strengthened that day.

For those fleeting moments, I was free of "ruling relationships" determined by the sociopolitical construct of race and clear on who I was and would always be — a child of God.

So most days, I feel called to take the North American church to the water in the same way — down by the riverside where the first sign of segregation hung. NFJ

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

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Countless lessons from Fisher Humphreys

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Fisher Humphreys is a Christian theologian. And I mean that in more than one way.

He is a thoughtful, careful and insightful theologian concerning the nature of God and other Christian beliefs. Also, he is a humble, faithful practitioner of the Christian faith who reflects the life and teachings of Jesus *and* is one of the best theologians among us.

In my earlier career in campus ministry, Fisher would speak at various student conferences. He was not a commanding pulpit presence with a booming voice and a string of well-rehearsed punchlines.

Rather he spoke directly about Jesus, God and the Bible in ways that were insightful, inspirational and understandable.

That led me to pick up his book, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (first published in 1974) — and to share it with college students who showed an interest in theological pursuit.

The clear, concise and well-reasoned book is available now in an expanded third edition from Insight Press.

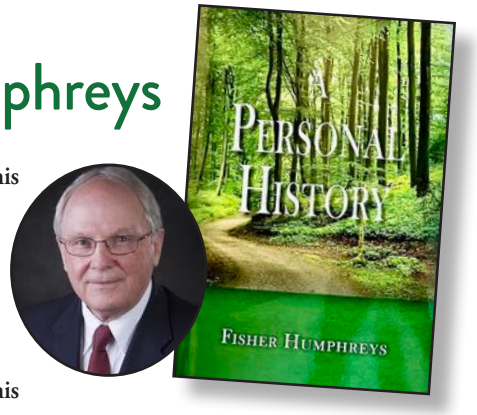
Other of Fisher's books were added to my shelves including *For God So Loved the World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism* with Paul Robertson (2000) and *Fundamentalism* with Philip Wise (2004).

So I was most pleased early in my editorship to receive a call from Fisher who was professor at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University at the time. He and his wife Caroline, he said, were coming to Macon, Ga., so we made plans to have lunch.

It was as delightful as I had imagined — as have been other opportunities since. Fisher even graciously served on the Nurturing Faith Board of Directors.

So last spring, after a great meal and stimulating conversation with Fisher and other friends, I was pleased to receive a copy of his life story.

Simply titled *A Personal History* (Insight Press), it was written out of the realization of how much he wishes his parents and grandparents had recorded their stories for future generation.



For me, it was another opportunity to learn from a superb teacher. Not only did I enjoy garnering more details of Fisher's biographical journey, but his insights punctuate the book throughout.

Fisher treats everyone with respect, even those with whom he has great differences of opinion — including those who've misrepresented him and his viewpoints.

A classic mark of Fisher's writing and speaking is his clear enumerations. Whether explaining the Trinity or his preference for a particular restaurant, expect four or five well-articulated reasons.

His eight-step explanation of the Southern Baptist Convention takeover — to which he had a front seat and sometimes a debate table — is the best place to turn when someone asks what it was all about.

Both the Christian and the theologian are present even in recounting with humility and gratitude his upbringing, educational endeavors, family matters and professional journey.

While I can't reduce the gathered insights to a specific number, here are a few:

Fisher's "third source" for educational pursuits was "a desire not just to know but to understand" — seeking answers to, "What's it all about?" His articulation of the relationship of philosophy to theology is helpful:

"What the engagement with philosophy did for me was to encourage a kind of theology in which we weren't just talking about the Bible; we were also talking about what the Bible talks about, namely, God and the world and ourselves in relation to God."

Fisher rightly notes the "two principle intellectual barriers to Christian faith are evidence and evil." He doesn't ignore these challenges, noting: "From the beginning, I was fairly certain that there are no knockdown arguments on either issue."

However, he doesn't shy away from them either. The facts of these arguments, he suggests, don't mean "there is nothing to be said."

And Fisher, once ridiculously labeled and libeled as an "infidel" by a fundamentalist publication, says those God-affirming things extremely well.

Understandably, the mild-mannered professor was threatening to Baptist fundamentalists because he so clearly explained the errors in their methods and beliefs they ironically called "inerrancy."

Their foundational claim was not in defense of an error-free Bible in hand but so-called "original manuscripts." Fisher noted that such manuscripts were written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and "were never together in one place, and they no longer exist."

Therefore, *inerrancy* was a mere battle cry in defense of fundamentalist *interpretations* of the Bible designed to keep women in submission and advance other aspects of the fundamentalist social agenda. That's my assessment, not Fisher's words.

His desire for understanding, said Fisher, is second to his desire for love. That is felt throughout his writing when referring to God, family, friends and strangers — especially those in need.

Fisher and his late friend Philip Wise shared the belief that the Christian faith is better understood when it is written down. I'm glad that Fisher so often put his good thinking in print — both his theological insights and personal story.

Maybe the best line in the book is not only sage advice but also reflects Fisher's life overall: "Example is better than precept." Fisher is a Christian and a theologian from whom much can be learned if not counted.

NFJ

HAPPY TRAILS

Riding out of West to well-deserved accolades

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The tourist-oriented town of West Yellowstone, Montana, didn't know what they were getting when a former prison chaplain from Arkansas showed up in the summer of 1998. But they soon found out.

The small but popular gateway to Yellowstone National Park swells to some 20,000 visitors per day during peak season. But only about a thousand brave souls endure the winters — where temperatures often drop to record numbers and snow piles high.

To be considered a permanent resident, said Benny McCracken, requires living through at least two winters.

He and his wife, Juanita, a retired schoolteacher who worked at the park gatehouse in summers, not only endured but also delighted in year-round living in "West" (as locals call it).

WHERE?

Benny had to look up the location on a map when he was recommended by a friend in Colorado to be the pastor of First Baptist Church of West Yellowstone. Benny's concern was less the location than the role, having never thought of himself as a pastor.

But chaplaincy was something he was gifted to do — and the perfect approach to pastoral ministry in this unique town. The McCrackens and West Yellowstone fit together like hands in well-insulated gloves.

His friend who oversaw resort ministries in Colorado described the approach as being the pastor of a parade. Benny said he'd experienced some of that coming and going in prison ministry.

"I came in the peak season," said Benny, noting in those days 100 or more people from all over the nation and beyond would show up for worship on a summer Sunday. Then a very cold winter service might bring in eight of the remaining residents.

"That was kind of a shock to get used to," said Benny. But the weather he took in stride.

"We had probably 300 inches of snow that first winter," he recalled.

Benny (right) with his friend Bruce Gourley

However, the mounting snowbank didn't concern him. "I just put on my snowshoes and walked up and sat on the roof of my house."

ADVENTURE

Despite significant loss of sight as a teenager, Benny took full advantage of the adventurous opportunities in the Yellowstone region — hiking, backpacking, fishing, cross-country skiing, rock climbing and more.

He was widely identified in town when riding his bicycle (since he doesn't drive), with his long white beard flowing in the breeze. He would swap to snow tires for the long winters.

Benny's ministry extended well beyond the church walls — volunteering with the park visitor center and local emergency services. His gifts and experience in mental health were called on numerous times in a place where such services are lacking.

Whether it was teen suicides or other matters of concern within the community, a phone call to Benny could be expected.

Benny's impact on the larger community was evident when the town's citizens chose him to carry the torch on their behalf toward Salt Lake City for the 2002 Olympic Games.

The reality that "all good things come to an end" took a while for the McCrackens to fully accept. But reaching a stage in life can necessitate a such a change.

So reluctantly, but with understanding and appreciation, Benny and Juanita recently moved to Memphis to be near family.

However, their hearts will always be closely held by the western gateway to America's first national park.

ACCOLADES

In late October, the townsfolk of West Yellowstone turned out in force to express their gratitude to the McCrackens for 25 years of immeasurable friendship and unselfish service.

A week earlier the owners of Freeheel and Wheel — a bike, ski and coffee shop that Benny frequented — treated their familiar customer to a going-away dinner.

"They kind of hugged me through this," said Benny of the support he received while grieving his move away from West Yellowstone. "I told them, 'You are my safe space.'"

All who put down a stake in West — for the season or the whole year — will miss seeing the flowing white beard that long appeared in the pulpit, around the local streets and on the park trails.

"Benny is one of the most amazing persons I have ever known," said his friend Bruce Gourley, who lives just 90 miles (close by Montana standards) to the warmer north.

"His determination and courage in the face of daunting obstacles has inspired countless people near and far, and his humanity and compassion channeled into community service has left an indelible mark on the town of West Yellowstone," he added.

Benny showed deep emotion when preparing to leave the town and the ruggedly beautiful mountains, meadows and rivers teeming with wildlife — along with dramatic canyons, stunning waterfalls, spouting geysers and other natural wonders.

"It takes a certain kind of person to live here," he said. And he and Juanita have been such persons.

"I've loved it," he said. "There is something mystical about watching a foot to 18 inches of snow pile up."

ALL SEASONS

In all the seasons, however, Benny said he found something deep within his soul.

"I've found 'me' more here than any place I've lived — and have found God more in nature," he said.

Days before moving, Benny took a break from packing to visit Yellowstone once again. He walked down to Gibbon Falls that drops over the rim of Yellowstone's massive caldera — created by an enormous volcanic eruption some 600,000 years ago.

"I was thinking about the wonder of creation," he said. "I'd never experienced God like that before."

An extra measure of joy, he said, came from taking so many others into the park to have similar experiences of awe and wonder.

"The hard part is leaving all of that," Benny confessed. "It's been a big part of who I am."

Visitors to West Yellowstone often return. Not only are they drawn to the region's natural wonders, but many have come to reconnect with Benny.

"We say the world comes to West Yellowstone," said Benny, noting that along with international tourists are the seasonal workers on J1 and J2 visas.

"It's the perfect opportunity to show them that Christ welcomes everyone," he said.

One discovery Benny made is that often international workers are so engrossed in their jobs that they don't have the opportunity to enjoy the park. So, he connected those workers with church members who could help them have that meaningful experience.

"The key to ministry in this kind of environment is networking," he said.

INTERNS

Benny uses the catch-all term "interns" to identify the numerous college and seminary students who've spent their summers working in ministry with him and others at the church.

Some found the experience so meaningful, they returned for another. Others have used vacation time to visit and hit the trails of Yellowstone with Benny.

The earliest summer missionaries lived and worked in the park. In later years, the students have lived at and worked out of the church.

"It's shaped the lives of a lot of people," said Benny, referencing the students, church members and visitors to West Yellowstone.

In testament, many of the interns shared their words of appreciation via a YouTube presentation titled "Your biggest fans."

They expressed deep love for the acceptance and guidance from Benny and Juanita — and offered affirmation and prayers for their next stage in life.

"I wish you all the happiness and love," said one intern. "We carry you in our hearts."

A young couple who spent "two great years" serving with Benny expressed appreciation for his mentoring, advice on life and marriage, and "the ends and outs of hiking in the backcountry."

Another intern noted the impact on her life and faith — learning to better appreciate the beauty of creation and the person of God.

One smilingly told Benny that he is at the top of those "I blame for getting me into ministry."

While leaving West Yellowstone was hard, Benny and Juanita did so with the clear affirmation that they left a good trail there for others to follow. NFJ

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A hard lesson about an easy life

By Tony Cartledge

As I was recently reminded, plans may go awry, sometimes at the most inconvenient of times.

For months, Susan and I had anticipated a memorable morning in a beautiful Japanese pocket garden in Torrance, Calif., just south of Los Angeles. Susan's son Patrick (whom I'm also proud to claim) would be marrying a delightful woman named Maha.

We've also grown to love Maha, who grew up in Torrance. Though she and Patrick live in Macon, Ga., the wedding was near her home, and we were looking forward to meeting her extended Mexican-Pakistani family.

Before the rehearsal on Friday we enjoyed roaming the little garden with its gnarled trees, waterfalls and koi pond. The occasion would be small: Susan would take pictures before the wedding and read a poem as part of the ceremony. I was to stand in the back and video record the happy proceedings.

After dinner at a vegan restaurant, we returned to the hotel for a little TV before bed. All was well until about midnight when I was struck by rather violent gastrointestinal symptoms. While dealing with the necessaries of such symptoms, I leaned over to pick up a trash can and passed out.

The trash can had sharp, pointed corners that my chest landed on. But it may have slowed me down enough so that when my head slammed against the corner of the bathroom doorframe, it didn't crack my skull. It did leave me with a concussion and a cut requiring six stitches.

I am ever so grateful Susan was with me. Things went downhill from there. Eventually I was in an ambulance headed to a Catholic hospital associated with "the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary."

Ten hours in the ER brought CT scans of my head, neck and abdomen; X-rays of my chest; an EKG; an echocardiogram; a sonogram of my carotid arteries; and a barrage of blood draws for various lab tests.

A statue of Mary Potter outside Providence Hospital in Torrance, California. Credit: Susan Cartledge

They wanted to do an EEG, but the technician was missing in action.

The good news is that all the tests were negative for disease. My heart is strong, my carotids are clear, my skull is intact, and my brain is still there, if slightly bruised and a little smaller. I confess to a bit of chagrin when reading the report and seeing the not-unexpected "age-related atrophy."

On Saturday morning the wedding went on as planned. After a sleepless night, Susan was able to participate, though distracted and not able to enjoy it as fully as we had hoped. Maha's mother brought her back to the hospital where I remained until late Sunday afternoon.

Changing our airline reservation cost much more than the original round trip. But we made it home safely the next day. A friend covered my Monday night class, and all was well.

Traumatic experiences lend themselves to pondering. At first, I worried about what kind of hospital bills I'd end up paying, even after insurance.

But then it occurred to me: an excellent hospital with a first-rate staff was located within a mile of our hotel. The EMTs who came to fetch me were professional and made an uncomfortable ambulance ride as smooth as possible.

The ambulance did not lack gasoline, and the hospital had all the electricity and water it could use. More importantly, no one was concerned about whether it would still be standing in the morning.

It was hard to bemoan a short hospital stay when I considered the horrific murders of 1,400 unsuspecting Israelis just two weeks before. The brutality of the Hamas militants was unconscionable.

Israeli reprisals included bombs raining daily on Gaza, killing thousands of innocent civilians in an attempt to wipe out the militants. Death by shrapnel or collapsing buildings is no less barbarous because the attacker does not wield his weapon at close range.

While I bemoaned my fate for the complications following an unexpected illness, I thought of people who were crying in pain from unimaginable injuries. Even if they were lucky enough to reach a hospital, there might not be any power or even fuel for backup generators.

The current Israeli government does not reflect the desires of most Israelis any more than Hamas represents Palestinians, most of whom want peace. Bad leadership leads to bad outcomes, and others suffer for it.

When we take time to look beyond ourselves, we realize that even our hardest days can seem easy compared to the suffering experienced in many parts of our world. Can we at least be grateful? NFJ

As this is editor John Pierce's final issue before retirement, I write with much appreciation for his leadership and with gratitude for his invitation to be part of this journal 17 years ago. I am confident his ongoing call for a "Jesus-worldview" kind of life will continue to ring true.

Questions Christians ask scientists

BY PAUL WALLACE

I spent my sabbath at yet another government entity named for a Confederate hero. A.H. Stephens State Park lies along the northern limits of Crawfordsville in the heart of Georgia's least populous county.

Between 1861 and 1865 Alexander Hamilton Stephens, a Crawfordsville native, served as the vice president of the Confederate States of America under Jefferson Davis, whom he did not like. Stephens was governor of Georgia in 1882–1883.

A few weeks before the first shots of the Civil War were fired, Stephens delivered his so-called "Cornerstone Speech" to a packed Savannah theater. He openly attacked the Declaration of Independence and its foundational idea that all men are created equal:

> *Our new Government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition. This, our new Government, is the first, in the history of the world, based on this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.*

Stephens used scripture to justify his position, covering himself with the old "Curse of Ham" fig leaf and including this forced reference to Ps. 118:22:

> *This stone [the superiority of the "white race"] which was "rejected by the first builders" [Founding Fathers] — "is become the chief of the corner" — the real corner-stone of our new edifice.*

Stephens delivered his speech in March 1861. And there, out in the warming light of August 2023, stood the sign: A.H. Stephens State Park.

I drove past it and then past Stephens' restored home. On the front lawn a tall white statue of the man glowered in the face of the morning sun.

I stopped at the gatehouse for a map and entered the park, wondering at the hold the Lost Cause has maintained on so many of my fellow southerners.

I parked and stepped out of the car into a vast silence. The plaintive weep of an eastern wood pewee sounded from deep in the trees to the west.

It was church hour in Georgia. I thought of my small community gathering at that moment on the ground floor of a church in Decatur.

Andrea was preaching, and I was missing it; I felt bad. She would finish her sermon and offer communion, and then Cecil, 85 years old, would read the announcements.

I could see him walking slowly to the lectern, shuffling his papers, looking up, and beginning as he always does: "Boy have I got some news for you."

I could hear Jonathan leading the group of doctors, recovering addicts, ex-convicts, teachers, children, nurses, gay couples, straight couples, wanderers, political operatives, grocery store clerks, CDC employees, retirees and general misfits as they join hands and sing the morning's last song.

But I was here, alone in Taliaferro County, in search of a reset. I had spent the previous day in rural Alabama at the funeral of a dear friend of my childhood and my first college roommate.

He was an only child who had died suddenly and was survived by two elderly parents. His mother bent low over his open casket and talked to him for five full minutes, touching his face and saying what holy words I do not know, while his father stood by in silence.

Chris and I went different directions after that first semester of college. He became what he always was: a good old Alabama boy, the real deal.

I joined the funeral procession in my Corolla, surrounded by trucks with Trump stickers and Confederate flag plates. Sweat ran down my back as a military detail played Taps, folded the burial flag, and presented it to the new widow, seated with her children in the shade of the tent.

Prayers were offered to a God of strength and compassion, and we left

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Writer's note: This is my final column for *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Thank you for reading, for your questions, for your kind letters, and for your support. It has been a journey worth taking, and some of you have asked what I'm working on next.

I am a birder. This passion has only increased in the last few years, and I have found myself writing about my project of birding in all of Georgia's 159 counties. As my final column, I will share a blog from my website, pwallace.net. Grace and peace to each of you.

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.

before the coffin was lowered. I made for the woods.

An equestrian trail opened before me — wide, stamped with hoofprints and interspersed with muddy bogs. The map showed this trail running along a lake, but I discovered that it does no such thing.

To the south I could see the lake, shining dimly beyond the trees and brush, teasing me, but no paths opened toward it. After a half mile the trail turned north, and I said goodbye to the prospect of herons and kingfishers.

I was dismayed; the forest was wholly empty of birds. I turned around.

Ten minutes later, at a bend in the trail in a low sun-dappled place, I saw movement in a young maple — no sound, just a small shift of light and leaf. I pulled up my binoculars, found the bird, and gasped. I could not believe what I saw.

I do not presume to understand religion. I cannot grasp the cosmic significance of even my own modest religious community, gathered on that very Sabbath, seeking again to orient itself properly to the secret of the world.

I cannot account for humanity's murderous knack for hatred, for making enemies of brothers and sisters, for making war, and for glorifying it all. And I can only sit in silence as a mother weeps over the coffin of her only child.

If I ever believed that I could understand such things by going to college, or to seminary, or by teaching, or by preaching, or, God help me, by *thinking*, then I am as vain a fool as ever took up space and breathed air. Such knowledge is too high for me.

But when I lifted my binoculars to the bird in the maple, I knew this: I was looking at a Kentucky warbler.

I knew this instantly and completely, even though until that moment I had never seen a single living bird of that species. In fact, for about three years leading up to that moment, the Kentucky warbler had been my nemesis bird.

A nemesis bird is a thing in birding. Your nemesis bird is usually not rare, but uncommon, the kind of bird you should see a few times a year.

You see this creature in field guides. You look it up on eBird, a global online repository of birders' observations, and it shows up on lots of local lists. All your bird friends have seen this bird.

They tell you to "go to Lyon Farm and walk along the creek west of the farmhouse." You do so once, twice, five times; you do not see this bird. Nor do you hear it, even though everyone insists, with perfectly straight faces, that it is quite vocal.

You have never, in six solid years of birding, found this bird. You begin to suspect a conspiracy: somewhere, someone is laughing. Finally, to protect yourself, you give up. You forget about it.

Except you don't, because one day you visit a lonely place in a lonely county and walk through a late summer wood bereft of birds, and then you come across a bird, one single solitary bird, and you pull up your binoculars and there it is, your nemesis, and you nearly pass out.

The intellectual pleasure of seeing a bird you have only ever seen in books, and of identifying it immediately and without ambiguity, comes directly from the hand of God. This is difficult to explain and quite personal.

As meager as it seems, such knowledge (that is a Kentucky warbler!) serves as a fixed point in a world of tumult and chance, a small but unequivocal gift in a world of loss, a pearl of great price.

It carries existential significance, suggesting that underneath it all the world might really make sense, and delivers a jolt of happiness wholly out of proportion to the physical event itself.

The warbler flies away, low into the brush behind the maple, and is gone. I hang around for 15 minutes more, hoping to see the bird again, but the woods stand as silent and empty as ever. I am buoyant.

The Kentucky warbler has completed my day and possibly my week. I shoulder my camera, turn my back on that sun-dappled place, and follow the trail back into the wounded inscrutable world. NFJ

My last words, for now

By John D. Pierce

Do good things that people value, and value the good people who enable you to do those things.

Enjoying the view from Yosemite National Park with daughters Meredith (right) and Abigail.

That has my been my guiding principle as editor of this evolving publishing venture during fast-changing times over the past nearly 24 years.

Truth-telling, of course, is an encompassing part of doing what needs to be done — while recognizing that I've been entrusted with both an amplifying format and with the freedom others may not have to speak so freely.

In my sheltered but shaping upbringing, I was clueless about much beyond planning the next camping trip, meeting basic school expectations or fumbling my way through naïve attempts at early romance.

While other organizations such as Boy Scouts and 4-H drew my attention and offered experience in skills from outdoors survival to public speaking, it was a nurturing church that anchored it all.

As a stringy-haired teen I worked after-school and weekend jobs that also provided some life lessons — one being to stay in school.

Meanwhile, Elton John's "Crocodile Rock," Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly," Jim Croce's "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown," Dobie Gray's "Drift Away," Carly Simon's "You're So Vain" and Kris Kristofferson's "Why Me" played in the background.

Back then, my vision of future possibilities was much too limited to consider the varied and enriching vocational and personal experiences that have come my way.

Yet fingerprints from the past can be spotted when reflecting on the shaping opportunities for leadership and service during those developing years. And repeatedly hearing or reading both the confronting and comforting words of Jesus was not totally in vain.

The best part of every job held over the past half century — from washing dishes to writing articles — has been in meeting incredible, delightful and inspiring people. They greatly outnumber those who can't be described by any of those adjectives.

Editorial freedom — granted and protected by those who've served on boards of directors during my editorship — is a gift for which my gratitude is deep. I've sought to accept that gift with the right balance of freedom and responsibility.

Through the years my writings have addressed many issues, trends and concerns — not as an authoritative and definitive word but as a way to encourage thoughtful consideration of these matters.

In more recent years in particular, I have pursued the question of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus in today's fast-shifting, technologically advanced and deeply divided American culture.

This has and continues to occur at a time when "Christian" as a label has little meaning, and often evokes bad connotations resulting from self-inflicted wounds.

As a result, there are various responses. Some fully reject institutionalized religious expressions — and I understand the pain that leads some to make that choice for healthy reasons.

Others simply ignore the tragic ways Americanized Christianity has departed from the life and teachings of Jesus. They just uncritically go along with the crowd.

Others remain as loyal critics — who stay on the inside and keep asking, "Where is Jesus?" And how does he fit into what gets sold to us as truth?

Of course, Jesus is not found only in those places we designate for him. So there are widespread opportunities to consider what it means to bring the radical grace, hospitality, mercy and selflessness of Jesus into all kinds of encounters.

I'm not in a position to judge my own work other than to say I've tried to do a good job while admitting my shortcomings. Having written countless words for nearly 24 years in this job brings some introspection — or at least some wondering.

Where did they land? How were they received? Did they make a difference beyond the moment?

Those questions, however, are not the ones that most rest in my mind. There are others.

Did I speak truth when it was unpopular but needed? Did I use my privilege and power to give voice to those who are hushed or struggle to find the words?

There's no illusion that my opinion writing in particular was always right or right on time. My prayer is that when I've erred, it was done so on the side of inclusion, compassion, justice, equality, open-mindedness and grace.

What I wonder about most is if my writings exceeded any blinders of the moment. It's too soon to tell.

My hope, however, is that if someone comes across my writings after I'm gone, and should ask one of my daughters, "Was this your dad?" — they can say yes without embarrassment and possibly with a little pride.

While highly imperfect in both my professional and personal roles, I've sought a balance in being truthful and graceful.

I tried, girls. I really tried. NFJ

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