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Public Righteousness

By Foy Valentine

[The Fourth of July is America's biggest national holiday. I have deemed its celebration this year a not inappropriate occasion to sound this note about public righteousness. It is the same note I've been sounding for decades, to be sure. My voice crying in the wilderness has not exactly captured and enthralled a vast audience. Nevertheless, here I go again. F.V.]

Facing the institutionalized unrighteousness of Adolph Hitler's Nazi evil, Karl Barth in 1938 voiced this prophetic challenge:

...Let the Church...look and see whether she is not now...compromising herself with the Devil, to whom no ally is dearer than a Church, so absorbed in caring for her good reputation and clean garments, that she keeps eternal silence, is eternally meditating, eternally discussing, eternally neutral, a Church so troubled about the transcendence of the Kingdom of God—thing which isn't really so easy to menace!—that she has become a dumb dog. This is just the thing which must not take place...today.

There is no issue to which the people of God may not speak; and public righteousness is one issue to which we have a divine mandate to speak.

No convincing case can be made for the neutrality of the people of God in the face of the immoralities that everlastingly dog our feet. It simply cannot be insisted that the Old Testament had nothing to say against sleaze, lust, oppression, violence, injustice, fraud, greed, dishonesty, and public unrighteousness in ancient Israel or that the New Testament had nothing to say against all these things in the Roman Empire. Moses confronted Pharaoh. Israel conquered the unrighteous enemies of the Lord God. "The stars in their courses," sang Deborah and Barak, "fought against Sisera" (Judges 5:20). Daniel broke the Chaldean king's unjust law (Daniel 6:10). Amos scathingly denounced the corrupt political personalities and powers of his day. John the Baptist warned the Establishment to flee from the wrath to come (Matthew 3:7). Jesus called King Herod "that fox" (Luke 13:32) and generally showed a fine and faultless flair for controversy with the public enemies of righteousness. (He could, indeed, be found in the middle of nearly everything but the road.) James castigated the rich oppressors who dragged the poor before their corrupt judgment seats (James 2:6). John the Apostle fearlessly proclaimed judgment upon Imperial Rome herself calling her "the great whore that sitteth on many waters" (Revelation 17:1). God's moral giants have never been timid fence-straddlers. So, John Milton rightly said that the neutralists are despised by both heaven and

hell, remaining ever outside the gates.

The Need for Public Righteousness

On the windward side of Molokai, I have squinted through a high-powered microscope to focus my eye in awe on the living organism that causes leprosy. Near the Sabine River bottoms of Van Zandt County in East Texas, I have looked down in elemental terror at the crawling copperhead snake that had just plunged the deadly poison of its loathsome fangs into my veins. Over the jungles of Paraguay, I have looked out of the airplane window in wordless dismay to see what happens when an engine swallows a piston. On the high walls of Buenos Aires and again under the beautiful bridges of Venice, I have viewed with fearful fascination Communism's hammer and sickle painted red and garishly so that even those who speed may read. In Panama's primitive interior where the heat is stifling and the humidity overwhelmingly oppressive, and again in India's pre-monsoon dust and poverty and oven-like heat, I have winced at the sickening, sudden onslaught of a fearful food poisoning which has wracked my frame with rigors of appallingly severe proportions. In Gaza I have driven with fear and trembling directly under the manned machine guns where the very air reeks with the ancient hostility of Jacob and Esau, compounded with usurious interest for millennia. On the Pacific island of Raiatea, I have stood quietly and alone in wordless horror on the altar stone where the ancient Polynesians sacrificed a human being on the occasion of every new moon. Across the face of the earth in my lifetime I have been an anguished witness, however, to something far more pervasive, more lethal, more awesome, and more sinister than any of these, the incredible proliferation of an all-pervading nerve gas of immorality.

Today's world in which Christians are called to proclaim good news is a fallen, sinful, disfigured, hurting, immoral world. It is perishing, as Augustine said of Rome, for want of order in the soul.

By an incredible distortion of logic, it views immorality as a harmless exercise of the times, violence as a proper way of life, racism as a divine right, and materialism as its just dessert. It firmly believes that a person's life consists in the abundance of the things which he possesses. Its master is its credit card; and it owes its soul to Visa and Master Charge.

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Yesterday it stood at the edge of a precipice, and today it has taken a step forward.

It is a world shot through with moral Novocain.

Its conscience is no bigger than a bar of soap after a hard day's washing.

It arrives late, leaves early, and does not want to get involved. It has too few arrows in its quiver. It feels no compunction to keep its word. It does not believe "you have to dance with who you bring." It is pathetically wall-eyed with one eye on the paycheck and the other on the rear view mirror. It has made quantity king and quality a pauper.

It seems hell-bent on cutting the jugular vein of decency. Its crime in the streets is bad; but its crime in the suites is worse. It is not its luck but its moral judgment that has petered out. Its derelict empires are characterized by impotent armies, doubtful dollars, and a malignant anarchism that is now headed willy-nilly straight for totalitarianism.

If there is a figure in its tapestry, incoherence is its name. Dancing on the edge of the bottomless pit, it has lost faith in God, hope for mankind, and love for either God or mankind. It is mired in a permanent identity crisis.

It is morbidly preoccupied with trying to find new nerve endings to stimulate. Instead of making a joyful noise to the Lord, it makes a doleful noise to itself.

Though it has worked for generations to build a Wholly Human Empire, its present prospect is fire in the sky, blood on the moon, and the elements melting with a fervent heat.

Nurturing a cornucopian faith in its own omniscience, it has erected a thousand monuments to folly, nearly all of them fantastically expensive in terms of human resources.

Our world dies the death of a thousand qualifications. It seems incapable of letting its yea be yea and its nay, nay. Its convictions are never quite sure of themselves. It cannot determine whether this is the year of the Dove, the Hawk, the Vulture, or the Lemming.

It underproduces wisdom and overprocesses knowledge. Because it does not understand the past, it can neither redeem the present nor prepare adequately for the future. To satisfy its appetite of the moment, it will burn down a cathedral to fry an egg.

For all its education and affluence and leisure and technology, it remains bound in shallows and miseries, stumbling along with one foot in a bucket.

It is afflicted with congenital myopia, blurred vision, a grievous nerve failure syndrome, and a terrible case of hardening of its ought-eries.

It is as far from real repentance as Oral Roberts ever was from the Mayo Clinic.

It knows as little about integrity as a downtown tomcat knows about home life.

More specifically, its family life is on the rocks.

Its racism is unresolved.

Its citizenship is characterized by corruption and cowardice, in about equal parts.

Its economics is an incredible rip-off of the have nots by the

haves who manipulate the system to sock it to the poor and provide welfare for the rich who maximize their capital and privatize their profits while they minimize their risks and socialize their losses.

And it lives and moves and has its being in an open Pandora's box of adultery, addiction, conspicuous consumption, pornography, population crisis, hunger, male chauvinism, violence, unbridled irresponsibility in television programming, wars, and rumors of wars.

As our grandpas used to say of a dog eating grass, "There's somethin' it ain't gettin'."

Today we are in the midst of a moral earthquake that is registering ten on God's Richter scale.

Public unrighteousness now threatens to pull down the pillars of the nation itself. It has left us rocking like a rowboat in the wake of a speeding battleship. It has become a way of life.

Unrighteousness is a noisome pestilence, a poison fog, a Beast out of the Pit, a tight harness that is rubbing us raw. It manipulates its unclean snout over our most precious things—justice, mercy, love, and peace—leaving them defiled, unclean.

One expression of our unrighteousness is an anti-social and irresponsible withdrawal into cocoons of privatized hedonism. Such excessively rugged individualism sees all discipline as dangerous and all customs as inherently evil. Scoffing at righteousness and snickering at values, this radical individualism metastasizes into an uncivilizing compulsion that rips the threat of moral influence out of the fabric of society. Unrighteousness is moral mark-missing which produces buckets of moral filth that slop the sins of arrogance and greed and lust and pride while the inner spirit starves. This unrighteousness steals the clapper from our liberty bell. It gets its values secondhand and reads its truth off cue cards. It glories in fathomless imbecilities ranging from the new math to the new morality.

Righteousness has become an object to poke, probe, and dissect before it is then ignored and at last abandoned altogether.

Mass media bent on producing ever more exciting circuses for today's new Romans give us the biodegradable politician and a bipartisan avoidance of most of the important moral issues of our time. Fearing religion as an opiate, our age has eaten the locoweed of racism, sexism, materialism, militarism, and scientism. Its latter state is worse than its first.

Like Jack who gloried in his beanstalk only to find at the top an angry giant, we have planted the malignant bean of immorality only to find the monster of unrighteousness ready to do us in when we have climbed to the top of the crop.

The situation of public unrighteousness need not be further belabored lest we demonstrate an answer to Macbeth's question, "What! Will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?"

Unrighteousness is not just a strange god; it is an evil and hostile god who wills for us not life but death.

Public righteousness is not something we have to cultivate in order to ward off secularism, atheism, socialism, or humanism. It is not merely a part of our arsenal of weapons for national survival, or for discreet national aggression.

For national or institutional or personal survival, nevertheless,

righteousness is fundamental not ornamental. Any nation or institution or individual who eats the apple of unrighteousness will surely die.

Public righteousness has often seemed in recent times to be ready for the garage sale of history. It must be recovered if America and Americans, or for that matter, if the human race and the world, are to have a future.

We seek to recover righteousness for we know that when righteousness breaks down, trouble breaks out; we know that when morality breaks down, chaos breaks out; we know that when moral values break down, cynicism breaks out. I say “recover” in spite of the fact that George Cruikshank said that this Nation was founded at a time when statesmen were without ideals, the Church was without vision, the Crown was without honor, and the common people were without hope. I say “recover” because our forebears, while far from moral perfection, were basically committed to integrity. Growing up in East Texas where we like our chili hot, our heroes human, and the truth with the bark on it, I used to hear my Daddy sing a gloriously provincial and little-known folk song:

Come, all you Mississippi girls
And listen to my noise.
You'd better not marry those Texas boys
For if you do, your portion will be
Johnny cake and venison—that's all you'll see;
Johnny cake and venison—that's all you'll see.

It was true. The portion, the lot, of our forebears was johnny cake and venison, poke sallet and cornmeal mush, hoecake and sorghum syrup. But their portion, partly given by God and partly claimed like Jacob wrestling with the Lord at Jabbok's ford, was something else, too. It was courage; it was discipline, fortitude, risk, nerve, vigor, work, blood, sweat, and tears in pursuit of great ideas, noble aspirations, enduring values. “Poor folks have poor ways,” they said; and yet, they dreamed the infectious, impossible dream. They shucked off the old-world husks of monarchy, a ruling class, and a state church. They pushed back the wilderness and broke new ground. They built little cabins in the clearings and little one-room meeting houses for their churches. They settled down and read their Bibles, and they developed character and carefully cultivated the righteousness without which no nation can become strong or long endure, without which no individual can become strong or no institution long endure.

The Nature of Public Righteousness

Righteousness is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “justice, uprightness, rectitude, conformity of life to the requirements of the divine or moral law; virtue, integrity.” Its

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original spelling was “rightwiseness”; and, as we sometimes still say a thing is sideways, meaning sideways, so this original spelling, right-wise-ness, signified right-way-ness. That is what righteousness is, right-way-ness. It assumes a standard. It starts with moral judgment. It distinguishes between right and wrong. It tells the difference between good and bad.

Furthermore, the concept of righteousness is one of the biggest profoundest, most pervasive concepts in the Bible. The word itself is found some 205 times in the Old Testament and some 96 times in the New Testament.

Exactly what is the righteousness which the people of God want to manifest and see manifested in society? Righteousness is discerning the difference between right and wrong and then choosing right while rejecting wrong. Righteousness is the will to be right and to do right. Righteousness is doing the truth, doing justice, doing love. Righteousness is adherence to principles as the best safeguards for the rights of persons. Righteousness is freedom with responsibility. Righteousness is liberty under law. Righteousness is justice. Righteousness is equality of opportunity. Righteousness is honesty—honesty in public life as well as honesty in private life.

Righteousness is speaking the truth. Righteousness is respect for others and honoring their rights. Righteousness is peace—personal peace, family peace, racial peace, peace between generations, class peace, economic peace, and international peace. Righteousness is personal integrity and it is institutionalized integrity—integrity in our homes, integrity in our schools, integrity in our governmental entities, and integrity in our churches. Righteousness is security with the clear understanding that although for the Church the umbilical cord to this world has been cut, there is another valid perspective which sees Christianity, as William Temple insisted, as the most worldly of all the great world religions for even Christians still need food, clothing, and shelter as well as such other necessities as health care, individual freedom, and personal privacy. Righteousness is responsibility. And righteousness is discipline—discipline as opposed to the lawlessness and disorder in which each does that which is right in his own eyes without regard to authority, human or divine.

Public righteousness has precious little to do with civic ritual that woodenly genuflects in the direction of the powers that be and mindlessly salutes every passing Caesar who is chauffeured by. It is not to be confused with the fuss and feathers of political rhetoric that every leap year wells up and floats off into clouds of incomprehensibility. It has no discernible relationship to plastic lapel flags. Public righteousness moves in the direction of right civic relationships, right social conduct, right public behavior. Public righteousness is related to justice, values, standards, morals, oughtness. It does not gag at calling good, good and evil, evil.

Eric Severeid was overly optimistic when he said in one of his concluding broadcasts that the central core of this country is moral and believing but he was essentially right in seeming to indicate that we can never be at home with unrighteousness. Any assumption that we can is nonsense for it would be a denial that humanity is created in the image and after the likeness of a moral God.

All righteousness, including public righteousness, is rooted and grounded in the righteousness of God.

The Jews understood at a very early time that God was passionately devoted to the right, that, as we are told in Genesis 18:25, he would not "slay the righteous with the wicked," and that the "Judge of all the earth" will "do right" (Genesis 18:25).

Because the Lord God is morally superior, he is always acting in morally superior ways. Because he is righteous, he is always doing righteousness. God is morally positioned, morally involved, morally active. God's purposes are always moral, never malignant, always redemptive, never destructive, always orderly, never chaotic. As his moral wrath is against all personal, social, and public unrighteousness, all moral aberrations and moral abominations, so his moral favor is upon those who do righteousness, establish justice, work for good, and do the things that make for peace.

Jesus Christ so clarified and communicated the righteousness of God that the world even today cannot escape His righteous impact. Paul made righteousness his great theme in his most significant writing, the Epistle to the Romans. New Testament Christianity further focused and clarified the obligation to do right. The early Church was so beautifully baptized in the righteousness of God, that one unknown historian wrote (in The Epistle to Diognetus), probably between 130 and 200 A.D.:

...Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language....But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the Constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvelous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their

own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. [Henry Melville Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Christian Writers* (Westwood, J.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.) pp. 13-14.]

Because God is righteous, he does not and therefore humanity should not treat righteousness and unrighteousness as if they were alike.

As personal righteousness is rooted and grounded in the righteousness of God, so public righteousness is rooted and grounded in personal righteousness. Public righteousness is related to personal righteousness as fruits are related to roots. In public righteousness, the body politic chooses morality over mammon, leans toward justice instead of exploitation, elects freedom rather than tyranny, and opts for order in preference to anarchy.

What is the relationship of right to public righteousness? Some things seem to be instinctively known to be right such as the dispensing of justice without favoritism and rejection of the wanton destruction of life. Other things come to be understood to be right, such as the rejection of human slavery and the separation of church and state as the surest guarantee of religious liberty, when they come to be understood as best for society. Still other things are only very gradually perceived to be right such as the control of pollution and the reining in of a rampant militarism which hardens its heart against Arnold Toynbee's insight that militarism has been the chief cause for the disintegration of civilizations during the last four thousand years.

What can we do to lay hold of public righteousness and turn away from the demonic unrighteousness which so aggressively besets us? The situation, as Dr. Johnson said of a man about to be hanged, should wonderfully concentrate the mind. We do not have the leisure of eternity in which to repent of our sin, turn to righteousness, and prepare to meet God.



The Church and Public Righteousness

The Church, although it is the Body and Bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, originates no righteousness. It reflects the righteousness of Jesus Christ, our Prophet, Priest, and King, who is the consummate word of God's righteousness.

The Church, at once called out and sent forth, gathered and scattered, redeemed and redemptive, lighted and lighting, is the incarnated righteousness of God. Though living in the midst of the hypocrites and the carnal, the lukewarm and the indifferent, the faithless and the unbelieving, the mammon-grubbers and the pleasure-seekers, the misleaders and the misled, the Church is the storehouse and distribution center for true righteousness. Therefore the Church must be everlastingly vigilant not to fetch her fire of righteousness from the strange altars of civil religion, atheistic humanism, or mechanistic behaviorism; and we must be equally vigilant not to misplace our fire of righteousness on the strange altars of mysticism, unbridled emotionalism, pseudo-pietism, or escapist dispensationalism of the kind tragically displayed by the Branch Davidians who got their dispensationalist premillennialism from the same bitter well that a lot of Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians have done for the last 50 to 75 years.

When the church is true to its high calling in Christ Jesus, it is everlastingly involved in the process of moral leavening, consistently speaking for God to the nation, and to the nations, about what is right as it brings the word of the Lord to bear on the great moral issues that affect humanity made in his image.

The Church, of course, can never be crucified on all the crosses. We cannot all be involved in all the burning issues all the time. But we can and we must bear witness, by our nature as the people of our righteous God and by the inner compulsion of God's Holy Spirit, to public righteousness in general and to such specific moral issues as keep arising in this kind of world. Let the Church, then, be God's salt, God's light, God's leaven.

It is the Church's business to "follow righteousness" (2 Timothy 2:22), "to do justly" (Micah 6:8), and to "let justice flow down as the waters and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24), as we play the moral music which the world will instinctively stand up to. Let the Church **do** the truth.

It is the Church's business to live out the moral validity of our baptism. In that baptism, having been buried to the old ways of unrighteousness, we are raised by God's grace "to walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Let the Church **demonstrate** the Gospel.

It is the Church's business to cultivate a valid inner life that normally, naturally, inevitably issues in a valid outer life. Having received righteousness, the Church is obligated and empowered to transmit righteousness to the world in which it travails while Jesus tarries. Appropriating the righteousness of God, through personal repentance and personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, the Church is responsible for faithfully and consistently sharing integrity through all that it is, all that it says, and all that it does. Let the Church **communicate** righteousness.

It is the Church's business to find those times and places, those ways and means to bear an unambiguous moral witness in an age paralyzed by ambiguities. Let the Church's **Yes be Yes and its No be No**.

It is the Church's business to pray for righteousness—personal righteousness in our own lives, civic righteousness in our communities, national righteousness, and international righteousness reaching beyond our borders to the uttermost part of the earth. Not only **may** the Church so pray: if it is faithful to God, it must so pray. Let the Church **look up**.

It is the Church's business to sound a certain note in calling the country to embrace the righteousness which alone can exalt a nation. Let the Church **speak out**.

It is the Church's business to preach repentance for unrighteousness and faith toward God issuing in changed lives, changed institutions, and a changed society. Those who hold four aces don't ask for a new deal—so I am told; and neither should the Church preach some other Gospel than the Gospel of God in Christ which leads changed people to change the world. Let the Church **preach on**—proclaiming the whole gospel of God in Christ.

Let the Church be seized by the Spirit, driven to the desert, and conscripted in the service of authentic righteousness.

Let the Church hold fast to its vision of God, issuing in justice, integrity, morality, and righteousness, for where there is no such vision any people will surely perish.

Let the Church not shrink from the Golgotha of sacrificial involvement on behalf of public righteousness.

And let the Church, flying alone like an eagle and not in flocks like blackbirds, so follow righteousness and do righteousness as to guarantee that those who come after us can have the opportunity to experience a future that is better than our past.

"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34). ■



Dancing with the Black Dog

By Hal Haralson

[Hal Haralson practices law in Austin and is a frequent contributor to *Christian Ethics Today*.]

A recent best selling book was entitled, *Dancing with the White Dog*.

Winston Churchill, who spent a lifetime battling depression, referred to his depression as "The Black Dog."

I spent the weekend dancing with my Black Dog.

He came growling out of the bushes with his lips curled back revealing white fangs and a vicious mouth flecked with foam. I was more scared than I have been in many years.

Two things contributed to this frightening episode.

The week before, I left Austin at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday for Freer, Texas—a four and one-half hour drive. Freer is near, by South Texas standards, Laredo on the Mexican border.

For 15 years I've hunted deer one week in December on the 17,000-acre Lundell ranch. Harry Lundell, a close friend and owner of the ranch, was already there waiting for me.

I drove "Old Red." This 1967 Ford pickup has been in the family for 26 years. I look like Jed Clampitt coming down the road with my homemade deer blind on the back.

There were four of us hunting. We were in position by 6:00 a.m. Monday, came in to camp by noon, went back at 2:00 p.m., and then stayed until dark.

This went on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday until noon, when I prepared to head back to Austin.

It was hot. Deer don't move until cold weather arrives. Thirty hours sitting in place and not a shot.

The other contributing factor involved my law practice. I am a solo practitioner. Each month, I meet the overhead and pay bills. The last of November and the first two weeks in December the cash flow trickled down and stopped.

I had no money to pay the bills. I thought about this for

hours as I sat in the deer blind.

I went hunting when there was no money. If the money didn't come in I'd have to ask Judy (my wife of 41 years) for help. I hated this prospect.

Just before I was ready to return to Austin on Thursday, Kinky came in with a beautiful nine-point buck draped over his jeep. The deer field-dressed 186 pounds (a monster).

"They're moving," he allowed. It had gotten colder the night before. I was torn. I needed to leave but I knew the hunting would pick up.

I left. I somehow felt I had to get out of there. I was washed out.

All the way home at 50-miles-per-hour (Old Red's limit), I worried about the money.

This had happened before and there had always been a solution. That didn't matter. I was exhausted, frustrated, and disappointed that I had not fired a shot. And I couldn't keep my mind off the money.

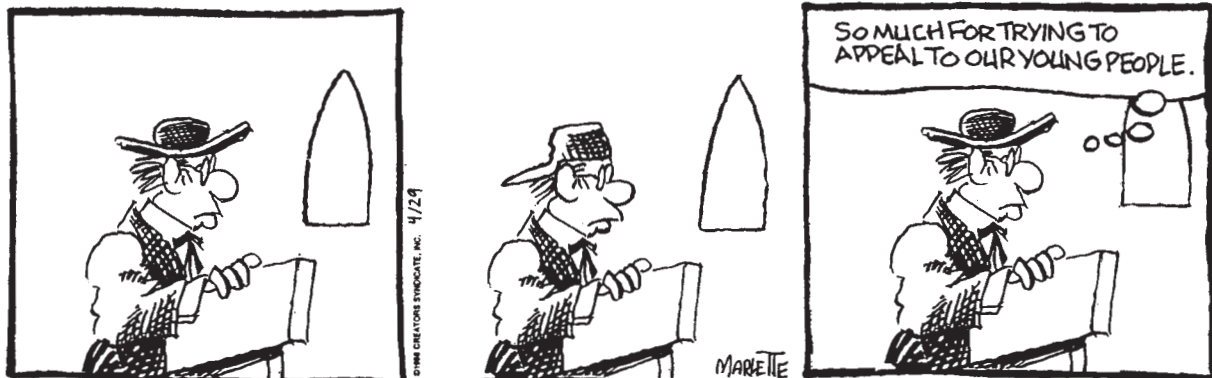
I began to see the Black Dog lurking behind the bushes.

I was diagnosed a manic depressive 35 years ago. By taking lithium, I have had no depression in 25 years. I was terrified, however, as I felt the symptoms.

Fear, lack of confidence, dwelling on the worst that could possibly happen, not being able to keep my mind off these things—all of these washed over me.

Waking at 3:00 a.m. and laying in bed the next morning my brain whirled as I was overwhelmed with "what if's". What if I had to close my law practice (that happened once 25 years ago). What if I was put in the State Hospital (that happened once 30 years ago). What if Judy got angry and filed for divorce (after 41 years of marriage)?

The fact that these things were unlikely meant nothing. My mind was a runaway train.



I was angry that after 25 years this could be happening again.

I covered it up, the worst thing I could do. A depressed person deals with depression by withdrawing.

Finally, on Monday, I told Judy. She immediately offered me \$2,000.00 to help with the bills.

I knew she would do this. I didn't want this. I felt I wasn't carrying my part of the load. Judy is a psychotherapist in private practice and a much better money handler than I. I thought accepting her offer would be an admission of failure. I held off.

Monday night was better. Tuesday night was my prayer group. We have met once a month for ten years and I looked forward to seeing my friends and telling them my experience.

My feelings were mixed. I was somewhat hesitant and told them so.

"Why were you reluctant to tell us?", my friend Jev Sikes, a psychologist, asked a probing question. "I think it's like a wound," I replied. "It's so sore...so recent...I want to protect it." I slept better Tuesday night. The openness with my group was very healing.

The next day, there was an appointment on my calendar that had been made while I

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*Ed said two things.
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*That is still God's
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was hunting. The lady was seeking an attorney to represent her in a divorce.

"The first place I saw your name," she said to me, "was in the journal at the Quiet House."

The Quiet House is at Laity Lodge on the Butt Foundation Ranch. I've been there many times.

She left after two hours of conversation, signing an attorney/client agreement and leaving a retainer that was more than enough to cover the bills I had worried about.

The Black Dog came and went in three days. I know he's still there, of course, lurking in the darkness.

The fears were groundless. That's beside the point. What happened here? Exhaustion, disappointment, fear so biting you can't shake it. Shaken faith.

Remember, Hal, God is there and never leaves you nor forsakes you.

Thirty-five years ago he sent Ed Bush, an Episcopal priest, to my home when I was deep in depression. I didn't want to listen then, but I did.

Ed said two things. "Be of good cheer" and "Everything is going to be all right."

That is still God's message, through Ed, thirty-five years later. ■

Grits, Grace, and Goodness

By Charles Wellborn

[Dr. Charles Wellborn is Professor of Religion Emeritus, Florida State University, Tallahassee and for 20 years was Dean of the FSU Overseas Campus in London where he still lives.]

The alliterative “G’s” in the title of this article are probably a carryover from the sermonic experience of my years as a pastor. Be that as it may, the three terms—grits, grace, and goodness—have become linked in my recent reflections.

I am a Southerner, born and bred. Across the years I have observed that first-time visitors to the “hallowed ground” of the American South experience a number of culture shocks. One such shock is the first encounter with that omnipresent ingredient on the Southern breakfast plate—grits. Southerners take grits for granted; not so our Yankee friends.

Years ago a friend of mine from Massachusetts came to Tallahassee, Florida, where I was living. On his first morning in town I picked up my friend at his motel where he had just eaten breakfast.

“What’s that white stuff they put on your plate?” he asked. “That stuff that tastes like wallpaper paste and, if you leave it long enough, turns into concrete?”

My friend’s question reminded me of an oft-told story. A traveler from the North, making his first visit to the South, stopped for breakfast at a roadside cafe in Georgia. From the smiling young Georgia Cracker waitress he ordered bacon and eggs. In a few minutes she brought his order to the table. On the plate were bacon, eggs, and grits. Puzzled, the man called the waitress over and, pointing to the white glob, inquired, “What’s that?”

“That’s grits,” the waitress replied.

“But I didn’t order grits,” the traveler protested.

The waitress had an explanation. “Grits ain’t something you order. Grits just come.”

“Grits just come.” By some trick of mind those words remind me of grace—that mysterious, almost indefinable working of God in human experience. Through the centuries Christians have struggled to understand the full meaning of grace. Seeking a terse definition, theologians have defined it as the “unmerited favor of God.” Those words hardly begin to plumb the depths of the concept. Christians attribute their salvation and forgiveness of sin to “Amazing Grace.” Even that

is not enough. Christ died not only that men and women might be rescued from their hopeless human predicament but also that his followers might have aid and assistance in their continuing struggle to be “good.” We call that assistance grace.

Grace is not something we can bargain for or purchase. It cannot be triggered by repeating some magic incantation or carrying out a prescribed sacred ritual. Grace “just comes.”

We are sometimes frightened by grace, for it often arrives at unexpected moments or in unlikely circumstances. We frequently find the workings of grace difficult to understand. It doesn’t always seem to make sense. We play the part of the Elder Brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, protesting to the Father that his open-armed reception of the prodigal violates all the canons of reasonable common sense. We constantly forget that what we humans call “sanity” does not always accord with the “Divine Sanity” of God.

Clearly, Christians are called to the task of being “good” in every area of life, both personal and corporate. Christian ethics, at rock bottom, is all about goodness, and we should never underestimate the difficulty of the assignment. “Being good” is a rough, tough, dangerous job.

In the seventh chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle makes a profound confession: “For the good that I would I do not, but the evil that I would not, that I do.” Paul obviously speaks here out of the depths of his own moral struggle. He points us to the two great difficulties in that struggle. It is often difficult to know what is right, and even if we believe that we know the good thing, the job is far from over. It may be even more difficult to do the right.

All of my Christian life I have puzzled over the implications of the ethical teachings of Jesus—the parameters of a truly good life. Some people seem to find these moral dimensions simple. My experience is different. I am constantly impressed with what I, and others, have called “the hard sayings” of Jesus.

Let me give a few examples out of many. Jesus said, “Love your enemy. Do good to them that persecute you.” As a World War II combat veteran, trained and ordered in that conflict, not to love my enemy but to kill him, I find that injunction disturbing. Jesus said, “If a man strike you on one cheek, turn the other.” I wrestle with the seeming contradiction

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between that statement and my natural inclination to defend myself and my children against unjustified violence. Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" and "Judge not lest ye be judged." Painfully aware of my own moral shortcomings, I find it uncomfortable to speak words of condemnation on my fellow human beings. Jesus said, "If a man ask you for your coat, give him your cloak also." How does that fit in with the apparent necessity to provide for my own material needs and those of my loved ones?

Unhappily, I have no glib answers for those moral dilemmas. Indeed, I distrust the simplistic solutions and the exegetical cartwheels of those who explain to me that Jesus did not actually mean what he seems to have been saying. We are told that the appropriate moral guideline is to hate the sin but love the sinner. That impresses me as an easy out—a convenient moral escape hatch. In everyday life the sin and the sinner appear inseparable, and to claim to hate sin and love the sinner allows many of us to twist the meaning of love into contorted shapes. Once we get our dirty human hands on the word "love," we can make that word mean what our baser nature wants it to mean. Thus, we are allowed to do misshapen things—actions which seriously contradict the essence of God's love as revealed in Jesus Christ. In the extreme, for example, individuals who classify all abortion as a grievous sin may hate that sin so much that they respond by murdering abortion doctors and blowing up abortion clinics, all in the name of God and "goodness."

True, most of us do not go to that extreme. But is not the difference between many of our actions and that one a matter of degree, and does not the extreme case at least raise the red flag of moral danger?

The truth is that all through Christian history those persons who have sought to take the words of Jesus seriously and to act on them at face value have been judged by most of the world as, at best, mentally unstable, and, at worst, insane. When Jesus willingly "emptied" himself and gave his life on a cross, he did what the world would call an insane act. When Francis of Assisi divested himself of all worldly possessions in order to identify himself totally with his needy and oppressed brothers and sisters, he violated the standards of common sense. How does one make sense of the choice of Father Damien to submit himself to the perils of a deadly disease for the sake of a few miserable lepers, or of the decision of Albert Schweitzer to use his manifold literary, medical, and musical talents, not for the advancement of his personal career, but for the needs of a few hundred African natives?

I have concluded that the moral teaching of Jesus constitutes what I will call "the ethic of the overload." Again and again we

The ethic of perfect love—the ethic of the overload—constantly demands from us more than human reason or common sense would justify. To respond adequately to that ethic requires a sort of reckless faith in the power of God and, beyond that, the willingness to suffer as a result of our actions.

Christians make our "sensible" moral decisions, only to discover with a cold shock that the Jesus-ethic requires much more. When Jesus counsels us to "turn the other cheek," he is clearly ruling out any tit-for-tat revengeful response. The "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" syndrome has no place in the ethic of love. Many of us believe that we can make a rational case for such restraint in our one-to-one personal relationships. But Jesus seems to be saying that our laudable refusal to react violently is not enough. We must go further and, apparently, invite even more violence from the aggressor. We must actively demonstrate that absolutely nothing another person can do to us will destroy our love for that person as one of God's children. That's the ethic of the overload.

When we follow our Master's instructions to give our needy neighbor our coat, Jesus says, "Not enough! Give away your cloak also." The ethic of perfect love—the ethic of the overload—constantly demands from us more than human reason or common sense would justify. To respond adequately to that ethic requires a sort of reckless faith in the power of God and, beyond that, the willingness to suffer as a result of our actions.

This brings us back to that "Divine Sanity." We must remember our human limits. We are, all of us, enclosed in a box, bounded on every side by the restrictions of time and space. Those restrictions affect everything in our experience, including both our language and our logic. To make matters even more difficult, a pervasive moral corruption is at work in that box and us. We cannot ignore the fact that evil taints us all. Christians believe that God, in an act of unlimited love, has invaded that box in the person of the Christ. God's invasion was carried out not only to achieve the salvation of the human race but also to confront men and women with the moral challenge of perfect, unqualified love. The "Word made flesh" speaks ultimate truth. It transcends in incalculable ways the inadequate time-space language and understanding of a corrupted humanity. God's ethical language is the language of the moral overload. To be good, in the fullest Christian sense, is to live out a moral pattern which is defined for us from outside the box.

Where does all this leave the committed Christian who sincerely wants to be good? I have learned much from the teaching and example of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the World War II German theologian. Faced with the choice between the demands of perfect love and the unspeakable evils of Nazi Germany, he finally entered into a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He did not make that decision easily. He agonized over it. He chose to act with a painful recognition of his own limits. Assessing the concrete situation as best he could, he did what seemed to him the

“most right” thing to do. But the knowledge of his own fallibility forced him to pray, even as he acted, “Father, forgive me where I am wrong.” His decision cost him his freedom and, eventually, his life. I believe he faced that terrible personal outcome with a sure reliance on the overshadowing grace of God.

As men and women living in a fractured world, we do not have the option to be moral spectators. We must choose, and we must act, often without any real certainty that we are totally right. Because our God-given fate is to be creatures of free will and choice, our responsibility in the face of the “ethic of the overload” is daunting. Nevertheless, that confrontation is necessary if we are to make any progress toward the goal of being good human beings in a good society. Our choices cannot be made solely on the basis of a rational, mathematical calculation of “the greatest good for the greatest number,” viewed through human eyes. God has not supplied us with a moral rule book. We cannot find our answer by referring to page twenty-four, paragraph five, sub-section fourteen. To think like Jesus, and then to act upon those thoughts, is a risky, dangerous, and difficult task.

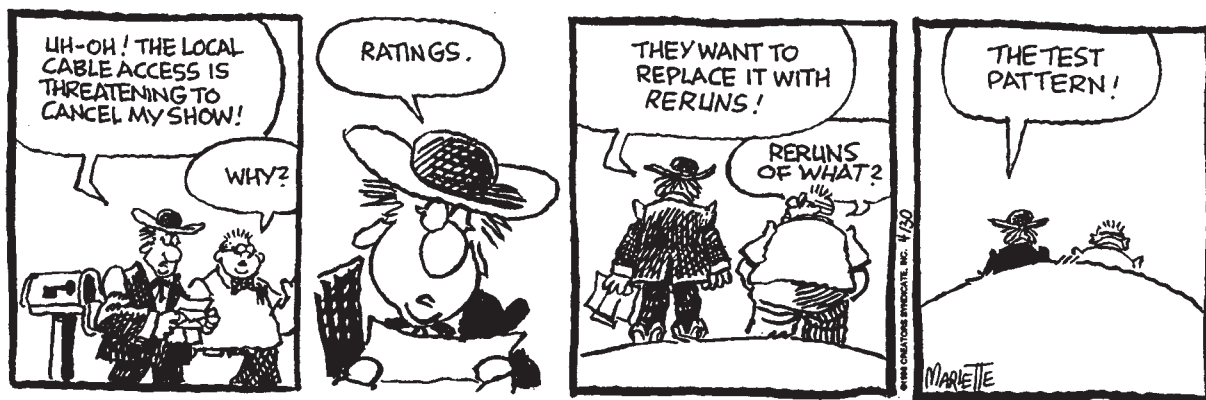
I am writing these words during the week just after Easter. In my meditations on the events of Passion Week, I am struck by the profound gap between two of the last sayings

It does not appear to be our destiny to achieve perfect love here on earth. That culmination awaits the time when we are released from our time-space “box” and see truth and virtue, not as “in a glass darkly,” but “face to face.” Meanwhile, our task is to take seriously the demands of the moral overload. Relying always on grace, we must dare to act—to do in each concrete moral situation what seems the “most right” thing to do, even as we pray, “Father, forgive me, for I know not what I do.”

of Jesus on the cross. An awful moment comes when Jesus enters into the full despair of the human condition, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (And, make no mistake, Jesus was not play-acting. His despair was real.) Yet, not long after those words, he faced the final moments of his human existence with calm confidence: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” What filled that awesome gap and gave him strength? Somehow confidence and assurance arose out of despair. It was grace that made the difference, and that same power is still at work in our world.

We cannot command nor manipulate grace. Grace “just comes.” What we can do is to be open and receptive to its coming. How can we be most open to grace? When we strive within our human limits to be the kind of men and women God wants us to be—when we struggle to be “good”—we are in the prime position to hope for grace.

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The Beauty of the Beast

By *Carlyle Marney*

[Dr. Carlyle Marney, now deceased, was founder of Interpreter's House at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. Before that he was pastor of the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C. after serving for several years as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas. Well known for his preaching, Marney preached this sermon, across the length and breadth of the land. And now though "he being dead yet speaketh" (Hebrews 11:4).]

I.

The most dangerous beast? He is neither lion, nor tiger, nor buffalo, nor elephant. MAN is the most savage of the beasts. His bite is poisonous; his hand is a club; his foot is a weapon; knives, clubs, spears become projectiles to carry his hostility. Nothing in nature is so well equipped for hating or hurting. His brain, which trebles during his first few months, is a literal storehouse for keeping destruction and pain-making. His logical powers mean that he can organize for doing harm. His tool-making means that he can invent ways to increase his ability to be hostile. His social nature means he always releases his venom in groups. His powers of communication make him able to mis-communicate; and mis-representation is a means of revenge. He can even make a weapon out of gossip. His memory means that he can brood and stir up malice. And his ability to see that **this** is like **that**, his ability to generalize, means that he can wrongly generalize, wrongly associate, and draw conclusions to his permanent fixation in prejudice. His judgment means that he can mis-judge. His very inventiveness makes him a bomb-maker; and bomb-makers are rarely caught, for the bomb-maker is miles away when his hatred goes off. His legal powers open the door to his illegality. And his great capacity for self-awareness is his great capacity for suicide. His socializing tendency gives him an arena for wider harmfulness. Confuse him and he may lash out at everything. Crowd him and he kills, robs, and destroys, for his crime rate increases in proportion to his crowding. Deprive him and he retaliates. Impoverish him and he burns villas in the night. Enslave him and he revolts. Pamper him and he may poison you. Hire him and he may hate both you and the work. Love him too possessively and he is never weaned. Deny him too early and he never learns to love. Put him in cities and all his animal nature comes out with perversions of every good thing, for greed, acquisitiveness, and violence were so long his tools for jungle survival that it is only by the hardest that these can be laid aside as weapons of his continued survival.

If you should suspend for a single ten years the processes of education, his civilization would be devastated. If you destroyed all that is past the memory of our generation—the etiquette, the laws, the patterns of civilized conduct—he would be a swamp

creature again. Excite him, frighten him, anger him in a crowd and he is devastating—more than locust swarms or herds of animals. I rode up unexpectedly on a herd of seventy young horses in a mountain glade and they ran as one animal and the earth shook under me. And 200,000 Peruvians at a Soccer match stamping their feet in unison registered a disturbance of earthquake size on a university seismograph miles away. A bad decision by a referee so angered a crowd of spectators that they trampled hundreds to death.

Man—greatest and highest of animals is our most savage beast. And nowhere is he more savage than at home. For here he maims, or wrecks, or destroys, or hurts, or lashes out. Nowhere is he more dangerous than in his lair; nowhere is he more destructive than to himself. Society is a composite picture of his great power to harm.

II.

As a bulwark against this savagery, to protect us from us, it takes all of our mighty oppositeness. To beat-down and subdue our own powers of destruction requires all our strength. This is what law is for. This is what civilization is about. Art, Culture, Philosophy, Order, Religion, all our powers are needed to cage and tame our strength for evil. St. Paul says, "I beat my body black and blue to keep it under subjection." St. Augustine, having resolved his concupiscence by shipping his mistress home, says that he had daily to cut the throat of his appetite. In every city there is a constant threat from the spill-over of our savage capacity for evil. It takes all our powers of the opposite to preserve us alive in a semblance of law and order.

Now the civilizing force of the Christian Gospel is incalculable. But the Christian Gospel did not begin this business of controlling savagery. Such beginnings are far behind us. And, so far as I know, not for 2000 years have we come across a really new weapon for controlling our evil unless it be tranquilizers. Techniques like fingerprinting and police cars with radio capacity have been helpful; but electric chairs and gas chambers are only less bloody than the guillotine—they are not more effective.

In his war against himself, Mankind came some thousands of years ago to some very high concepts and ideals: the great old code of Hammurabi, the Ten Commandments of Moses, Assyrian codes, Egyptian codes, Hindu laws, the Oriental Yin-Yang, and the acceptance of one's culture, the great corpus of Roman Law, Stoic Philosophy, the Greek notion of man, all these were civilizers and all these had a high purpose. We benefit from every one of them although we may be largely ignorant about them.

But the idea in our Christian past, the BIG idea is, that whatever the gulf in us, it could be fixed. We could become a new creation. We could be re-made in Christ Jesus into one new Creature. We could be a new human race. In the Man, in the

only Man who appeared among us as the New Adam, Adam II, the Christ of God, we could be made over in his image and could associate ourselves into a society of made-over men. Into churches we could come and live as whole men and while doing it we could keep the world out. We could keep the beastliness out. We could keep the savagery out with one hand and bring the world in with the other, until all were in.

III.

Our failure, our utter failure is at both points, for we have neither brought the world in nor kept it out. This is the plain situation of the modern church—we have neither kept the world out nor brought it in. As Douglas Branch said on the day he was inaugurated as secretary of our denomination in North Carolina, “If all the world were Baptist we would have every problem we have got.” And this is so.

And worse, we Christians are now a shrinking minority in an exploding world population. This is the modern crisis of Christendom. We can neither keep the world out nor get it in from here. For millions it means the Gospel has run out. For millions it is perceived to be the failure of Christianity and the Church. For many commentators it is the “Post-Christian Era” that we are entering. This is why there can be mega-churches of up to 15,000 members in a city and the existence of the huge church makes almost no difference to the City.

There are four-hundred churches in Charlotte—little closed communions, ghettos, refuges of sick and miserable people clinging for some kind of mutual confirmation, self-affirmation, but reproducing in their own bodies and within their own walls nearly every crime and beastly capacity; and, on the large scale, essentially not much different from those who are outside. This is the crisis of modern Christianity and it is a dreadful crisis.

It is not just a failure of nerve—it is not just a failure of morality, it is a failure in **direction**. It is not just a failure in goodness—we are as good as the people who are outside the church—it is that the church is **inward oriented**. It survives to keep itself going. It is no longer sought. It is a subjective, inward, defensive, closed, self-concerned corporation and it is a moral failure on the broad scale. If this continues it would be the death of Christendom as it is already the death of the institutions of Christendom, for the inward-oriented church will not hold the tide back. Our little ghettos will not contain the beast. Our little institutions will neither civilize nor redeem nor save nor make. This is the end of the world the **Book of Revelation** talks about. The Church Herself becomes a beast or as **Revelation** puts it “a harlot and the mother of harlots.”

IV.

Here in our time and place we have set out on a new venture. We are not alone. We do not all understand yet what it is

The inward-oriented church will not hold the tide back. Our little ghettos will not contain the beast. Our little institutions will neither civilize nor redeem nor save nor make.

that we are up to. Vestiges of the old inwardness cling in globs to us, too. There is on us daily the pressure to put all our energies into keeping house and building up the ghetto. We need 3,000, not just 1,700, just to keep our camp ground clean. The need to be successful, the need to be comforting, and the need to be encouraging are fantastic pressures to make us like the surrounding churches and to ignore the failure of Christendom to be Christian.

Add our own agonized awareness that six full time ministers cannot repair the damage done downtown and at the production centers of the culture. The damage is done there, but it is acted-out in the bedrooms, and schoolrooms, and kitchens, and playgrounds of the surrounding suburbia. Add to this the agonized inability of a professional clergy to get at the root of the trouble where it lies in the vaults and foundries and manufactories of our

values. This becomes a different situation.

Nevertheless, a new direction is represented here. We are not alone—but we were among the first twenty years ago to see how God will work to bring his beauty to his beast. How urgently important it is now that we begin to understand what we are up to.

With this kind of conviction, with this kind of analysis in our bonnets, Mr. Carroll and I went to New York for a pair of TV presentations. We did not know how we could say it, or whether we could say it at all. We were teamed opposite the pastor and a layman of perhaps the most successful Protestant Church in America. Thousands of members, hospital beds, old folks homes, camps, teams, projects and as Andy Griffith would say, “I don’t know what all!” More than this we were teamed opposite the most winsome, hard-working, gifted organizer-administrator in the American Church. But more, he is an altogether admirable, lovable man who has been triumphant over great personal suffering and loss—he is a man to be like—a great gaunt Swede of giant proportions in his city.

But worse, we were pitted against two dreadfully wrong ideas: if you can’t get them there you can’t help them! And—the church ought to be as well organized and as successful as General Motors. **Both ideas are utterly false.** As a matter of fact you can’t help them if you do get them there—**don’t make me prove this from the rolls of my own congregation!** You have no guarantee whatever that you can do them any good if you can “get them there.” They have to be helped where they are and you can’t hire enough hands to go where they are! Nor does anything in the nature of our task require a successful Church! As a matter of fact, nothing in the Gospel requires more of a church than a cell-group of response where you get the strength to do the work of God. This changes what church is for. Changes it utterly, no longer a ghetto for defense you become a center for redemptive witness where the world is.

Some convictions are basic for our existence, if this is to be the

new shape of relevant Christianity, if this is to be how the beauty comes to the man-beast in society.

We believe in the power, effectiveness, and worth of the new creation in Christ Jesus. But we believe in the salvation of the world—not the salvation of the church. Read John 3:16.

We believe in the salvation of the inhabited world of men. To this end, the salvation of the world, the church is a tool to release the beauty of the beast. But church is tool—not receptacle or vat.

We can never get all the world to agree with nor to join us. We wouldn't know what to do with them if they did. Redemption is by permeation of whatever structures are already there—not by incorporating into our own structures a double sewer system to take care of the evil of the world.

The necessary reversal of flow involved here means that our whole living together these years has been an attempt not to bring everybody in and change them but to send changed people out to change. Not to maintain you as church members where you are—though this has its needs—but to transfer you out there where you can save.

The new concept of church now is clearer. The new creation has to happen where the old creation resides. You can't catch a beast on Tryon Street—they just don't go there! The beast has to be dealt with where he lives. The gospel has to be lived at the bank, the stores, the schools, the houses, the prisons, the rental offices, the government offices, the factories and mills, the slums, the streets, the race pens and the rabbit hutches of the modern metropolis, you can't get these rabbit pens to come into the church.

This means that the new creation calls for more ministers to serve as vehicles for transfer—it means the world needs a priest at

every elbow, every desk, every sink, every bedroom, every turning lathe, every knitting machine, every steering wheel, every golf course. Quit asking me to be all those places. You are there! And that is all God needs.

Salvation is created out there in the permeation of their values—not brought into this factory. We church members are service men in-the-field. No professional priest can do this. Where you are skilled in the bank and its workings I am an utter ignoramus and have been so told. Where you have the training of 40 years of professional calling I am an utter idiot. The priest at every elbow is what we have mistakenly referred to as "just a layman." And what we have been calling our by-product has been our main business all the time!

What is this center for? To repair the damage to the ministry of the laity. We are a shop, we are a mother, we are a healer, and we are a teacher to make ministers. The big burden for the pastor is not to make you happy—the big burden here is not to satisfy you until you are contented and altogether healthy. The big burden here is not to make you lawyers—our burden is not to teach you to be doctors, or teachers, or salesmen, or even parents. Our burden is to learn with you and to help you to be able to live like competent interpreters in your world to redeem it: to give you the tools we have been given for understanding what God has done, is doing, and will do in you.

Our great joy is the calling to become persons with you in **this** place for the sake of those at **that** place. We may never get them here. We need you there! And this is the new church. It is a hope for the beauty of this magnificent beast of God that we may get you there in such position that you know what is going on and can be both redeemer and priest. ■



Gerber Daisies

By Roger Lovette

[Roger Lovette is Pastor of the Baptist Church of the Covenant, an inner-city congregation in Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author of numerous good books among which are *For the Dispossessed*, *A Faith of Our Own*, and *Journey Towards Joy*.]

Funny how some of the most important moments in our lives cluster around the simple things. Often these are occasions which seem inconsequential at the time. The gospel says that abundant living usually flows out of simple things like manna and loaves and fishes and bread and wine and chance encounters at a watering place. Biblical faith often clusters around events so ordinary that we miss their meaning because we expect the spectacular.

Unloading my suitcases after being gone for two weeks, my wife and I began to catch up on the news. She had traveled South to see her mother as I traveled North to study. Coming back home from Florida she detoured by my hometown in Georgia to see my mother. In her eighties, my mother was rushed to the hospital while my wife was there. My mother's hospital trips had been coming closer together. Slowly her heart was wearing out although we did not recognize it at the time.

"Oh, by the way," my wife said, "your mother sent you some flowers. Gerber daisies. Just before she got sick she went out to a nursery, found these two plants at a good price. She told me about three times to go by her house and pick up the plants and bring them to you. She gave me strict instructions to tell you not to plant them here. (I was living in Clemson, South Carolina at the time.) She said, and these were her words, 'That old red mud won't grow nothin'.' She said, 'Keep them out of the full sun. Give them plenty of water, but not too much—take them with you to Memphis when you move and put them out.' They are on the deck if you want to see them," my wife concluded.

I wandered outside to see the daisies. Both pots of flowers still

had beautiful red blooms on them. I noticed that there were other blossoms still coming on. I felt the dirt to see if the flowers needed water. Then I placed them under a picnic table where they could get some sun without being parched. Every day I would check on the daisies.

I called my mother who was still in the hospital. She said she was feeling fine. As usual she wanted to know all the news. What we were doing, when we were flying back to Memphis to talk to another church about moving. She asked, of course, about the daisies. I told her they were faring well. She repeated her instructions a second time: "Don't plant them now. That old red mud in South Carolina is not good for flowers. Take them with you when you move and put them out and I expect they will do fine. Give them plenty of water, not too much sun."

This was the last conversation I had with my mother. Little did I know that within a week's time our family would be huddled together around her grave at the Park Hill Cemetery.

The morning the call came that she was dead I did not know what to do. What I did do, before we left for my hometown, was to ask my neighbor to look out after the flowers until we returned. Then we drove to my hometown for that long hard trip of saying goodbye. The next few days were a blur. Planning a funeral, surrounded by family and friends through the years, visitation at the mortuary, the funeral itself on a hot July afternoon under a blue, blue Georgia sky. We returned weeks later and cleaned out her house, lovingly divided the belongings of eighty years, and sold the house where I was born.

We moved in late August. All our belongings were packed away into a moving van for that long trip from South Carolina to Tennessee. One of the last things I did was to walk across my backyard to our neighbor's house to pick up the daisies. They had been well tended and they were flourishing.

I did not trust the movers with those plants, so I placed them in the car for the long drive. A week later, on a hot, August



Sunday morning I planted those two plants in the side yard in my new home in Memphis, Tennessee. It was a painful time, planting those last flowers my mother had given me. When I finished I remember whispering a prayer: "Dear God, let them live. Let them live." That was in late August.

On a Saturday morning, October 15, I went out the door to get the morning paper. It was my birthday. I noticed a strange sight. One of the Gerber daisies had a red bloom on it. Looking closer, I noticed that another bloom was forming. I'm not much of a gardener, but I do know that daisies do not usually bloom in October. My mother's final gift, like so many others she had given through the years, reached out and touched my life. Even after her death, her gift came alive on my birthday.

Frost came early that year in Memphis. The perennials wilted and hibernated under the cold hard soil. But after the winter the grass slowly turned green and the birds sang their hearts out. I kept watching for signs of the daisies. Earlier in the fall I had covered them to protect them from the cold but I did not dig them up. Everything else I planted came up, but not the daisies. I kept going back and looking for signs of life. The Gerber daisies were dead.

At first I could not believe the plants had died. I had prayed and worked and hoped they would make it through the winter into the spring—but they did not. But the flowers did what they were intended to do. They bloomed on my birthday and in the weeks that followed. The Gerber daisies came into my life at a hard time and the flowers fulfilled their purpose.

I have made peace with the daisies that did not come back. They were part of the multilayered fabric of my grief. They were a symbol of my mother's life—rich, alive, and special. Her flowers were there when I needed them, working their healing power. Perhaps grace and renewal always come to us in tiny things as unlikely as blood-red Gerber daisies.

I still have dreams about my mother. Sometimes I wake up with a start and think: "My mother is dead." Grief has not yet done its final work even after all these years. Sometimes, even now, a sadness steals over me. But I go on. And from time to time I remember a cluster of daisies with their untimely, serendipitous, October blooms, a birthday present that came from my mother months after her death. Her gift taught me that the Psalmist was right: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30.5). ■

War and the Population Explosion: Some Ethical Implications

By John M. Swomley

[Dr. John M. Swomley lives in Kansas City, Missouri. He is a graduate of Dickinson College and Boston University and holds the Ph.D. degree from the University of Colorado. A Phi Beta Kappa member, he was Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City from 1960 to 1984. He is a frequent contributor to *Christian Ethics Today*.]

The nature of war has been changing from wars between nations to wars within nations. According to the United Nations, only three of the eighty-two armed conflicts between 1989 and 1992 were between nations. Those within nations were primarily the result of religion or culture or race or ethnic differences, poverty, shortage of arable land, and inequalities caused by overpopulation.

There have been 148 wars in the world since World War II, according to Ruth Sivard, a military analyst. Among these were wars in the Sudan, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. Most of these were population wars.

These new wars, characterized as "population wars," can be contrasted with imperialist wars during the period 1500 through the early 20th century, when major powers sought conquest of territory for the exploitation of resources. Spain, France, Britain, Portugal, Holland, Germany and the United States were all involved in such wars. The chief factor in all such conquests was armaments or military and naval superiority over the more poorly armed natives in India, Africa, and the Americas. By the 20th century nations or combinations of nations fought wars so disastrous as to lead them to carve out spheres of influence or alliances to deter war, and conferences to limit armaments and establish rules of warfare. Still World Wars I and II occurred.

Today the United States as the world's "superpower" has established spheres of influence in the Americas; in Europe, through NATO; and in Asia through treaties with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and others. The U.S. is now in the process of extending its power throughout the Middle East. Within these spheres of influence the USA recognizes that hunger, poverty, refugees, migration, shortages of water, and overpopulation, are major threats to peace and stability. Or, as in the case of Africa, it tends to ignore grave turmoil and social upheavals where there are fewer political and economic interests at stake.

The Pentagon is aware of this new phase of warfare. In its 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review it justifies its large military establishment in part with these words: "Some governments will

lose their ability to maintain public order and provide for the needs of their people, creating the conditions for civil unrest, famine, massive flows of migrants across international borders....Uncontrolled flows of migrants will sporadically destabilize regions of the world and threaten American interests and citizens.”

The Pentagon’s description, together with support evidence to be discussed later, requires a new ethical approach to war in addition to traditional methods of limitation of armaments and other efforts to prevent wars between nations. The new ethical dimension requires serious efforts to reduce population, end degradation of the land and water resources, and reduce poverty worldwide. None of these can be accomplished without fundamental changes in the way women are treated, including their right to reproductive freedom, and the way governments respond to the burgeoning population problem.

The evidence of a planetary population problem includes the cataclysmic increase in the number of economic refugees as well as those from population wars. According to the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, the world had 27.4 million refugees in 1995. This was 4.4 million higher than the year before and 17 million more than the preceding ten years. Another 20 million were refugees within their own countries.

Out of a global workforce of about two billion eight-hundred thousand people, at least 120 million are unemployed and another 700 million are underemployed or without enough income to meet basic human needs. A major reason for this is that in many countries there is not enough arable land or water to provide food for the people who live there. Nor is there enough available employment for landless people. This has been both a reason for economic migration and the tension leading to population wars.

An article by Hal Kane in a 1995 *World Watch* magazine said, “Apart from the long-established migratory pressures of war, persecution, and the pull of economic opportunity, migrants are now responding to scarcities of land, water, and food that are more widespread than ever before. They are leaving because of overcrowding in decrepit squatter settlements that now house huge numbers of people, because of post-Cold War changes in political climate, and because of widening disparities of income. This is why most of the world’s migration has yet to happen.”

An illustration of some of these problems appeared in the March 1, 1998 *Kansas City Star’s* description of Burkino Faso, a “landlocked West African country slightly larger than Colorado, where women often walk miles every day to fetch water and firewood, and the average family earns less than \$300 in a good year....Last month Burkino Faso applied for emergency foreign aid to feed about 800,000 famished people left without food after a

The British medical journal, The Lancet, said Rwanda had the world’s highest fertility rate and “the fact that any country could now be in intensely Catholic Rwanda’s predicament is an indication of the world’s and especially the Holy See’s reluctance to face the issues of population control.”

serious drought affected the main crops of sorghum, millet and corn.”

Even in the Americas there are hundreds of thousands of economic refugees. More than one-and-a-half million refugees from Mexico, Salvador, Guatemala, and other countries below Mexico live within 25 miles of the United States, hoping to cross the border. Hundreds of thousands live in huts, makeshift tents, lean-tos, and caves without adequate sanitation, or health and law enforcement assistance. Estimates are that more than a million residents of Tijuana just south of San Diego live under these conditions. They and other millions are malnourished and many have communicable diseases, including AIDS. Their future seems dim.

Some of them are also refugees from earlier wars in Central America and Mexico, fought over control of land.

The most devastating population war in recent history is the war in Rwanda which began in 1994. It began in the most densely populated country in Africa, where virtually all arable land was in use by the mid-1980s.

Michael Renner of the World Watch Institute noted that in Rwanda “half of all farming took place on hillsides by the mid-80s, when overcultivation and soil erosion led to falling yields and a steep decline in total grain production.”

In Rwanda there were 1,800,000 refugees living outside its borders in 1995, and close to one million Rwandans had been slaughtered.

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Renner noted that “The Hutu leaders that planned and carried out the genocide in 1994 relied strongly on heavily armed militias who were recruited primarily from the unemployed. “These were the people who had insufficient land to establish and support a family of their own and little prospect of finding jobs outside agriculture. Their lack of hope for the future and low self esteem were channeled by the extremists into an orgy of violence against those who supposedly were to blame for these misfortunes.”

Population wars are caused not only by shortages of land but by scarcity of water. Sandia Postel in her 1992 book, *Last Oasis: Facing Water Scarcity*, indicates that early in the 90s, twenty-six countries with combined population of about 230 million people had water scarcity.

The shortage of water in the Mideast is illustrative. “No matter what progress irrigated agriculture makes, Jordan’s natural water at this pace will be exhausted in 2010,” predicted Elias Salameh, founder and former director of the University of Jordan’s

Water Research and Study Center, according to the May 14, 1992 *Washington Post*. "Jordan then will be totally dependent on rain water and will revert to desert. Its ruin will destabilize the entire region."

Salameh continued, "None of the regional countries—Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia or the Gulf Emirates—can be self-sufficient in food in the foreseeable future, if ever. All Middle East economies must be restructured away from agriculture because of a lack of water."

The economic and military problems discussed all too briefly above require changes in our approach to social ethics and to our national politics. The facts of overpopulation and depletion of natural resources must be faced.

It is no secret that the Vatican has been one of the most adamant opponents of contraceptive birth control and worldwide family planning for decades. An article in the April 4, 1998 *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* said, "In the early 1980s, Pope John Paul II came to Nairobi and counseled Kenyans, whose population at that time was the fastest-growing in Africa, probably in the world, to 'be fruitful and multiply.'"

The *New York Times* reported on May 29, 1992, "In preparation for next month's Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Vatican diplomats have begun a campaign to try to insure that the gathering's conclusions on the issue of runaway population growth are not in conflict with Roman Catholic teaching on birth control."

Time magazine of February 24, 1992 in a story entitled, "The U.S. and the Vatican on Birth Control" began with this sentence: "In response to concerns of the Vatican, the Reagan Administration agreed to alter its foreign aid program to comply with the church's teaching on birth control." And in July 1992, the Sierra Club attacked President Bush for vetoing "two foreign aid budgets in order to block all U.S. funding for the United Nations Fund for Population program" and linked Bush's policy to "the urging of the Vatican." The 1998 Republican-controlled Congress followed the same position by linking payment of the U.S. debt to the United Nations with a provision against funding family planning overseas of any government or private agency that was involved in funding or lobbying for abortion.

By contrast, the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, has said, "No country has achieved smaller families or low maternal mortality without access to safe abortion—and none will in the foreseeable future."

There are also additional remedies such as recognizing that women worldwide are not the property of their husbands or fathers, but moral decision-makers with respect to their health, their lives and their future. Neither are they public property for governmental decisions that require them to become pregnant or remain pregnant against their will. Unless we recognize women's rights the dire consequences for life on the planet are enormous.

Jennifer Mitchell in the January/February, 1998 *World Watch* wrote:

*The "pro-life"
movement primarily sponsored by the Vatican is really a pro-death movement, not only because of population wars but because of its denial of reproductive freedom to women worldwide and its denial of condoms to prevent the spread of contagious disease.*

In the developing world, at least 120 million married women and a large undefined number of unmarried women want more control over their pregnancies, but cannot get family planning services. This unmet demand will cause about one third of the projected population growth in developing countries over the next fifty years, or an increase of about 1.2 billion people.

The World Health Organization estimates that 585,000 women die each year during pregnancy and childbirth. "The death toll," according to the 1997 World Watch *Vital Signs*, "underestimates the magnitude of the problem. For every maternal death as many as thirty women sustain oftentimes crippling and lifelong health problems related to pregnancy."

Moreover, many of these deaths and lifelong health problems could have been prevented by access to family planning services, and safe, legal abortion.

There is more to this culture of death evident in the fact that more than 4.7 million people, most of them in southeast Asia and su-Saharan Africa, contracted HIV in 1995, and 1.7 million died from AIDS in 1995. By 1998, these figures are significantly higher. The Vatican has also strongly opposed any funding of condoms to prevent disease. What this means is that the "pro-life" movement primarily sponsored by the Vatican is really a pro-death movement, not only because of population wars but because of its denial of reproductive freedom to women worldwide and its denial of condoms to prevent the spread of contagious disease.

The other major key to the solution of overpopulation and disease lies with the United States and the American people. We put our resources into weapons and provide tax breaks for huge multinational corporations and arms industries, with very little regard for their degradations of the environment, at home or abroad.

The United States provides many of the weapons used in population wars. The U.S. annually spends more than \$450 million, and the Pentagon employs an arms sales staff of 6,395, to promote and service foreign arms sales. Major weapons-exporting firms contributed \$14.8 million to Congressional candidates from 1990 to 1994, and over \$500,000 to the Republican and Democratic parties for the 1996 Presidential election.

In the words of Omar Khayyam, they, and we, "want to take the cash and let the credit go, nor heed the rumble of the distant drum."

With respect to Christian leadership, the fundamentalist and evangelical churches accept the Vatican's position on family planning services, or, like the mainline churches, are not politically active either to support family planning or reduction of arms and of poverty worldwide.

What does this acquiescence or silence mean in the face of the great future planetary catastrophe we all face? ■

We're Not Computers

By Glenn Dromgoole

[Glenn Dromgoole, a longtime Texas newspaper editor in Fort Worth, Bryan-College Station, and Abilene, is writing a book of essays on the little ways people's lives can make a difference over time. He lives in Abilene.]

A computer can do amazing things. It has incredible memory. It can store millions of facts, figures and names in its "brain."

But, you know, a computer can't appreciate the beauty of a sunset.

It can't know the joy of hearing a newborn baby's first sound.

It can't experience the excitement of catching a fish or hitting a home run.

It can't take pride in watching a child walk across the stage and receive a diploma.

It can't hope or believe or imagine or be spontaneous.

It can't know the pain or failure or disappointment, but neither can it know elation or satisfaction or contentment or happiness.

A computer can't feel.

It can't care.

It can't be generous or kind or compassionate.

We can, and that's the difference. ■

Character: I Did It His Way

By Bob Adams

Dr. Bob E. Adams is Professor of Christian Ethics at the Divinity School at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. He earned a Ph.D. in ethics, philosophy of religion, and missiology from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1969. He served as missionary in Chile, Columbia and Argentina. He has taught at the International Baptist Seminaries in Cali, Colombia, and Buenos Aires, Argentina; la Universidad del Valle, Cali, Colombia; New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, before moving to Gardner Webb's School of Divinity in 1995.

Ignacio Loredó and Miguel Bollatti were the best friends the students had at the International Baptist Seminary in Argentina. Ignacio taught them about Christian conduct and Miguel helped them live according to Christian standards. Ignacio taught them to beware of the three greatest, most obvious, and most insidious temptations they would continually face and Miguel helped apply the code of Christian conduct that they agreed to. The three greatest temptations—misconduct with money, sex, and power. Ring a bell? In Bible times, throughout Christian history, in South America and in North America, and around the world, the problems are still with us. Christian character flourishes or fails on the basis of our handling of these drives.

I have been teaching Christian ethics since 1969. I have taught ethics in South America and in North America. I have taught in churches, church camps, a Christian academy, on Caribbean islands, in a university, and in eleven seminaries. For stretches as long as ten years and as short as a week. In institutions that were coeducational, or only accepted male students or only accepted female students. In one place, if students were married, both had to enroll in degree programs. On an institute level, where the only educational requirement was a rudimentary level of reading. All the way to doctoral seminars. Before I became a teacher, I served nearly ten years as a minister in university settings. I have served as church pastor, part or full time, in eleven churches. I have worked in or directed nearly one hundred and fifty Vacation Bible Schools.

By reciting this pedigree, I intend, if possible, to establish my credentials. I know Christians in general and I know Baptists in particular; and I know that all of us have to confront the three major character issues that Ignacio and Miguel confronted, and we relate daily to people who confront them.

Christians are recovering sinners, on-the-road but not-yet-arrived. If you haven't yet repented of your sins, you need to stop here and do that and ask Jesus to begin saving you. On the other hand, if you feel you have fully arrived spiritually and that this focus on character is for those who haven't yet arrived at your full state of

sanctification, you're on the wrong theological road and will someday, sooner or later, fall off a cliff, crash, and burn. Get on the narrow road that Jesus described and join his crowd of recovering sinners who are honestly striving to build character, growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ.

I'm about to get down to the nitty-gritty. Some of it may be deemed to be X-rated but it is not pornographic. Pornography does its best to entice you into some kind of sex-related sinning and trap you there. Moses and Peter and Paul and the rest of the Bible characters **knew** sin and sins, repented of both, and trusted in a faithful God. Their purpose in talking about sin, sometimes in gruesome detail, was to help people get away from it, not get into it. **That's** the difference between the Bible's frankness about sexual sin and pornography. I'm going to try to be as frank as the Bible, but don't misunderstand my motive or my purpose!

There's nothing wrong with sex. There's nothing wrong with the medium of exchange called money. There's nothing wrong with power—that which gets things done. God made human beings with the capacity to use all these. They are, in a real sense, a part of God's good created order. But they can be misused and thus be terribly destructive. Run down the list of people you either know personally or know about, Christians, who are in deep trouble. They don't keep their pants up or their skirt down. They have a love affair with money. They use power as a weapon. They fall. Of course, non-Christians get into the same kinds of trouble. But they don't fall; they're already down! They haven't taken the first real step yet. The Christians who are in deep trouble have fallen off the road into the ditch. Of course, all Christians are saved only by grace. Grace and the daily struggle form character and shape the Christian life.

A lot of God's laws in the Old Testament were given by God to help his people know where the deep ditches were on either side of the road they were to walk. Those laws can be very instructive for us today. Some of the laws in the Old Testament were like a compass, showing people the direction they were to go even though there was as yet no road. Those laws can also be of great help to us today. But, both first and finally, we look to Jesus who is the way and we look to his teachings, which provide our compass bearings as we steer toward Christian character. And we look to people like Phoebe and Paul and Peter who followed Jesus and are our mentors. We follow with them, take counsel and direction from them. We all are following Jesus. Unlike some of today's heroes and ikons who revel in their life-long ego trips, "I did it my way," Christian character calls for us to "do it his way."

The teachings of Jesus in their context, give us boundary markers. We are to live inside them. An example: The Old Testament says, "Don't commit adultery." Jesus reinforced that by saying that a lustful look and a wayward thought put a person on the wrong

road. Don't go down that road! But not committing adultery doesn't automatically make a good marriage. What does make a good marriage? Commitment. The C word, is the beginning place. "For this cause a man shall leave his mother and his father and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." That is commitment! Jesus quoted it when he wanted to point out the basis of a marriage that endures. Commitment alone doesn't make a good marriage, but a good marriage won't be fashioned without commitment. So, we live out marriage within the markers of commitment to God and to one another, which excludes any other sexual partner; and that lays a foundation for what can become a good marriage. Paul comes at the same thing from another perspective. A wife has charge of her husband's sex activity, and a husband has charge of his wife's sex activity. THAT is commitment! Will that alone make a good marriage? No, but it places boundary markers inside which a marriage can become good, and can get better. When a person gets outside the boundaries, that's bad. Staying inside makes for a good marriage. What about a person, now a Christian, whose upbringing included lustful looks and follow-throughs on the look? We'll get to that at the end of the whole thing, for there are many Christians whose upbringing included lustful looks and follow-throughs in more areas than sex.

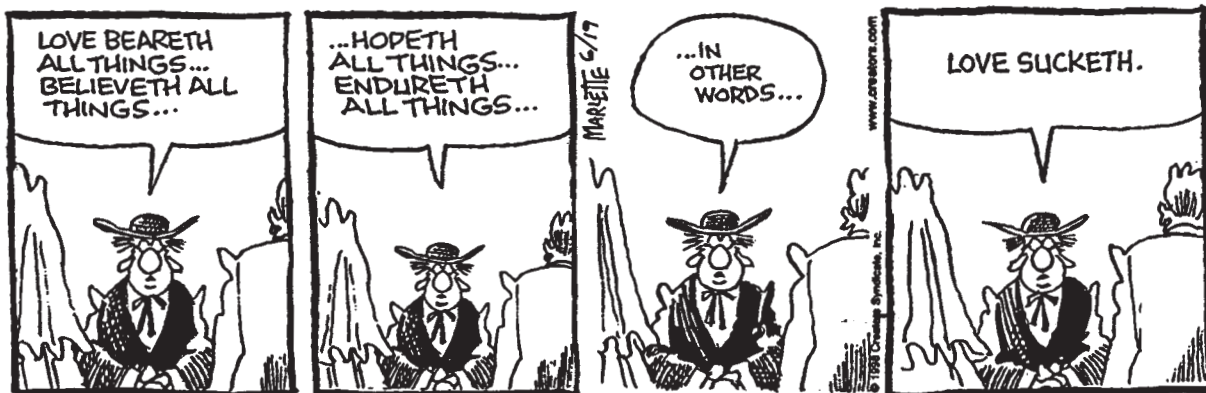
Today's world fosters unbridled individualism, the big I, the big Me and the big Mine along with the kindred idea that I have a legal and moral right to get all I can for Me no matter how much trouble that may cause others. It goes something like this: "If I should decide to help someone else, I may do so but I am not obliged to. The world is a large arena in which a WAR is raging, a war of all against all, each individual fighting against all other individuals in getting and keeping and I intend to get mine for me and mine!" The idea goes back to the beginning of human history as recorded in the Bible and finds recent justification in the works of people like Ayn Rand. "Community is out and I am in! It will all work out for the better if not the best for all because the bigger the incoming tide of goods and things the higher each of our boats will be lifted!" Never mind that some will have built yachts, some will be in small rowboats, some on flimsy rafts and most are naked and can't swim. "Each for himself!" This is materialism gone mad, it's selfishness lamely justified, and theologically it's that thing called hubris, pride. Jesus said it another way, "You can't serve God and money." Money, the love of which is at the root of all kinds of evil. Again, what about the person, now a Christian, whose upbringing, training, and practice include this idea about things, and their common denomi-

nator, money? Also again, we'll get to that at the end of all this. For we are still dealing with lustful looks and follow-throughs.

What about that without which nothing gets done, Power? IF we are convinced that we know how things should come out and IF the reason they wouldn't come out that way is that we were squeamish about the use of power, then surely it is true that we should get and use all the power we can to make things come out as we know they should! Here is the greatest and most subtle character assassin facing most Christians in today's world. The powerless believe that if they could only grasp the reins of power, they could make everything come out right. This is the greatest mistake of most Liberation Theology proponents. Its analysis of the corruption and wrong are on target. Its willingness to use coercive power to right wrongs, however, is off Jesus' mark. He didn't do things that way in the face of the same kind of injustice, nor did he allow his disciples to do so. On the other hand, the powerful among Liberation Theology's supporters believe that they must use the coercive power at their disposal to make things stay right and get even better! Among both Liberation Theology's adherents and opponents are Christians who are convinced that they must use coercive power and violence to achieve their ends. They believe that nothing gets done without the use of power!

Jesus' disciples were convinced that Jesus was right and that if he would just use the power at his disposal, he could make things come out right. The problem for them was that Jesus wouldn't use his power the way they thought he should. Did they think that if he would let them get hold of it and use it, they could make things come out right? They were exasperated with him. He wouldn't let them call down fire from heaven and fry the stubborn, unbelieving Samaritans. He insisted on going to Jerusalem where, if he didn't use his power, he would surely be trapped, perhaps killed. Once in Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples were faced with violence against him and them. His opponents had no qualms about using violent force. During the last supper, Jesus had one more talk with his disciples about his use of power and the world's use of power. He warned them about the consequences of using power the world's way even for the best of spiritual purposes.

Jesus deliberately, thoughtfully, calmly and after much real, not fake, agony, kept his course of active, non-violent opposition to evil. That's what got him nailed on a cross! And our failure to do that is what keeps us off our cross. Many Christians are in such a self-righteous frenzy over real or imagined wrongs that they are ready to nail somebody on a cross. Some seem ready to nail fellow-



Christians on one. Jesus died with a spear in his side, but He never lived with one in his hand. Right on! But that's hard, hard to think about, harder to accept, hardest to do. Every age has had its Christians who actively and non-violently opposed small and great evils, and were silenced. But not finally silenced. They are like those witnesses in the last part of Hebrews 11 who were silenced in their day, but who now live on in God's list of the immortal heroes and heroines of the faith. Three lessons are to be learned here; faith, faithfulness, and patience. Their faith was in the God who acts, although not always by our human timetable. They were faithful to their vision of how God would have them live. And they stayed "under the burden," which is the New Testament's phrase for patience. To do otherwise, to take things into their own hands in order to make those things come out right could not, would not, work God's purpose. By their faithfulness they developed exemplary character and became examples of patient endurance, living stones, and faithful witness.

Finally, what can we do to become the kind of persons whose lives would be characterized by what I have described? "Characterized." How does that work? I come now to the explanation which, in an old-fashioned camp meeting of the Methodist or Baptist variety, precedes the invitation. Perhaps, **exhortation** would be the word which gathers together and sums up both **explanation** and **invitation**. Can we be exhorted to have character? Yes. The question is, How? How can we become persons, men and women, of the Hebrews 11 kind of character?

Let me seem to digress. You will see that this is not a digression. My wife, Sheri, is a theologian. She also teaches theology. The two are not necessarily the same, but she is and does both. I intend being an ethicist. I also teach ethics. We study things together and talk about things together. For going on fifteen years we have taught the same students. She, theology and I, ethics. We have done this on two continents, in Spanish and in English. We talk together about the Bible, about our students, about our churches (most of the time she has attended and worked in one and I in another), about our world, about our daughters (she and I have one and I have another three), about the needs of us all—the two of us, our students, our churches, our world, our daughters, about the things we enjoy and the things we don't, about the things that we like and the things we don't.

We have reached some conclusions. You would think we would, of course, after fifteen years. Let's start with the needs and what we all may do about them. We are increasingly convinced that our greatest need in building character in our own lives is to read over and over again, then again, then once more the Bible. All of it: the pretty parts, the ugly parts the more easily understood parts and the less easily understood parts, the parts that uplift and inspire us and the parts that bring us to our knees. And although we are also convinced that all of it is important and none is to be left out, yet it is the accounts of Jesus that we **must** concentrate on in order really to get at the rest. We are not Marcionites (that is, we are not Gnostics denying Christ's humanity and believing that matter and all things physical are inherently evil), nor are we anti-Pauline. To the contrary. Yet, there is Jesus, standing at the pinnacle of it all, beckoning us to follow him. And there are Paul and Phoebe and Peter and Mary and James and John and all the rest, following him and beck-

oning us to follow with them. Which we intend to do and which we do, running and stumbling and excited and out of breath most of the time. Following him. That's what we all need to be doing. Together, with no one left out. The sexually charged and those with less libido. The rich and the poor and the in-between. The powerful and the powerless and the power-hungry (that's all of us). And in our best moments Christians all want to do it his way.

We learn that sometimes we have disobeyed him out of ignorance. When we do that, it's knowledge we need. That's where reading the Bible and praying about it come in. And all of us reading it, together when possible, because some of us can see things that others of us can't. We need the Bible and the Holy Spirit and prayer and each other to cure our ignorance.

We realize that we fail and sin because we are weak. Each of us is weak in ways that others aren't. Each of us is strong in ways that others aren't. "Confess your sins to one another" is not an idle admonition. Yet we don't do it. And we pay the price. The big, powerful super-church and television enchanter-preachers are also weak—but to whom are **they** going to confess their weaknesses. They avoid being seen as weak! "Bear one another's burdens," the Bible tells us. How can you do that, however, if you don't know what the burdens are? It seems that when John the Baptist exhorted, people came **confessing their sins!** Nowadays when one comes forward at the invitation, sometimes we preachers repeat the formula that so-and-so has come forward "confessing their sins and publicly confessing Jesus as Savior." The rest of us don't know what those sins are that are really not confessed to anyone. And that's the last we hear of that! Until maybe the rumor mills start grinding. Rumor is not prayer. It is not confessing **our** sins although it may be calling out (confessing) **their** sins. Rumor is not bearing one another's burdens. It is adding to another's burdens. We need to disciple one another. It is not easy. But it is a way of building character.

And then sometimes we are not particularly ignorant nor are we particularly weak but we go on and sin anyway. The Bible calls that a sin of presumption. It is really dangerous. Could it be the most dangerous thing we can do to undermine character? It is presuming on God's grace, that God will forgive us even though we did it deliberately, even though we knew better, even though we weren't weak. "If God is in the forgiving business, let's throw a lot of business his way." Or, "Shall we sin the more, that grace may more abound?" Paul answered that one with the strongest negative at his command: "No way!" In the Old Testament sacrificial system, there was a procedure, either sacrifices or offerings, for sins of ignorance and sins of weakness, but not even a hint about any procedure for sins of presumption.

What about it?

Character.

We find out about its importance. We confess to one another. We help each other. We fall down and get up with our brothers' and sisters' and God's help. We change. We begin to look more like Jesus. We begin to act more like Jesus. We begin to talk more like Jesus. We begin to think more like Jesus. We begin to learn to do it his way.

It doesn't happen overnight. It takes a lifetime. That's what a lifetime is for. ■

God's Long Summer

By Charles Marsh

A Review by Darold H. Morgan

[Dr. Darold Morgan is a former pastor and the former President of the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.]

This is a vital book on a very relevant subject. It takes us dramatically, forcefully, and unforgettably back to Mississippi and the summer of 1964. It is one of several volumes currently examining the civil rights struggle in the nation. Its unique approach and its careful research, combined with the excellent writing skills of the author makes this one of the best of the bunch. The author tells the story of five individuals who were at the heart of the civil rights movement in the deepest part of the Deep South. He comes up with a riveting, heart-breaking account of a movement in American life which is still evolving.

Alternating between some fascinating biographical research and finely honed reportorial skills, the author reaches back into history and resurrects one of the saddest and most graphic chapters in twentieth century America. It is a highly readable volume, but it is also an ambivalent reading experience for the reader is seized by the violent conflict between good and evil in human nature that staggers the imagination. One almost wishes all this were fiction because so much of it reeks with pain, hatred, blindness, and unmitigated evil.

The intent of the author is stated plainly, and he rarely veers from it: "This book invites the reader to revisit the tumultuous landscape of the American civil rights movement in Mississippi." When the reader finishes the book, he or she will recall for a long time the following names: Fannie Lou Hamer, Sam Bower, Douglas Hudgins, Ed King, Cleveland Sellers. The core of the book is an account of their lives, their convictions, and their experiences.

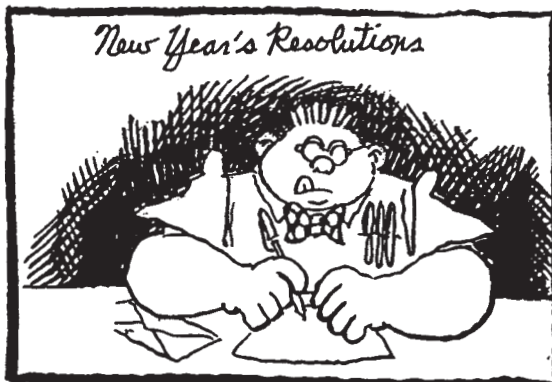
The 1960's was a time when the Bible still figured promi-

nently in the civil rights movement. To this reviewer the best thing about the book is the simple, basic, biblical faith of Mrs. Hamer. She came from the Mississippi Delta, a sharecropper, nurtured in a Black Baptist Church, uneducated, but amazingly resourceful, a natural leader in her community and state in the voter registration movement. We must not forget how controversial then was this basic right of voting, denied for generations to practically all African-Americans in the South.

Mrs. Hamer's knowledge of the Bible and the hymnal, her sense of timing, and her courage brought both warmth and depth to these terror-filled times. Her personal sufferings through arrests and beatings, her determination not to hate, her perseverance despite poverty and poor health, her positive attitudes in the face of hostile political maneuvers from so-called friends, all were dealt with on the basis of her convictions about the presence and power of God. In this she identified closely with America's key civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., whose skills and non-violent philosophy were, and still are, immensely influential.

The author then shifts gears to Sam Bowers, "the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan." Marsh is highly perceptive in his emphasis on Bower's use of biblical theology to justify the violence and death which his group was responsible for. The contrast with Mrs. Hamer's interpretation of the Bible is jarring. The documentation of the KKK's white racist actions in this "Long Summer" is still deeply shocking.

Add to this the position and leadership of Douglas Hudgins, then pastor of the prestigious First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi. One has to conclude that he forfeited the potential of prophetic leadership because he willingly allowed himself to be trapped by the culture of his community and by the fears that unnumbered pastors of all denominations exhibited over and



over again through these months of crisis. The author documents the resistance of Hudgins and others to the Southern Baptist Convention's heroic action in 1954 which overwhelmingly accepted the report of the Christian Life Commission affirming and supporting the Supreme Court decision that segregation on the basis of race in the public schools was unconstitutional. This is unpleasant reading, but it is essential for understanding the background of the racism among us which is still unresolved.

The final two individuals studied are Ed King and Cleveland Sellers. One was a Methodist minister, and the other was a Black civil rights activist. Both are still alive. Both are natives of the South. Both were active in "the long Summer of 1964." King went north for his theological education and became deeply committed to what was then generally considered radical convictions about Christian faith and social justice. Returning to the South in the early sixties, he moved quickly into the heart of this racial strife in his native state of Mississippi. Brave beyond measure, he also was somewhat erratic in his methods and procedures. One of the sad things about the volume is the documenting of his later years.

Sellers represents the angry black man, who tired quickly of the white zealots from the north. He joined the framework of black leaders such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and others who effectively eliminated white leadership in the movement. Black power came to be his theme with the piety of Mrs. Hamer and others no longer considered relevant, a trend that is still dominant in this area. Almost out of control himself, he was arrested, sentenced unfairly to years in prison, with the author sadly concluding that his approach "did more tearing down than building up." To Seller's credit he came out of prison, followed through on his education with moral and spiritual discipline, and is now a useful college professor with deep convictions about the inevitability of social justice in America.

This book is a valuable, well-written, excellently researched volume which resurrects some of the dark shadows related to the struggle for racial justice in America. The author deliberately does not draw a precise list of conclusions about these matters. The retelling of "God's Long Summer", he seems to assume, will adequately allow the reader to come to his own conclusions. Yet to the credit of author Charles Marsh, this Baptist pastor's son never leaves the reader in doubt as to what his convictions are in opposition to the great evil of racism. ■

Does God Really Heal?

By Al Staggs

[Dr. Al Staggs, a Vietnam era Army veteran, is a minister known nationally and internationally for the performance of his original one-person stage play on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He lives in San Antonio.]

My wife died in April of this year following a twelve year battle with cancer, a particularly malignant melanoma.

A few weeks prior to her death some of our long-time friends paid us a visit at our home. After a brief trip for a quick lunch, the four of us sat in the living area of our home to catch up on what all was going on in each of our families and in the lives of our children. Toward the conclusion of this visit, one of our visitors asked my wife and me if we had ever heard of a certain woman who had been healed of her cancer by following a special nutritional regimen. She had brought a tape for my wife to listen to. My first mental reaction was, "I really don't believe what I'm hearing! This sweet Christian woman really does not comprehend the heavy ramifications of what she is doing by suggesting that my wife, who is just two weeks from her death and barely able to get around, could be miraculously healed if she would just start chewing apricot roots and avoiding caffeine." That's not exactly what our friend said, of course. I imagined that the diet that the "miracle worker" friend would suggest would consist of that kind of regimen. This experience pushed me back to my Clinical Pastoral Education days at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas in 1976 and 1977. I had graduated a couple of years before from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and had managed to learn the Bible well enough to offer some pastoral care and comfort in almost any given situation. The challenge that my CPE supervisors were faced with was to help me not to feel compelled immediately to put a spiritual band-aid on everyone I met. These supervisors encouraged me to close my mouth and listen carefully to the patient's feelings as well as their words. What our well-meaning Christian friend had done was well intentioned. In my dying wife's situation, however, it was a profoundly cruel gesture.

That particular incident occurred about the same time our daughter, Rebekah, was confronted by a member of a prayer group at Baylor University. This classmate of Rebekah's discovered that her mother was gravely ill with cancer. What she told Rebekah was that if she just had enough faith her mother would be healed.

These experiences have compelled me once again to rethink my theology of healing. I confess that I have extremely low tolerance for the so-called faith healers or for the peddlers of healing. I'm aghast that anyone would dare to claim to understand the mind of God about any particular person or any particular illness. What these folks do to people is hold out hope for a complete

reversal of a person's physical condition. When the miracle does not occur, the lack of miraculous action can be attributed to a person's lack of faith which only compounds the person's problems. Not only are these people terminally ill, but they are also being taught that they are not good Christians. In my weaker moments I am reminded of the passage from Matthew 7:22-23, where Jesus says, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform miracles?'" Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

Our visiting friends on that memorable afternoon recounted story after story of "miraculous" answers to their prayers. After hearing a steady diet of incidents in which people were healed of their infirmities or found better paying jobs, my wife looked over at both of them and said simply, "It hasn't worked that way for us."

Sometimes I just want to ask these people who become so excited about miraculous healing, "Has your vaunted prayer program yet kept anyone alive forever?" Eventually we all die, including those who were healed of their particular disease. No one has yet managed to avoid the grim reaper. So why save our success stories for just those precious few who have been allowed a few months or years longer than they would otherwise have had?

My wife's death was preceded by seventeen months by the death of her mother from Alzheimer's Disease. Mrs. Cason languished, as did her family, for some fourteen years before her merciful death. As I pondered her illness and the way that this disease steals every measure of dignity that a person once possessed, I remembered that there was not an incident to my knowledge where a faith healer had claimed to arrest or reverse the condition of an Alzheimer's patient. Cancer is sometimes characterized by what has been called spontaneous remission; but as far as I know, Alzheimer's never is.

The death of a loved one can be experienced in a multitude of ways. For our family, my wife's death gave not only her, but also our children and me some measure of relief and peace. Once again, that obviously is not the case for every death. We discovered the peace of God during those final weeks and days and minutes of Vicki's life and sensed that God was very present with us in all that we experienced.

I vividly recall that during my Clinical Pastoral Education days a certain African-American woman made an earnest request for me to pray for her healing from leukemia since she was a single parent with an eight-year-old son. It seemed very logical to me that here was a situation where healing would be both merciful and necessary. I remember praying that if it could be God's will, this good woman would be healed of her infirmity. I felt, however, as I prayed that I was putting God on the spot to come through for this woman and for me. Her healing did not occur. She died of that leukemia a few months later.

One of my favorite scripture passages is this section from 2 Corinthians, the twelfth chapter where Paul says:

...There was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My

grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

There needs to be a major emphasis on God's grace and sufficiency for every illness and every situation. The Christian community should talk just as loud and long about God's presence in the most hopeless situations as we do about the "miraculous healings." For not to do that is to leave out the vast majority of sufferers and eventually all sufferers. Our pre-occupation with medical reversals implies that these situations are far more important and far more demonstrative of the workings of God in people's lives than are the far more numerous evidences of his grace and power in the experiences of always having always underneath us his "everlasting arms." This sort of spectacularism is nothing short of a half-truth and it is in the end a vicious blow to other sufferers and to the families of those sufferers. Ministers and churches alike need to hear clearly that it often takes more faith to live *with* an infirmity than it does to be healed *from* an illness. As a minister for nearly thirty years it has been my responsibility and privilege to be with patients and families in some of the most difficult times of their lives and in some of the most difficult situations imaginable. What I have observed is that in so many, many situations, God's peace and presence is manifested in their lives despite their hardships. This is not to say that there were not questions, suffering, and real grief present in all of these conditions. What I have observed is that in spite of the natural anguish that is there for the patient and the family, there is also evident in many, many cases, the presence of God's Spirit, giving comfort and hope.

Theologian, priest, and author, Henri Nouwen, was both a friend and mentor to me. Nouwen had this to say about death: "Death does not have to be our final failure, our final defeat in the struggle of life, our unavoidable fate. If our deepest human desire is indeed to give ourselves to others, then we can make our death into a final gift. It is so wonderful to see how fruitful death is when it is a free gift." Nouwen's words and his own approach to his life and to his recent death in 1995 are a counterbalance against those whose "healing" hit-and-run ministries suggest that death is a defeat and that only miraculous cure is a victory.

Stories of miraculous healings have their place. The miracle of a believer's faith, however, in the face of terminal illness, and the faith of a loving family, is just as important as any story of a miraculous cure of an illness. Very few people experience a total reversal of illness. Most people diagnosed with terminal illness struggle through it to the very end.

So, let us hear the stories of the miraculous presence of God in the lives of these saints who are faithful to the end. ■

Watching the World Go By

Shall We Have Government-Mandated Prayer and Bible Study?

By *Ralph Lynn*

[Dr. Ralph Lynn is a retired professor of history at Baylor University.]

Contradictory as it may seem, passions run so high in matters of religion that religious people of all faiths, preaching love and brotherhood, have always needed some governmental power to protect them from each other.

For the early Christians that power was the Roman Emperor, Constantine, who called the representatives of Christendom to meet at Nicaea in 325 A.D. to settle the question of whether God is One or Three-in-One.

To Constantine the question was of “trifling” importance; he merely wished to maintain public order.

When the church people reached a decision (in favor of the Trinity), Constantine “dismissed the 318 bishops with the (vain) request that they not tear one another to pieces.”

For us now, the question is not the nature of God (about which we all, as human beings, are irremediably ignorant) but whether we shall have government-mandated prayer and Bible study in our public schools.

According to the *New York Times* of February 17, 1998, this question may be hottest at the moment in Lee County, Florida, where Pat Robertson and Christian Coalition types have a majority on the Riverdale Board of Education. They are having the Bible taught as “secular” history in their high schools. These Fundamentalists say that 53 school districts in 22 states are following their lead.

Florida Judge Elizabeth Kovachevich approved the program with two restrictions: the curriculum must omit the Genesis creation story and must omit, also, the entire New Testament. In practice it has proved impossible to honor these restrictions.

Entirely aside from the question of constitutionality, the judge’s decision capsules some of the chief problems of the program. The judge said that it is “difficult to conceive how the account of the Resurrection or of miracles could be taught as secular history.”

One of the problems is the fact that the entire Bible is full of miracles. Indeed, many Christian theologians insist that the Bible is meaningless without the miracles. Certainly, the Resurrection of Jesus is the one miracle without which few Christians think we could have either the gospel or the church.

A problem which might not occur to many is the fact that the ancients, including the ancient Hebrews, lacked any critical view of history. The Greek historian, Herodotus, for instance, working in the fifth century B.C., would relate fanciful stories deadpan and

then observe that “this is what they say but you are not obliged to believe it.”

Another problem is that most professional historians would probably agree that miracles may occur but that historians have no way of discovering their validity. Only sacred “history” has a place for miracles.

To give the directors of the Riverdale program due credit, it must be noted that they are aware that the “secular” history they wish to teach calls for questioning the Biblical accounts.

But the teachers are so restricted in their questioning and discussions that one must doubt their ability to do secular history. Teachers and students are distracted by the ever-present video taping equipment at the back of the classroom.

A quotation from the teacher of one class illustrates the dilemma. “We want to talk about the story of Noah and the flood. Is it true or not true? That’s not for me to say. That’s not for us to say. We’re just going to look at it and see what we can verify and can’t verify.”

The same teacher had a similar problem when a student raised the question of where Cain and Abel got their wives. The embarrassed teacher replied, “For whatever reason, we’re not supposed to talk about that. You just read it on your own. I don’t know why. Please don’t ask me why.”

In one class, students were shown a “documentary” called “Jerusalem” in which the narrator says, “The memory of Jesus and the miracle of his Resurrection live in Jerusalem every day.”

The most serious problem connected with this program is that it will surely be self-defeating among the brighter, the more intellectually curious, and the more independent-minded of the students. They will apply the habit of the critical examination of the Bible in ways that will shock their elders.

All this is taking place in a “largely Republican county” where the Christian Coalition recently gained a majority on the Riverdale school board. Pat Robertson’s American Center for Law and Justice is supporting their program.

Faced with these developments, it is clear that to maintain our traditional freedom of religion from governmental controls, we must certainly elect friends of freedom to local and state boards of education.

Ultimately, however, we must do what we can to see that the judges appointed to the Supreme Court understand the significance of the First Amendment and are dedicated to keeping it intact. It is *our* governmental protection. ■

The Church's Political Ministry: Some Propositions to Provoke Debate

By James A. Nash

[Dr. James A. Nash is Executive Director of the Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy in Washington, D.C. The Center is a national, ecumenical center which supports the linkage between theological-ethical reflection and Christian social action.]

The purpose of this essay is to pick a fight—well, really to start a religious and political argument, for such argument is a foundational feature of civil society and an essential means to that society's moral advancement.

I offer here a set of propositions—that is, theses to provoke debate on contemporary directions and deficiencies concerning Christian faith and politics. Clearly, propositions are much more than academic matters. They are, after all, what got Martin Luther into all those 16th century unpleasantries when he nailed 95 theses to that church door in Wittenberg.

Now being much more modest (with good reason) and much less imposing on my readers than Luther, I'm going to nail up only six theses here. Nonetheless, these six propositions will, I hope, provoke controversy, generating an examination of important problems that might otherwise be ignored. Is that not what propositions for debate are supposed to do?

Proposition I: From an ethical perspective, politics is much more than the art of the possible; it is an essential means for realizing the desirable—that is, bringing goals like economic justice or social justice to fruition. Understood in this sense, politics is an ethical enterprise that no responsible individual or institutions, especially Christian churches, can ignore or denigrate.

Those Christians who draw a sharp distinction between a personal and social gospel, who argue that the role of the church is the conversion of individual souls rather than the reformation of society, imply not only that the arena of politics is irrelevant to the concerns of Christian faith but also that the gospel is irrelevant to the decisions of politics. Such an insulation of Christian faith from politics is theologically indefensible (indeed, it is authentic heresy). It

is a denial of the sovereignty of God.

The gospel relates to **all** creatures and it applies in **all** situations. The gospel rejects all forms of moral parochialism. It insists that Christ cannot be compartmentalized, locked in some “spiritual” closet. The God known in Christ is central in individual spiritual lives, but also is sovereign over the social, economic, and political realms. This God comforts the afflicted, hears our prayers, and calls for proclamation of the good news. And this God, as portrayed especially by the biblical prophets, is brazenly **political**—blessing the peacemakers, meddling in the affairs of governments, judging politicians and political misdeeds, and liberating slaves from the shackles of pharaoh. Indeed, to be in covenant with this God demands social and economic justice, justice organized and undergirded by the society as a whole, with special consideration for the poor and the aliens or immigrants.

Justice in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament is a spiritual discipline, an act of worship, without which the value of other spiritual disciplines—fasting, prayers, sacrifices, are negated (Is. 58:1-12; Amos 5:21-24; Hos. 6:6). Similarly, Matthew's gospel reflects this prophetic tradition in its description of divine judgment: Christ comes to us in the form of human need and in the context of the deprivation of rights, soliciting just and compassionate responses. To neglect the deprived is to reject Christ. Individuals and nations will be judged on the basis of their care for the “have-nots” (Matt. 25:31-46). In fact, the Suffering Servant—with whom the church traditionally has identified Jesus—is the one who **proclaims justice** to the nations (Is. 42:1-4; Matt. 12:18). So, fidelity to the political God portrayed in scripture is to struggle to deliver the community of earth from all manner of evil—private **and** public, personal **and** social, cultural **and** ecological, spiritual **and** material. The sovereign God bans all boundaries on benevolence.

In our complex and technical world, economic and political systems powerfully affect the lives of all of us—too frequently benefiting the “haves” and harming the “have-nots.” The regional and national capitals of our world are the scenes where the destinies of billions of

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people as well as millions of species are determined. We humans are by nature political animals. The need for structures of government is built into our very being by the God who created us, in order to enable us to live together cooperatively and fairly. That is why classical Christian thought interpreted government as the gift of God for the common good. Thus, if Christian churches are committed to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, setting at liberty the oppressed, challenging "the powers that be," and exalting those of low degree (all of which characterized the ministry of Jesus, and therefore ought to characterize the ministry of the church, according to the Magnificat of Mary and Jesus' reading from Isaiah in the temple), then the churches dare not ignore the political and economic contexts of these concerns. Every political issue that affects human and ecological welfare—whether it be an arms race or the unemployment rate, starvation or pollution, racism or extinctions of species—is at once a moral and spiritual concern, and therefore a challenge to love. If we are to deal with social causes and not merely individual symptoms, these issues in their political settings must be items on the agenda of the church.

The Christian church, therefore, cannot make any theologically phony distinctions between personal rebirth and social reform. We are called to proclaim and live the whole gospel, not some expurgated version of it, in loyalty to the Christ who seeks to minister to all the needs of all God's creatures. Love demands the pursuit of justice, peace, and ecological integrity in the realm of politics, no less than in any other context.

No doubt, this political involvement does entail some risks for the churches. No straight line can be drawn from our affirmations of faith and systems of ethics to public policy. Too many factual disputes, judgment calls, value conflicts, moral dilemmas, necessary compromises, and unholy alliances block the way. The translation of Christian faith into moral norms and then into laws and regulations is a complex and ambiguous process, and that translation becomes more tenuous with each step toward specificity. Consequently, Christian political involvement must be tempered by the realization that no political party or platform can adequately represent the Christian norm. Christians, therefore, must be ever alert to the dangers of the political captivity of the churches by some political party or ideology, and to the relaxation of the critical tension between religious ideals and their ambiguous embodiments in the necessary compromises of politics. These risks of political specificity are real, but they are risks that must be taken to avoid the greater danger of irrel-

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evance to human needs.

Proposition II: The condition of the mainline churches' political witness requires a long-term corrective strategy, perhaps a major educational initiative on the theological meaning and practical moral importance of political action by Christians.

The health of the churches' political witness has been deteriorating for more than a decade. Most of the members and ministers have entered a period of political quietism, a shameful retreating from political stances and controversies, both institutionally and individually. Even among those churches who are politically interested, significant segments are sympathetic to the dismemberment of government.

The reasons for this withdrawal from public concerns are numerous, but they generally revolve around the old stand-bys: the avoidance of conflict and the dilution of witness in order to attract members and bring in money. There is a widespread yearning for insulation from political conflicts, rather than total immersion in them. Some forms of so-called spirituality are pulling people out of, rather than pushing them into, the political process. A socially relevant gospel is not being preached from many pulpits. Praying for the poor is common, while preventing political and economic predators from preying on the poor is declining.

The reputation of churches as bodies of politically active Christians rests in large measure on the laurels particularly gathered in the 60s and 70s on civil rights and Vietnam. In the last decade, however, most of our numbers have been quietly and gradually stealing away to safe shelter. To be sure, we've left behind a faithful but tiny remnant of faithful advocates—the national church offices, for example, whose contributions should be hailed. But it is very difficult to be an effective advocate

when the responses from across the land to appeals for action are not abundant or zealous—indeed, when the support base is fragile and fearful.

The main problem with political strategy in the churches today is not that the means are morally harmful. In fact, there are no signs that we've violated any ethical constraints (e.g., by using bribery or deception). Instead, our strategies are politically innocuous. Our tactics are not morally excessive; they are theologically thin and therefore they are politically puny.

This situation will not self-correct through some ecclesiastical version of the Invisible Hand. It requires a countervailing strategy. A major educational initiative is called for, involving all who bear responsibility for solving a serious problem: denominations, ecu-

menical agencies, and, of course, seminaries. My other propositions lose much of their relevance unless this one is pursued aggressively.

Proposition III: Now is the time for all women and men of good will to come to the aid of their government! We need to defend the goodness of government. No doubt, there are many reasons for the current discontents with government. Governments have numerous moral deficiencies that demand continuing reform. Nevertheless, government is not a necessary evil but rather an indispensable good to meet public needs. Indeed, from the perspective of most classical Christian thought, government is the blessing of God to meet these needs.

The current demonizing and downsizing of the federal government are diminishing governing capacities, while licensing and unleashing dangerous social and economic forces that only government may be expected to hold in check. The prevailing political trend is that terrible triad of devolution, deregulation, and privatization. This trend means, in simplest terms, the severe reduction or elimination of various national standards and protections applicable to all the states and all citizens.

This unholy trinity—devolution, deregulation, and privatization—fails to take the social powers of human sin seriously, such as the free-rider tendency of most people to avoid paying their fair share of the public burden in the absence of coercion. It romanticizes private enterprise. It forgets that our human rights demand not only protections, *from* the tyrannies of government, but also protections *by* governments *against* the tyrannies of private interests, including economic powers intent on exploiting the public by reducing the regulatory protections of government. It fails to grasp the paradox of liberty and public restraint, interpreted by L.T. Hobhouse in his classic effort to link the individualism of nineteenth century liberalism with twentieth century concepts of social solidarity: “The first condition of universal freedom...is a measure of universal restraint,” because social controls to prevent abuses by some and mutual aid to enable participation by all are the only ways in which “liberty for an entire community is attainable.” [L.T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964 [1911]), 17, 49-50, 54, 67.]

The loyalists to this trinity are oblivious to a fundamental political reality of our time: An active federal government is necessary to match effectively the serious social and ecological problems that confront our nation as a whole. Only through the federal government can we establish national norms to meet national needs. Only the federal government can be the social instrument through which we support the common good and share the benefits and burdens of being a truly united people. In light of our national needs, current efforts to dis-organize the federal government are, to

Our political goal should not necessarily be smaller or larger, weaker or stronger, government. These are questions to be decided contextually, not ideologically. Instead, our goal should be government that is strong and active enough to be the effective guarantor of all our human rights.

quote John Calvin in response to the political antinomians of his age, “an outrageous barbarity” (*Institutes* 4.20.3).

The issue of the purposes and functions of government has become the most prominent and perhaps the most important debate of our age. Never has political philosophy been more practical and relevant. As a Christian contribution to this debate, one of our tasks is to develop an adequate “theology of government,” focused on the ultimate foundations of government functions and relevant to the newness of our times. Our present theological perspectives on government are generally simplistic and anachronistic: they reflect the political situations in the 1st, 13th, 16th and 19 centuries more than they do the dynamics of the late 20th century. As such, they are often misleading.

A strong case for government as the gift of God for the social and ecological common good really matters in our time. Our political goal should not necessarily be smaller or larger, weaker or stronger, government. These are questions to be decided contextually, not ideologically. Instead, our goal should be government that is strong and active enough to be the effective guarantor of **all** our human rights, not only the political rights, and civil rights but also the economic rights (adequate nutrition, shelter, and health care for all). Contrary to that libertarian cliché, the best government is

not the one that governs the least, but the best government is the one that governs in effective response to human and ecological needs. It is not an exaggeration to say: In the absence of responsible and effective government, we have no serious chance of resolving our nation’s major social, economic, and ecological problems.

Proposition IV: Faithful and effective Christian involvement in the political sphere depends on a tenacious commitment to ecumenical solidarity.

An intriguing paradox of today’s major church groups is: they are simultaneously cooperative and competitive. A major ecumenical problem is that those denominations are becoming increasingly competitive—tastefully and subtly camouflaged, of course. Most of these denominations are trying now to differentiate themselves from the “Protestant pack,” to show they are not interchangeable parts of Christendom, and to highlight their presumably appealing peculiarities—for example, their “distinctive” doctrines or the special virtues of their founders. The intensification of this “denominational identity syndrome” is a response to the cultural crisis of mainline Christianity—the losses in members, money, social status, and political power, particularly in comparison with their rivals of the Religious Right. Each of the mainliners is increasingly seeking a competitive edge, reminiscent of the

“We’re Number One” chants during March Madness, in pursuit of prosperity, prestige, and power.

The ecumenical—and political—effects of this syndrome are severe. Ecumenical activity is perceived as little more than an additive—a luxurious extra, something supplemental and non-essential to the “real” work of the church, rather than as a way for the churches to do their essential tasks more faithfully and more effectively. Denominational introversion is spreading: The mainline denominations are increasingly centering on their internal concerns, and backpedaling from cooperating associations and collaborative political witness.

A united political witness is essential on the grounds of both political potency and integrity. On grounds of potency, the churches’ political concerns can be advanced more effectively and faithfully through collaboration than in denominational isolation, especially in times of increasingly scarce resources. Cooperative activity enables a pooling of resources and a division of labor, thereby enhancing the prospects for optimal influence and effectiveness.

On grounds of integrity, the witness to the gospel is not credible apart from the quest for visible Christian unity in common witness. The fragmentation of the churches’ political witness obscures the reality of the reconciling and liberating powers in God’s love and impedes our mission of reconciliation and liberation to a broken world. The churches cannot be credible witnesses for peace and justice when the churches are not just to one another and cannot make peace, or even function cooperatively, among themselves.

Twenty years ago, a Presbyterian leader and ecumenical veteran, Eugene Carson Blake, said, “If the churches are to be stronger ten years from now, they will be more ecumenical. If weaker and irrelevant, they will be sectarian and provincial.” Blake was right: ecumenical activism is essential not only for the empowerment of political witness, but also for the renewal of the churches themselves.

Proposition V: The churches must learn to speak in a public tongue in the public sphere, in order to function effectively and fairly in the midst of moral pluralism.

Moral pluralism is a dominant feature of our culture. In fact, that is true even of our churches. Every mainline denomination is now multi-confessional, incorporating much of the moral spectrum and the concomitant conflicts in its midst. Politically and socially, moral pluralism means at least that many moral voices are clamoring for the public’s attention and pleading for a faithful following. No dominant ethical foundation or prevailing set of moral values can be assumed in the culture.

Consequently, it is fruitless—and unfair—for Christian churches and their leaders to pretend to be the ultimate arbiters of public morality. In giving public arguments for a political cause, it will not now work for Christians to quote scripture, or some confession of faith. Churches, of course, have the political right to speak in the language of our theological ghettos when in the public arena, but other citizens have no obligation to hear or to heed—and frequently those Christian voices which speak in stained-glass, King James fashion thus are not being heard nor heeded. In a pluralistic world, people are accustomed to moral authority being

challenged, and most of them (and most of us) want good reasons for accepting a given viewpoint, particularly one that runs counter to self-interests or cultural conditioning. They want to know “why.” The situation demands not only trustworthy witness but also plausible argument, grounded in some shared standards of rationality. It demands that Christians in the public arena make a “case,” not simply a confession—a case rooted in and compatible with their confession of faith, I hope, but still a case that can be defended rationally and experientially apart from the confession.

This situation has occupied the attention of a number of scholars interested in “public theology”—for example, David Tracey, Michael Perry, Robin Lovin, Max Stackhouse, and Stephen Carter. The reason is that this situation raises some perplexing questions about the political involvement of churches in pluralistic cultures. What are the rules of argument governing participation in the public sphere? How ought we to make our case, to justify our stances, publicly? What political ends are proper and achievable in a pluralistic culture? What are the rules of peacekeeping and fairness—the civic virtues—that the churches ought to promote in response to pluralism? Is it fair to legislate our Christian moral values unless they also can be justified on some common ground? What is this common ground? Despite earnest claims that we do not need a “moral esperanto” for a civil public square [Richard John Neuhaus, *America Against Itself: Moral Vision and the Public Order* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992)], it seems increasingly clear that we need some common ground—some broadly agreed process of moral reasoning and public decision-making—to avoid sheer babble and severe conflicts.

In my view, sound answers to these questions depend on a revival and reform of the natural law tradition in ethics. Despite the fact that the natural law has been associated with some moral perversities and unsavory interpretations, the core idea still seems sensible and essential. The natural law starts with moral reflections on the “nature” of human beings as social and ecological creatures, rather than with distinctively Christian or other religious precepts and principles. It affirms an objective and universal moral order, a general set of values and virtues, patterns of rightness and goodness, that correspond to the deepest needs in the human constitution. In the natural law tradition, the moral norms appropriate for living together in any social unit are not dependent on any special revelation or scripture, nor are they accessible only to some religious elect. Instead, these norms are “natural” in the sense that they are open to “natural reason”; they are discoverable by all humans through rational reflection on the fullness of human experience, in search of those basic conditions necessary and valuable for humans flourishing in responsible relationships. These norms are not known instinctively or indisputably; they are not “written on our hearts.” They are discovered only gradually and imperfectly, through the trials-and-errors of historical experience. Their discovery depends on human wisdom, including such disciplines as psychology, sociology, biology, and political science.

Christians, of course interpret the natural law as God’s creation of our moral constitution. Indeed, even the Christian ethic of love can be justified by the natural law, for that love is essential to human well-being, as the fulfillment of our moral aspirations.

Nevertheless, the natural law is not distinctively Christian. It is a “natural revelation,” a “common grace,” in the sense that it is open to all, whatever their ultimate commitments, whether evangelical or atheist. This universal accessibility, however, is the natural law’s main asset: it has the potential to be our much-needed common moral ground. The natural law might provide us with a common moral tongue in political debate, as well as an ethical basis for making common cause with a host of world views in a morally pluralistic culture and global community. The natural law certainly requires reformation in view of the variety of corruptions and distortions of it in legal, philosophical, and theological history. Yet, the development of the natural law is the most promising direction I know for resolving the political problems arising from moral pluralism.

Proposition VI: Adequate responses to the Religious Right will include not only criticisms of their interpretations of faith and morals, but also some serious searches to discover what we can learn from them strategically.

I do not know how to interpret the Religious Right theologically. Do organizations like the Christian Coalition represent God’s judgment on mainline Christianity’s political flabbiness? Are they the rod of God’s anger, as Cyrus was, prodding progressive Christianity to awaken from its political doldrums? I admit, I sometimes think that way. Yet, no matter how we interpret them theologically, we may have something to learn from them strategically.

Ironically, the Christian Right is the main religious group in the United States that responded earnestly to mainline Protestantism’s past rhetoric about political involvement. They perceived mainline Christianity as a politically active influence, and that perception provided a strong motivation to create a countervailing power. We taught them a lot. Now what can we learn from them?

We certainly do not want to imitate their violations of elementary morality, including the stealth and McCarthyite tactics that some of them have used for purposes of intimidation in the mainline churches and political culture. Nevertheless, we must give

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applause to the Right’s zeal in embracing the political imperative of the faith. Many of us envy that. How, if at all, can we match and organize that zeal, and at the same time give them additional lessons on how to do politics honestly and fairly?

As a lesson from the Christian Right, and as a counter force to it, do we need to create a political action arm of the Christian Mainstream? I am thinking here of a parachurch organization institutionally independent of the denominations and councils. It would be a mass organization—of individual members, one involving the mainstream Christian people of God. It would be specifically Christian and broadly ecumenical in its rationale, while coalescing strategically with other religious and social groups. It would be a body with a well-defined political agenda that is honestly, moderately, and prudently committed to liberty and justice for all. It would not be a political party but rather a lobby, an educator on political theology, and a political organizing force. I know most of the arguments against this approach; I’ve made a lot of them. But in light of the ecclesiastical and social signs of the times, I find this approach increasingly suggestive as a way to channel the commitments and energies of the Christian mainliners. My fear, of course, is that concerned and sensitive churches may not be sufficiently numerous or zealous to be effective political actors, but my hope is quite the contrary. We can not know whether my fear or hope is sounder except by exploring the possibilities. In any case, the idea of a politically active counterforce to the Radical Religious Right deserves some serious dialogue.

These propositions are now before us for debate. In expectation of your clarifications and corrections, I reserve the right to revise all of them, and I reserve the right to revoke any, except propositions I, III, IV, and V, to which I am probably irrevocably committed. But let’s argue—fairly and honestly, to be sure, but not overly politely in some insipid malinterpretation of civil debate. The concerns I am raising here matter too much to be constrained by academic gentility. They demand intense scrutiny and discussion, and if my concerns are sound, serious reforms in the way American Christians minister in the political sphere. ■

THE CENTER FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICS AT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

The Center for Christian Ethics exists to bear witness to the relevance of the Christian gospel in the world. It maintains an emphasis on applied Christianity with program activity based on Christian experience, Biblical truth, theological insight, historical perspective, current research, human needs, and the divine imperative to love God with our whole hearts and our neighbors as ourselves.

CHRONOLOGY

- In 1988 plans were made and the foundations laid for the Center for Christian Ethics.
- In 1989 the Center for Christian Ethics name was carefully chosen.
- In 1990, on June 14, the Center was chartered as a non-profit corporation.
- In 1991, on June 17, the Center was granted 501(c)(3) standing by the Internal Revenue Service.
- In 1997, a mutually beneficial relationship between the Center and Baylor University was established, with the Center's primary offices situated in the Baylor Administration Building, at 416 Pat Neff Hall, Waco. Texas.

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SUPPORT

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CONTRIBUTIONS ARE

- Greatly needed
- Urgently solicited
- Genuinely appreciated

OBJECTIVES

- Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics.
- Champion the moral values without which civilization itself could not survive.
- Publish a Christian ethics journal as a needed voice for the Christian ethics cause.
- Conduct forums to discuss critical ethical issues with a view to recommending practical responses.
- Address the ethical dimensions of public policy issues.
- Prepare and distribute Christian ethics support materials not being produced by others.
- Work with like-minded individuals and entities to advance the cause of Christian ethics.
- Perform needed Christian ethics projects and services for those welcoming such help.
- Recognize and honor those who have made unique contributions to the cause of Christian ethics.
- Utilize the contributions of responsible stewards who designate resources to be used in furthering the cause of Christian ethics.

The **VOICE** of the Center for Christian Ethics is *Christian Ethics Today*. Within the constraints of energy and finances, this journal is published about every other month. It is now sent without charge to those who request it.

COLLOQUIUMS are Center-sponsored conversations held several times a year with knowledgeable participants coming together to discuss relevant ethical issues with a view to recommending appropriate actions.

INITIATIVES in Christian Ethics (related to such things as race, class, gender, publishing, mass media, translation, teaching, and curricula) are Center agenda concerns.

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