

CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY

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"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23

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A Bag Full Of Starlight

By Joe E. Trull, Editor

Harold Lewing describes Sam, a poor farmer of the 1930s with six children. A week before Christmas, Sam brought home six brown sacks, one for each child. "These bags are just for you. Rich kids would say they are empty. But I want you to fill your own bags with the real meaning of Christmas."

On Christmas night Sam took his six kids to the barn loft. Snuggled in the hay, they watched the stars. Sam asked them to open their bags, then to look at one of the brightest stars.

"Ain't she a big bright one tonight? Light is that part of the star that moves across the vast sky toward eternity. Light is the vehicle of creation. Open your paper bags and look inside. There you can see a little of the starlight—in fact, you've really got a bag full of starlight. I could have filled those bags with gifts, and all your lives you'd be wasting your energy, thinking you had to fill every empty bag with material things."

Christmas is indeed a "bag full of starlight," for on that first Christmas morn God sent his Son Jesus—and that "life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (Jn 1:4-5).

The role of *Christian Ethics Today* is to bear witness to that light. And we do it only and entirely because of your faithful support and encouragement. I write these words just before Thanksgiving, mindful of so many blessings, especially your sacrificial gifts that make our ministry possible. Three special "bags of starlight" bless me greatly.

First, *the starlight of a dedicated corps of assistants*. A bivocational pastor in Beeville keeps our mailing list and website running—thanks Ray Waugh. In Des Moines, Randy Shebek transforms our Journal copy into columns, pages, and pictures. In Dallas, Suzanne at Etheridge Printing walks beyond the second mile to get CET published. And dear James Kim at Postel Tech works to get your Journal addressed and mailed on time. And here in Wimberley, my dear companion Audra types, proofs, corrects, and "secretaries" in a hundred ways to make it happen, all out of our Wimberley home.

Second, *the starlight of a growing number of annual con-*

tributors to the Journal. To date in 2002 we have had a record number of 448 readers contribute \$34,718. This year has been very tight (our budget is \$60,000), but you our readers have made it possible to publish. Yes, I realize out of 3000 readers we have room for growth (*and I urge anyone who has not contributed in 2002 to send a gift this year—we really do need your help*). I also realize we have a large number of students, denominational offices, church libraries, colleges, and seminaries who receive the Journal—this is a significant ministry that your gifts help us continue. Thanks for your "starlight in our bag."

Third, *I must give thanks for the starlight of a few major contributors*. When the February issue looked doubtful, one person called to offer a gift of \$10,000—I must admit, I was so moved, I could not speak. This same person has now offered a challenge gift of \$15,000 if we can find contributors who will match this gift.

I was again deeply touched when the first pledge of \$1000 came from a young college professor who asked, "Can I pay it out at \$85 a month?" I still get choked when I think of his sacrificial gift. Thus far we have \$12,000 given or pledged—could you join them?

I am also very grateful for a few Foundations and Churches who have us in their Budget, such as Northminster BC in Jackson, MS who has supported us for several years. I pray more churches may be encouraged by this Macedonian-like example (2 Cor 8:1).

So, this Thanksgiving and Christmas season, I will give God thanks for these special "bags of starlight." Where I live there are no streetlights. The sky is filled with stars, some brighter than others, but all beaming brilliantly. Each one is important. Every star adds to the panorama of God's Imax Theatre.

Thank you for being a part of the family of *Christian Ethics Today*. Pray with us that we will always shine brightly, reflecting the radiance of the One who is the "light of the world." ■ J.E.T.

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We've Got Mail

Letters From Our Readers

"What wonderful blessings your publications are to my life. Each issue is a source of inspiration, great joy, personal growth, and a catalyst for reexamination and affirmation. I use your articles practically every week in preparation and on Sunday, and have not been excommunicated yet!"

Dan R. Griffith, Haskell, TX

"May I say a hearty 'AMEN' to your editorial 'Etica y Misiones.' As a 20+ year veteran SBC missionary I have come to many of the same conclusions. Thank you for words that indicate that we are not alone . . . Pray that we can be faithful to God's calling in spite of the frustrations."

IMB Missionary

"I thought that putting three very different approaches to stem cells together [June 2002] made for most interesting reading. No doubt, almost every reader found something to agree with and something to make them angry. . . . I think you are doing a real service to evangelical readers."

Wilton H. Bunch, Beeson Divinity School

"Enjoy each issue. Thank you for what you do to make us think. Don't agree with all they write, or all I write either, but they all make me think."

W. Winfred Moore, Baylor University

"I can become ecstatic when I talk about your publication. Wish I could wave a wand and have it in the hands of every Baptist who cares about what is going on."

Chaplain Lowell F. Sodeman (ret.), Decatur, GA

"The Journal is an oasis in a dry and thirsty land: Keep it coming, please."

Doug Watterson, Stuart, FL

"For my money, CET is probably the best publication Baptists have. I appreciate a voice of reason in a world of subjective rationalization."

Ron Kemp, Bolivar, MO

"Of all the journals that I read, this is the one I keep for future reference. From the scholarly articles to the 'musing' of Foy Valentine, I have found the journal personally enriching and professionally helpful."

Royce Calhoun, San Antonio, TX

"Here's one more check for this year. I was blessed with an unexpected windfall and I can't think of a better cause to give a part of it to. I enjoyed the past issue with the Moyer's piece and the good pieces by Valentine and Haralson."

Ralph H. Ramsey III, Lubbock, TX

"This [gift] comes from a non-Baptist, yea even a non-Christian for I am an elderly Unitarian agnostic who was married to an atheist who practiced the best Christian ethics possible. I hope your Journal will continue to be published in good health in a country of continued peace."

Jeanne Lamar Slobod, Georgetown, TX

"Where else can anyone turn for such an array of depth of intellect and good humor, to satisfy the soul? Perhaps we should add to reading the Scripture and the newspaper, a third—CET!"

Jeff Day, Hammond, LA

"Dear Foy: When I got back home, the latest issue of *Christian Ethics Today* was on my desk. It's another great issue and I know you are pleased with the great job being done . . ."

Millard Fuller, Habitat for Humanity International



Loving People Into The Kingdom

By Tony Campolo
Eastern College, St. David's PA

Editor's Note: This message was originally delivered to the North Carolina Baptist Men's Conference in Charlotte on March 2, 2002.

In Matthew 22, some Pharisees confront Jesus and one of them, a lawyer, tries to embarrass him. I know what that is like to have questions, not for an explanation of ideas, but to embarrass the teacher. I know what that is like because I'm a professor. For ten years at the University of Pennsylvania, students and faculty were always after me because I was the "Resident Christian" in the Sociology Department. I remember, they would always question me at faculty meetings.

I taught in an Ivy League school but I never graduated from one personally. I went to Temple University where the poor guys go and the other school was where the "intellegincia" go. If you graduated from Temple and you teach at Penn they will not let you forget from whence you come!

I can remember being asked by one of my junior colleagues (a Harvard snot) who said, "Doctor, where did you do your graduate studies?" He knew. I would always say to questions like that, "Temple O." It was my way of beating him to the draw. You see if I had just said, "Temple," he would have said, "Oh." Then you could always count on the second line. "The word is around the University that you use transcendental categories for legitimizing social order and that in reality, your categorical imperatives are mystically inspired. Is that true?"

I would say, "Yeh." That would be the signal. I would say, "Yeh, I believe in God." When the signal was out, my eight graduates would gather around because they knew that the old man was about to chew up another Harvard boy. (I shouldn't go too hard on Harvard, because something is going on at that campus. The university, not the chaplains or Baptists or intervarsity group, but the university has invited me the week after Easter to start a series of revival meetings!)

The Pharisees come to Jesus and they are trying to expose him as a shallow teacher, as someone who doesn't have good answers to the important questions. The scribes and Pharisees had embroidered the laws of Moses, which without comment were quite complicated. If you read through Leviticus and Deuteronomy, everything was evil. You talk back to your mother you could get stoned. They put you to death for everything. If you touched the skin of a dead pig, you got into trouble, which puts the whole super bowl into question!

They took the complicated Law of Moses and made it even more complicated. The whole thing was so sophisticated that even they could not figure it out. So they asked Jesus,

"Of all the things that are written by Moses and all the things that are in the Torah and Talmud, please tell us which is the most important of all of them—we want to know?"

Jesus answers with such simplicity that they don't know what to do with his answer. You know what Jesus said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37-39). The first commandment is to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second is like it, for it is the same thing. On these two commandments hang all the law and all the commandments of God. The truth is missions must be motivated out of the love for God and the love for one's neighbor. That is the motivation. A lot of people are missionaries out of guilt. I have met missionaries on the field and wondered why they were there. There is almost an anger against the very people they are trying to help. Someone laid a guilt trip on them and they thought they had to go. It's got to be motivated out of love. Love for God and love for neighbor, that's what we are talking about.

People need to know about God and about God's love for them. Those who say that missions are unnecessary, just take a look at the world in which we live. You don't even have to go overseas. In our own communities, the need for people knowing God's love is crucial. The more you get to know Jesus, the more you come into a personal relationship with him, the more you know that you are loved and that you are valued and that you are of significance.

I worry about this poor woman Yates in Texas who grows up in this evangelical community and they laid such a guilt trip on her that she is walking about saying I am not a good enough mother, I need to be punished. I wonder how much of her psychological mess is biophysical or how much of it was just bad religion. I've got to ask that question for there's a lot of bad religion out there that just lays guilt trips on people.

Freud once said, "The church, in order to convince people to accept the gospel and deliverance from sin, first has to make them feel guilty." The problem is we do a much better job of making people feel guilty than we do of relieving the guilt that we make them feel.

Baptists are particularly good at it. We know how to do it. When I was a kid growing up, it was always on me. Every Sunday I heard that I was a dirty, filthy sinner and that I was going to burn in hell. "Are you ready to die," my pastor would yell at me. I was twelve years old and I didn't want to

die. But here is the good news of the gospel, when you really get to know the Jesus I'm talking about, "There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Self contempt is evaporated.

You notice that scripture says you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. If you hate yourself, your neighbor is in trouble. That doesn't take much figuring because you know that those who are down on themselves are usually down on everyone else around them. You show me that church member that is always finding fault against everyone and I'll show you someone who has a negative self-trip. You know that is true. When you are down on yourself, you feel you are rotten and no good and you are a very, very dangerous person

We all become dangerous. I have a pastor-counselor friend who had a woman in the office whose marriage was falling apart. She was lashing out at everyone and as he talked to her in depth, he came to the realization that it all stemmed back to an experience when she was very young—when she was in the fourth grade. She had a teacher that didn't like her when she misbehaved. One day she did something that was very disturbing. The teacher called her forward to sit in front of the class and said, "Catherine, do you realize that nobody in this class likes you?" What a thing to say to a child in the fourth grade. Nobody likes you! "I'm going to ask everyone in the class to come up and write something on the blackboard that they don't like about you." One by one the children came up and wrote something they did not like about Catherine. Mean and cruel things. This fourth grade girl sat there convulsed in tears. It ruined her life. The pastor-counselor asked a very simple question, "Did everyone come to the blackboard?" She said, "Yes, everyone did." He said, "Close your eyes. I want you to look at that classroom. There is somebody else there. Way in the back in the corner is Jesus. Catherine, watch. Jesus is getting up. He is coming to the front of the class. He picks up the eraser at the blackboard and he erases all the terrible things that were written there. He picks up the chalk and he writes, 'Catherine, you are wonderful and I love you.'"

That's the good news of the gospel. We've got a Jesus who comes and with his precious blood wipes out the past. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as

snow." All of the terrible and ugly things that may or may not be true, they are blotted out. They are buried in the deepest sea. They are remembered no more. When you go to Judgment Day, don't be afraid. The Scripture says to come into his presence with boldness. That's how I'm going to come. I'm going to move in there with boldness, man. I walk with boldness. I'm from Philadelphia where you learn to walk bold. That's why you people get mugged, you don't know how to walk. You come in here with that North Carolina smile. We kill people like you. I'm going to walk in there boldly and say, "Out of my way angels, out of my way." I am going to stand before the judgment seat and the Scripture says in the book of Jude, "And he shall present you (that's me) to the Father." I can just hear it. "Father, I would like for you to meet my friend, Tony." (I hope my wife is there).

Missions begins with a personal relationship with Jesus wherein you are redefined. You come to see yourself in a new way. You come to see yourself as one who has incredible worth and value and capable of doing things for God. You think, "Not me, I can't do anything for God." A friend of mine in a midweek prayer meeting told of a man standing and testifying about a time when he was in Sydney, Australia. He was standing on the corner of King's Crossing, which is a famous intersection like Time's Square. Someone pulled on his jacket. He turned around and there was a bum. Before he could say anything the bum said, "Mister, if you were to die tonight, where would you spend eternity?" He walked away. The man giving his testimony said the question so troubled him that he had no peace for three weeks until he gave himself to Jesus. The pastor said that about two years later another man stood up in the midweek prayer meeting and gave almost an identical testimony. "I was in Sidney, Australia near the corner of King's Crossing and a derelict pulled on my jacket. When I turned around he said, 'Mister, if you die tonight, where would spend eternity?' That's all he said. The question struck my heart, I was so upset and that night when I went to my hotel room, I got down on my knees and I gave my life to Jesus."

My pastor friend was later in Australia attending a meeting of churches in Sydney. The hotel was just down the street



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from King's Crossing. He thought just out of curiosity he would go to that corner—maybe that bum was still around. As the pastor was standing there on the corner looking around, someone pulled on his jacket. He said, "Don't say a word, I know what your are going to say. You are going to ask me if I were to die tonight where would I spend eternity." The derelict said, "Yes, that's what I was going to ask you. How did you know?" The pastor told about the two men who had come to know Christ because of this. The old man started to cry. "I was an old drunk and I got saved down at the Salvation Army just around the corner. I got saved some eight years ago and I'm not educated. I don't know how to do much of anything. All I could do was ask this dumb question and for eight years I have stood on this corner day in and day out and to thousands of people I have asked this question. Today is the first day I have had any evidence that it did any good at all."

But that's not the end of the story. When the word began to get out on this man, people all over Sydney began to pop up saying, "He touched by life too." I don't know if you were watching television on New Year's Eve 2000, but they showed the Harbor Bridge in Sydney with the fireworks going off behind it. If you take a good look at that picture you would find a cross in neon lights with one word, "Eternity." The whole city came to honor this man who had died just a few months earlier. A man who touched all kinds of lives because he did the only thing he knew how to do, asking that question.

To love God enough to do God's will in the world, that's what a missionary is. And, you've got to love people. Let me ask a simple thing. I'm a sociologist by trade, so I'll take a survey tonight. In terms of how you became a Christian, Why are you in church today? Here are the options.

- I read a Christian Book.
- I heard a great sermon.
- I heard a Christian Radio or TV Show.
- Somebody who really loved me kept bringing me to church and made sure that I heard the story and just kept at me until I made my decision for Christ.

There are the options. How many of you are Christians because a book converted you? That really encourages me. Second option: A sermon did it. A few of you.

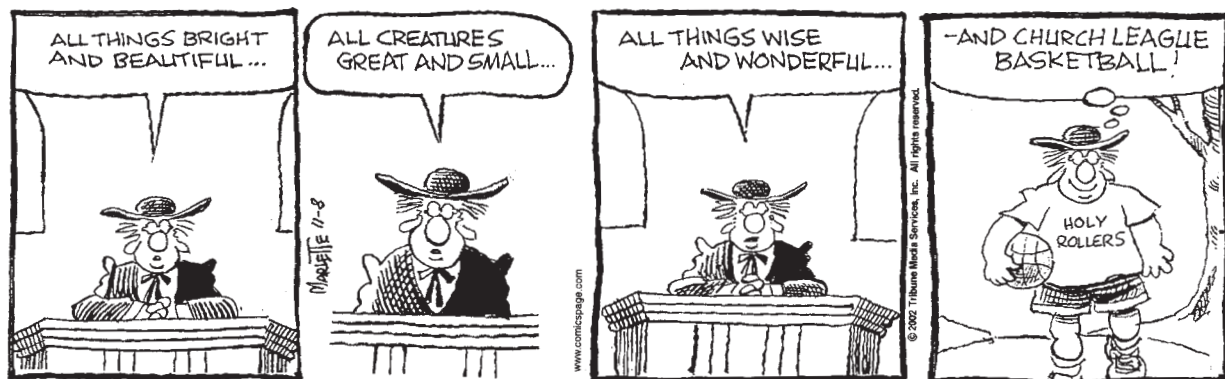
Other options: I was converted by a radio show or a television show. I mean we are spending all of this money on radio and television shows. Surely there has got to be better results than this!

Now how many of you are in the church and are saved because some person cared about you and loved you into the kingdom? Those people in Nashville are always saying we need a new methodology for missions in this contemporary postmodern era.

I've got to tell you, the way you get people won to Christ is the same way they did it 2000 years ago. You have to love them into the kingdom. You have got to care about people. You have got to reach out and minister to them in love. That's what missions is about—loving people. Loving your neighbor; really loving your neighbor.

I've got to tell you, loving your neighbor is of crucial significance. Sometimes you are afraid to love your neighbor. I can remember when I was afraid to love my neighbor. There was a kid in my highschool who was gay. The word got out on this homosexual kid. We made hell for him. Those of you parents who have a homosexual son or daughter (and please, in a group this size there are at least 30 or 40 of you), you know what it is like to see your son suffer. A sweet kid, who goes to church; a sweet kid in the youth group who struggles with this; he cries at night begging God to change it and nothing changes. Roger was a gay kid. He was not happy. We made fun of him. On Fridays after gym class, boys went into the shower—but he never went in with us. He went in alone afterwards, and when he came out we were waiting for him with our wet towels and we would whip them after him and sting his little body. I wasn't there the day they dragged Roger into the small tile shower and shoved him into the corner. Doubled-up, crying and screaming, the guys urinated all over him. He went home, went to bed about 10 p.m., and about 2 a.m. he got up and went to the basement of his house and he hanged himself.

And I knew I wasn't a Christian. I believed the Bible—I believe as I do now in the inerrancy of the Scriptures. I believed in the doctrines of the Apostle Paul. I believed in all you should believe in to be a Christian. But if Jesus was in my heart and I loved Jesus as I should and I loved my neighbor, I would have been Roger's friend. But I was afraid to have him



as my friend because if you were a friend to someone like Roger it's not long before people are talking about you. I wish I could go back and relive that time and be his friend. And if in my large inner city high school they made fun of me and said nasty things about me, I know what Jesus would say, "Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you and say terrible things against you because you love the wrong people."

I don't know all the church is to be, but I do know what it is supposed to be. It is supposed to be a group of followers of Jesus who love all the wrong people. If there is anything that was true about Jesus, it was that he loved all the wrong people. God sent his Son to us, the ultimate missionary, and they criticized Jesus because of who he loved. Check the Scripture. He loved all the wrong people. The prostitutes, the publicans, the tax collectors, and those who were betraying their own people to the Romans. All those people who were spit upon, cursed, and put down. Those were the people Jesus reached out to. And the religious establishment, those key leaders of denominational Christianity who pass resolutions to have nothing to do with the wrong people. And Jesus says, "I don't care what they vote on and I don't care what they say. My love is unconditional." And they rejected him. But sinners loved him. They became followers of Jesus.

It says in 1 Corinthians 1, when you look at Jesus' followers, not many were prosperous, or significant, or rich folks. But rather they were the ones whom the world called nothing. He loved them and he built a movement out of them. Look at the disciples—a bunch of losers. Peter and Andrew, fishermen who didn't even have a decent set of nets. When Jesus came upon them, what were they doing? Then there is James and John, sons of thunder. What kind of guys in that town earned that sort of name? They probably had leather robes painted with pictures and rode around on camels with racing stripes. And Jesus says, "Come unto me all you that labor and give me the stones which the builders reject and I will build you a kingdom."

If you are going to be a follower of Jesus, you have got to let Jesus love you and redefine you as a person of worth and through you he can go out and love others. That's what he wants. He wants to love other people through you.

I'm a sociologist by trade. Sociology and Psychology in this country are really quite distorted. They are on the wrong track. Every once in a while, you find a discipline gets caught up in a paradigm and doesn't know how to get out of it. The paradigm that American Psychology and Sociology is caught up in is the behaviorist model. The neo-Freudians are behaviorists. If you go to the university that is what they will drill into your head. Both of those ideologies suggest that what a person is, is the result of his past. We are all conditioned to be what we are by past experiences. So much of this "pop psychology" students pick up in school, and no one even questions it. We are the result of our past conditioning, we are molded into the persons that we are today because of the events of yesterday.

People, we are not Pavlovian dogs. We are not creatures who are determined by the past. As a matter of fact, human beings have the capacity to be defined by the future. My future is more important than my past. Don't try to understand me in terms of what I have been, understand me in terms of what I am becoming because, brothers and sisters, it has not yet appeared what I shall be, but I am going to be like him.

And day by day I am becoming like him. It is the future that impacts the present more than any thing in the past. You know this from your experience. How many kids do you know that are flunking out of school, going down the tubes, and all of a sudden they are on the Dean's list? What happened? You say, "He's got a purpose now, he has some direction now." Have you ever heard that? Victor Frankl developed the concept of Logotherapy. In his book *Man's Quest for Meaning*, this Jewish guy in the concentration camp at Auschwitz figures out that he can use the time effectively by doing a study. He studied which of the prisoners survive and which don't survive. Which of the people make it despite the suffering and which die. As he studies the backgrounds of the various people he interviews, he finds there are no social-psychological differences that are notable that differentiate those who survive and those who die. But this is where he finds the difference. Those who survive are able to project themselves into the future and what they dream about and what they envision is what saves them from destruction in the present. That is the basis of his study.

That's exactly the point. When I do mission work, when I work with inter city kids, I would give up if I really believed that they were products of the past. I work with kids that armies have marched over. I work with girls who were raped by their brothers and mauled by the guys on the street. I deal with kids who have no parents to speak of and who live in an environment of drugs and promiscuity. If the past defines who they are then these kids are lost. But I can say to any kid that I talk to, I do not care as much about where you have come from—it is important and it does influence you—but I am more concerned about where you are going.

Here is what the Bible says, "And when the young no longer have dreams and the old no longer have visions, people perish." I spend most of my time on university campuses. Sometimes it upsets me because as I talk with the children, your children, they have no dreams—they have no visions. Let me tell what you have told them. You told them to be happy. "Mom, what do you think I ought to be?" I ask any father, any mother. Every mother in America answers the same way. "I really don't care as long as he is happy." It kind of makes you puke, doesn't it?

My family is Italian—immigrants! You say what has that got to do with it? My father really didn't care whether I was happy. I would come down in the morning. Pow! "What is that for?" What my mother and father built into my heart was vision. My mother told me, "When you were born, I took you like Hanna did to the church and I dedicated you to the service of Jesus. You think you can be anything you

want—you can't. You were brought into this world to serve other people in the name of Jesus, especially the poor and the oppressed. Do you understand?"

People ask me, "Tell us about your call to the ministry."

I never was called. My mother decided!

The best thing she ever did for me was to give me a vision, to give me a dream to make me see that my life could count for something significant. But when I meet your kids, they tell me: "I want to be happy." Happy? Have you ever seen a more unhappy group of people?

I was in an elevator in Chicago a few months ago. I was up in my room at 10 o'clock. I realized I was supposed to be down on the ground floor in the ballroom delivering a lecture to corporate executives. I ran to the elevator. I was so upset for I was really late. The only other person on the elevator is this kid. I don't know whether he has on long pants or short pants. You know what I mean? He is just kind of standing there. We get down to the ground and the stinking door does not open. I'm banging on the elevator door. I'm yelling, "Open up, open up out there." All of a sudden the voice behind me says, "Sir the door is open." I turned and the door on the other side was opened. It was one of those elevators with doors on both sides. I am over here banging on the wrong door. This kid did not laugh. This kid did not laugh. I took him by the shoulders and said, "Kid, laugh, this is funny!"

I meet your kids coming out of high school and I ask them, "What are you going to do when you grow up?" "I don't know." If a kid has no goals, no purpose, no directions, what do you do with him? You send him to college. Four years later you are \$80,000 poorer and you ask the kid the same question, "You are a graduate now, what are you going to do? What are you going to be?" What does he say, "I'm keeping all of my options open."

And the Bible says, "When the young no longer have dreams and the old no longer have visions, the people perish." I was a guest lecturer at UCLA and I was half-way through the morning and the discussion had started and I could just sense what these kids were about. About money! About where they were going to make money—yadda yadda. At a particular point I said, "You know, you are 23 years old and I'm 66 years old, and you know what? I'm younger than you are because people are as young as their dreams and as old as their cynicism. You guys at 23 are cynical. You are only interested in money." You say, "Show me the money."

You parents let your kids get away with this. You say, "You can't tell your kids what to do." Of course you can. "They will rebel!" Of course they will. Your job is to carefully define for them what they are to rebel against. There will be a synthesis. There will be commitments and then individuality. Then will come your values and commitments. The tension between the two will emerge into a synthesis that will bring together the best elements of both, and that's what every parent wants.

You don't want your child to be a clone of you, but you don't want your kid to do his own thing either. You have to

have a sense of mission and vision. That's what the gospel is about. It's about vision. It's all about the future.

Many of us have reduced faith to a theology. "Do you have faith?" "Yes, I believe in the Apostle's Creed." That's not faith, that's theology. Hebrews 11:12 says, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." When was the last time you said "in the name of Jesus?" You've got to bring Jesus into this, kid. What is the future Jesus wills for you? What do you think Jesus wants you to do? What do you think Jesus wants you to accomplish in life? I know what he wants. There is a project!

Martin Heidegger says every young person needs a project. A project that is so significant that if he dies trying to realize that project, his life will have meaning. I know what the project is. The project is to create the kingdom of God. That's what it is. The kingdom of God. When Jesus taught us to pray, he said, "Thy kingdom come thy will be done." Where? No parting of the sky when you die by and by. Don't let those neo-marxists say that Christianity is about deferred gratification. It's not! It's about the realization of God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

You say, "Are you one of those postmillennialists that believes we can bring in the kingdom without Christ's return?" Of course not. Jesus has got to return for the whole thing to happen in its fullness. When is that going to happen? Well, I don't know. For that matter, Jesus didn't know. You are going to have to ask a Baptist evangelist for that one!

I believe in Philippians 1:6, "That he who began the good work in you, (you got it?). . . he who began the good work in you will complete it upon the day of his coming."

If you had talked to the French Underground during WWII, and asked, "What are you trying to do?" They would say, "Defeat the Nazis." "They say you are a ragtime army—a few hand grenades, a few machine guns. You can't take on the Nazi Army and win." You know what they would have told you? "Across the English Channel there is a huge invasion force gathering. We don't know when they are going to give the signal, but in the moment that the Nazis couldn't possibly expect, they are going to sweep across the English Channel and invade. They are going to join up with us and carry us to victory."

And you know what? When they ask me, "Do you really think that the church of Jesus Christ is able to transform the world—that is, change it into the world that ought to be, into the kingdom of God? Why, you are just a ragtime army—you don't amount to much." I say, "There is a huge invasion force being gathered beyond the sky and I don't know when they are going to sound that trumpet but they are going to come and join us and carry us to victory!"

For the young intellectual sophisticates that are here, the sophomores in college, you are undoubtedly reading T.S. Elliott. Of course he's heavy. Everyone reads *The Wasteland* in their sophomore year and they all memorize one couplet:

*This is the way the world will end
This is the way the world will end*

Not with a bang, but with a whimper.
 That is depressing. But I've got great news.
This is the way the world will end
This is the way the world will end
Kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of
our God.
And he shall reign forever and forever.

Let me tell you about some kingdom builders I know. A friend of mine called me about 25 years ago. He said, "I'm putting together a board of directors. I want you on it because you are good at raising money." I said, "What are you going to do?" He said, "We are going to build houses for poor people." I replied, "That's great because sub-standard housing is one of the plagues of our country." He said, "Yea, we are going to build houses for poor people. Here's the deal—no down payment. Secondly, they will have long term mortgages with no interest." I said, "That's great except for one problem. Who is going to build the houses?" The reply came, "We are not even going to charge them for the land, we are just going to charge them for building materials."

"Fine. You charge them for building materials, no down payment, long term mortgages, and no interest on the mortgages? You are not going to have enough money to pay the workers."

He said, "We are going to get church people to volunteer." Right!

Twenty-five years later, Habitat for Humanity has completed 100,000 houses. And get this. In the next five years, they will complete the next 100,000. And they are doing it without government money. Incidentally, don't let yourself get sucked into all this faith-based stuff that they are talking about. I mean if you put government together with church programs, it is like mixing ice cream with horse manure. That's right! It's not going to hurt the manure, but it is going to raise havoc with the ice cream.

Some say, "Can't you just separate the evangelical thrust from the social action?" I've got news for you, all of my social action is evangelical! I don't think you can separate the two. That's what's wrong with the church. We have been separating evangelism from social action and now we are going to make it a doctrine of the church with the help of the U.S. government—for what?

We will sell our soul for a bowl of pottage. When will you realize that the reason why faith-based programs work is because they are faith-based! And if you separate the faith from the rest of the program, it will go down the tubes. You say, "But there is so much money in the government." Listen, there is so much money in church we don't need their lousy money. We really don't. Too many people are reasoning, "If the government does it, I won't have to."

I contend that the reason to give is because it changes the giver. Why do you think Jesus said to the rich young ruler, "Sell whatsoever you have and give to the poor." Why do you think he said that? "Sell what you have and give to the poor and take up the cross and follow me." Does he say it just because the poor need help? And the poor do need help! No, he says it because he knows what will happen to the rich young ruler as he sells everything he has and helps the poor.

Responding to the needs of the poor is a socially transforming experience. It's a psychologically transforming experience. And most importantly, it is a spiritually transforming experience.

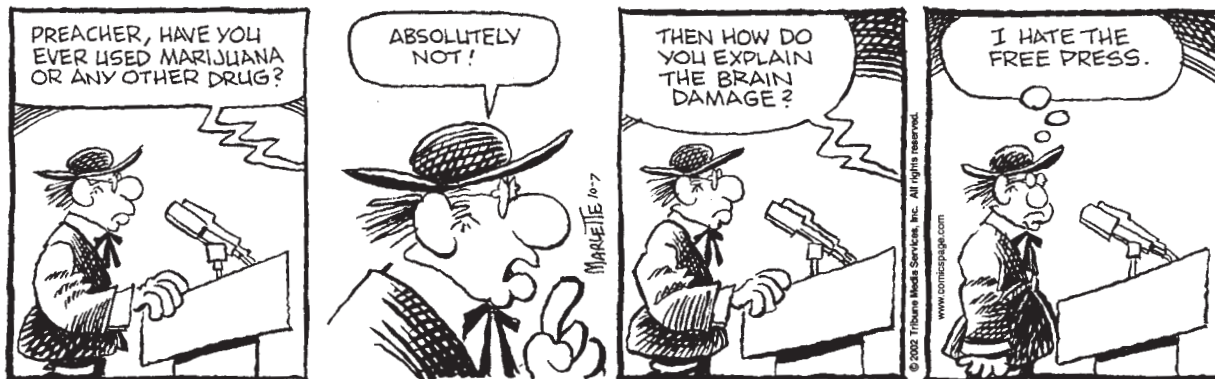
Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "When Jesus calls you, he calls you to come and die." And Jesus is looking for a group of people who will surrender all that they are and all that they have.

Soren Kirkegard tells a delightful story of a fireman. Everybody in town loves the fireman because he was a kind and a gentle man. One day he got on the fire truck with the other firemen and headed to the blazing inferno—a building being consumed in flames. The fireman saw about five-hundred townspeople there with little water pistols in their hands. Smiling at one another, they were going "squirt-squirt, squirt-squirt."

The fireman asked the people what they were doing. They replied, "We all believe in what you are doing and we each came to make our little contribution—squirt-squirt."

The fireman shouted, "Get out of here. This is no place for well-meaning people who want to make a contribution, this is a place for people who are ready to die to put out the flame."

When Jesus calls us, the commitments are deeper, far deeper than we have been ready to admit. We need to give ourselves for the work of the kingdom. We need to bring



ourselves, our time, our energy, and our money. And those who do not go need to be supported by those who stay behind. But our commitment to missions needs to increase dramatically.

Another kingdom builder is a guy I know by the name of Al Whitaker. Came down one morning for breakfast. He has been the Director of the Mennan Corporation—the CEO. His wife looked across the table and said, “Al, is this what you want to do the rest of your life? Do you want to spend the rest of your life making shaving cream? Do you really want to spend the rest of your life making rich people richer?”

When he was having supper that night, he mentioned to his wife, “That question you asked this morning was so disturbing that you should know, when I left the office today, I handed in my resignation.” That slowed her down. Whitaker set up an organization called Opportunity International. One of the reasons I teach at Eastern University rather than the University of Pennsylvania is they let us set up a special graduate program to train men and women to go as missionaries to Third World countries to start small businesses and cottage industries that people can own themselves. If we are really going to create an indigenous church, then we have got to create an indigenous form of financial support for the church. We have to help the poor as they are starving to death; but my goodness, it doesn’t solve the problem. You have to create jobs.

The Talmud says there are several ways of helping the poor. One way is to create jobs. Sounds like the old WPA. Good system. We need to rebuild America’s highways, we need to rebuild America’s schools. There are three million people who have lost their jobs since September 11. Let’s create jobs for them.

Another way of helping the poor is to give them what they need, but never let them know where it came from. That’s why I am very upset with Baptist youth groups that deliver food baskets and toys at Christmas to poor families and stand around and sing Christmas carols. Please, I want them to deliver the toys and the food. I just don’t want them to hang around. Leave the stuff on the back steps, run away, call the people on the phone and tell them, “There is stuff on the back steps. It’s for you! This is God.” And hang up.

The Bible says that the God who sees what you do in secret will reward you openly. When you do your giving, your left hand is not supposed to know what your right hand is doing. You respond to people out of love. The lowest form of charity is to give people what they need and then rub their noses in it. This is why the welfare system failed so miserably. We gave people what they needed, but we took away their dignity. And when you take that away you have taken away more than you have given.

So at Eastern we started graduating students in the special MBA program. We have an MBA and MA program that trains people to do community development that gets people together to start small businesses and cottage industries that they can own themselves. The first business was a sandal fac-

tory. The sandals were made from worn out tires—very easy to do. Simple tools, simple operation. We did so well, we were selling them on the world market. We gave the children of Guatapechi in the Dominican Republic fifty-cents every time they would bring us an old automobile tire. It wasn’t long before we had used every old automobile tire in Santa Domingo.

Then we started getting “new” automobile tires. So we had to change our modus operandi a little. We have been directing young men and women into Opportunities International, the organization started by Al Whitaker. Our college has this MBA and MA program specifically for this reason. In ten years, Opportunities International has created 1,500,000 jobs for poor people in Third World countries. If you figure there are six to a family in a Third World country, you have to multiply 2,500,000 by 6 to figure out how many people are delivered from poverty, not for a day, not for a week, not for a year, but for the rest of their lives. This is the kingdom of God breaking loose into human history. People having jobs. People having homes. People having hope. People having a future. That’s what it is about.

You say, “But this is so concrete, isn’t the kingdom of God more spiritual?” No, for Isaiah 65:17 says, “This shall be the kingdom. Everyone will have a house to live in. A decent house that he himself participates in building. Everyone will have a job and will have the fruits of his own labors. Everybody will be healthy and children will not die in infancy. Old people will live their lives with perfect health coverage. It is the kingdom of God.” And it is not going to be actualized in its fullness until Jesus comes again. But between now and then, the one who is beginning the good work in us will complete it on the day of his coming.

Salvation for me is the transformation of the individual. Salvation for me is the changing of relationships so that you stand up for the poor and oppressed and the down trodden, to be a voice for those who have no voice. The kingdom of God is creating the new society that God willed when he created this planet in the first place.

It is the future. ■

Far Be It From Me To Politicize Shootings

By Tom Teepen, Columnist
Cox Newspapers, Atlanta

The body count around Washington was still rising when the good people who can be counted on to rally for the safety of firearms rushed forward to warn that gun-control advocates would surely try to “exploit” the situation.

Any such attempt to take unseemly advantage of the victims and their families, we were sternly counseled, would show “poor judgment and taste.” This is becoming a standard part of the gun-lobby script.

Presumably it also would be untoward to cite the high number of fatalities at a troublesome intersection as an argument for redesigning the traffic control there. And indiscreet to clamor for levees along the part of a river that often floods by cutting the victims swept downstream.

In short, if public safety breaks down more or less regularly at any particular point, civic etiquette expects that everyone will look the other way and not give the matter a thought.

In the interests of those who might otherwise stumble into gaucherie, here’s a short list of matters that, in respect to the victims of the sniper, must not be brought up in polite conversation. Remember, the priority here is to avoid embarrassment for gun manufacturers, sellers and lobbyists.

So by no means mention that the likely weapon in these murders is a .223 caliber rifle, probably of the sort usually called “military-style,” which actually means “military.” These rifles have a range about five times the range typically favored by deer hunters.

Sniper rifles are designed for the virtually sole purpose of shooting humans from cover at a very long distance—the chosen instruments to fulfill the sniper community’s slogan,

“One shot, one kill.” And, yes, there really is a sniper community, with its own clubs and publications and other lodge-like accoutrements.

And keep it to yourself that the means have existed for years to set up a national system of ballistic “fingerprinting”—a database that would store the telltale characteristics of every firearm. Bullets used in crimes then could be matched to the original gun sale.

That wouldn’t lead to the culprit every time—many weapons used in crimes have been stolen, for instance—but it would at a minimum create a starting point.

The National Rifle Association and the rest of the gun lobby have forbidden the development of such a system. Ballistic fingerprinting would be sort of like gun registration, and if guns are registered the federal government will confiscate them and then Hitler will take over.

What’s more, guns might cost as much as \$20 more and we can’t have that.

It would be indelicate in the circumstances to suggest that ballistic fingerprinting might have given police a quick start in trying to catch the sniper and to prevent further deaths. The NRA’s sensitivities need to be respected.

Fortunately, not everyone is so loutish as to exploit these tragedies.

The House GOP leadership had been cranking up legislation to shield gun manufacturers from lawsuits resulting from gun crimes. Realizing that this was no time to drag the grieving gun makers into the political spotlight, the leadership has quashed this legislative indulgence, at least for now.

The politeness is touching. ■



Resisting the Growing Gun Culture

*By Dwight A. Moody, Dean of the Chapel,
Georgetown College, KY*

The year of our Lord nineteen hundred and fifty five was the best Christmas ever. To prove it, I have a picture, one of those old, black and white shots, with shinny finishes and serrated edges, now displayed in the family photo album.

There I sit, all five years of me: black cowboy hat atop my round, sandy head; sure enough wild-west vest buckled around my proud chest; a genuine leather belt with two holsters strapped to my waist; and slung beneath on each side, a sleek, silver six-shooter.

Legend has it I was the fastest gun on the street.

What isn't legend is this: those two imitations of the real thing were the last guns ever to occupy a place in my home.

I am among those who think homes (and people) are more secure without guns.

Security is important: which is why the second amendment of the Constitution of the United States addresses the importance of civilian militias (what we now call the National Guard).

In this time of international terror, we are indebted to all the men and women who take up arms to protect us from harm.

But what concerns me are all the other people who have taken up arms: who fill homes, cars and barns with guns: hand guns, hunting guns, antique guns, target guns, street guns, even sniper guns.

A special on television last week took us to a camp that specializes in sniper training. What possible personal need or social value can defend such a practice?

All of this is evidence that the gun culture in America is on the move, asserting itself as a cultural norm and establishing itself as a political force.

One place where they have succeeded is video games. No space in our society is more violent than the shoot 'em up scenarios of these addictive devices.

The games mirror the movies: Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and of course, Sylvester Stallone with his

unforgettable and untamable Rambo character.

Then there is Charleston Heston. Once he was Moses whose story line tells of a young, ambitious Hebrew killing an Egyptian and fleeing to the wilderness. It was only as an old man, forty years later, that God saw fit to use Moses. The man made history, not by wielding weapons in the war on evil, but by lifting up his hands to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Charleston, on the other hand, gave up the Moses model.

Instead: there he was at a gun culture convention, lifting high above his head the long-barreled flintlock of Daniel Boone vintage: there he was giving voice to his gun culture convictions, "Over our cold, dead bodies!"

What he meant by this election year demagoguery is, of course, his disdain to the point of death for any governmental or grassroots efforts to curtail the spread of their culture of guns.

What the rest of us are seeing, though, are eleven cold, dead bodies scattered across the human landscape of our nation's capital.

And, alas, what we are not seeing are the cold, dead bodies of thousands of people shot dead every day in our own dear America, by virtue of which we have become the most violent nation on the face of the earth.

What is not dead is the hope that someday, somewhere in America some of us who resist the gun culture in our nation will, of our own accord, create living environments that are free of guns.

What we need are homes, streets, schools, churches and businesses that have been declared gun free zones.

What we can create are entire communities whose peace-loving people forswear whatever freedom we have to bear arms in order to shape a society where the only guns around are the shinny, silver six shooters that parents give their five year old boys for Christmas. ■

A Courageous Mission

By Charles Johnson, Pastor
Trinity Baptist Church, San Antonio

Editor's Note: This sermon was delivered at the Annual Convocation of Texas Baptists Committed in September, 2001.

This famous Woman at the Well was powerless and disenfranchised in every conceivable way by the males of the time.

First, she had the misfortune of being a woman. They defined her personhood only in relation to males. Because they saw circumcision as the sign of a covenant with God, the woman could relate to God and the community of faith only through the man. Because the blood of the sacrifice on the temple altar became the means of atonement from sin, they considered all blood outside the temple life as ritually unclean; thus, they excluded women from worship life during menstruation and childbirth.

Increasingly they excluded and segregated women. They had access to the Holy only through their males. A woman's court was added to the temple to distance females from the sanctuary. It came to be that a woman's vow before God was not as valid as a man's, and that a husband could essentially annul a wife's vow.

They blamed women as the location of sin and evil and eventually excluded them from testifying in public trial. Women could not be seen in public nor speak to strangers. They could not teach or learn the Torah in their own homes. They were second-class citizens in every way, barred from the worship and teaching of God, just barely human, just scarcely above the status of slaves. This woman had nothing.

Nevertheless, it gets worse. Not only was this individual a woman, but she was a woman without a man. She had no husband. This means she was dirt poor. Women in the first century were dependent both financially and legally on the men in their lives; fathers, husbands, brothers, sons.

Dying from exposure was common in the Greco-Roman

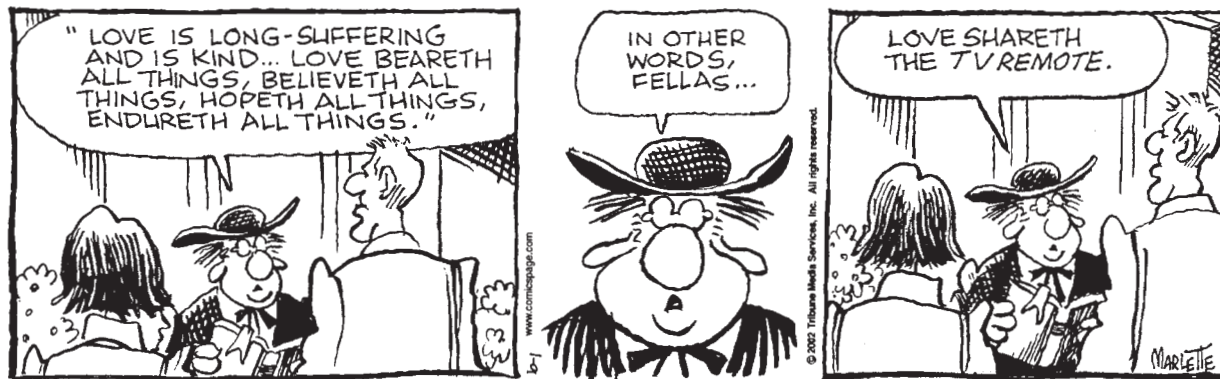
world of Jesus' day for baby girls. They did not receive the care and attention that baby boys got. They would die of exposure to the elements, a first-century form of passive euthanasia. Women generally married while teenagers, bore children, and died young. The average life expectancy of a woman in biblical times was 34 years (*Oxford Companion to the Bible*). Frequently, women died in childbirth.

In short, most women lived in slavery or near-poverty, and worked very hard for wages for their own economic survival, and that of their families. Prostitution was a common vocation for a single or widowed woman. This woman may have been essentially a slave or sexual concubine working for a man who was farming the valley below Mt. Gerazim. She has come to the nearby well of Jacob to fetch water for her master and his men. This woman has nothing.

However, it gets even worse. She is not emotionally well. Who would be in her shoes? She had been married and divorced five times and was caught in a destructive cycle of serial marriages.

Here she was again in another relationship. It was not a healthy, mutual partnership with a man, but just something that would help her barely hang on financially. She had been there five times before and was stuck. This woman was addicted to abusive, self-centered, narcissistic men who had treated her so badly that she long ago had lost any semblance of self. She had no time for herself. She was not important. She would do almost anything to put food in the mouths of her babies, even sell her body, or her soul.

This woman is the profile of battered women. She is Alice Walker's *Celie*, in *The Color Purple*—so used and discarded so frequently at such a young age—she thinks it is just a normal



existence for a girl.

She is a typical client of Women's Protective Services. She reminds me of a woman in my country church in Kentucky who kept reporting to me her husband's abuse. I finally believed her after a nurse at the hospital called to tell me to come quickly because her husband had bashed in her head with a stick of firewood. Maybe this woman had no fresh cuts or bruises, but Jesus saw plenty of woundedness in her. She was young, yet she felt like she had been going through hell for five lifetimes.

However, it still gets worse! This poor, beaten-down ghost of a woman is also a Samaritan—a mongrel race of half-Jews in the Northern Kingdom who had intermarried Syrians after the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C. They worshiped Yahweh, but not like their kinspersons to the south. The Samaritans constructed a temple on Mt. Gerazim to rival the temple in Jerusalem. They were the Jews' fiercest opponents. They were like today's cross-town rivals.

These Samaritan enemies often attacked and robbed travelers from Galilee going on pilgrimages to Jerusalem. In the minds of the Jews, they were a hated, despised and worthless race. As the region between Galilee and Judea, Jews considered Samaria particularly susceptible to outside corrupting influences. Conversely, Samaritans considered Jews heretics, especially in dietary laws and worship practices. There was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans.

So, not only was this human being a woman, she was a poor woman. Not only was she a poor woman, she was an abused woman. Not only was she a poor and abused woman, but also a member of an oppressed minority. In short, the woman at the well was socially disenfranchised, religiously ostracized, economically marginalized, and emotionally victimized. In this unhappy regard, she was not terribly different from many women in the world today. This was a woman who had nothing.

Small wonder the text says that Jesus had to go through Samaria. Agape love compelled him to do so. His entire force of being motivated him toward Samaria.

Jesus went directly through Samaria for evangelistic reasons. He needed to "good news" somebody. Jesus had an intuition that someone in Samaria needed a word of hope and acceptance. Jesus had to go through Samaria because he sensed someone there was at the end of her rope, at the dead-end of life, and needed a way out with God's love. Jesus was constrained to go through Samaria because there was somebody there who needed to hear that they should never put a period where God only puts a comma.

Are we making our way through Samaria? Are we going to those places that are rough and dangerous? Are we taking the gospel of Christ to those regions in our city, state, nation and world that we have concluded to be inaccessible and inhospitable? Maybe we have a keen interest at stake in doing so.

Philadelphia African-American minister Eugene Rivers tells about the day the street gangs burst into his worship service, bringing their drug war from the inner city. Shots rang

out. They riddled the sanctuary with bullets and killed two people. Shortly after that, Pastor Rivers commented, "Unless the church is willing to go out into the streets, the streets will come into the church."

Jesus went through Samaria because he knew full well that every sinner had a future and every saint has a past. As Augustine said, "There are at least as many sheep outside the fold as there are wolves within."

When Jesus saw the Samaritan woman, he spotted a sheep outside the fold. The text says that Jesus was tired out because of his journey, so he took a rest beside Jacob's well. It was only noon. Jesus had been walking for a few hours, but not far enough to tax a strapping young 30-year-old man.

No, Jesus was not so much tired in his body, as he was in his spirit. He was tired of sexism that demeaned and denigrated women. He was tired of poverty that robbed women and children of their dignity. He was tired of racism that judged a human being by his skin color rather than the strength of his character.

He was tired of social patterns and religious traditions that put down women and kept them from enjoying full partnership. Jesus was tired. Like Rosa Parks whose courageous stance started the Birmingham bus boycotts, Jesus too was "sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Because Jesus had no bucket or rope with which to draw water, he asked the Samaritan woman for a drink. Not only did he speak in public to this half-breed, half-Jew, half-whore, half-person, he even drank after her.

Jesus was no doubt familiar with the rabbinical saying, "A man should hold no conversation with a woman in the street, not even his own wife, still less with any other woman, lest men should gossip." Or, this saying from the Mishnah, "He that eats the bread of Samaritans is like one that eats the flesh of swine" (*Interpreter's Bible*).

Immediately, when Jesus spoke to the woman she recognized his Galilean accent. She identified him as a Jew, and wondered just what in the world was going on that this Jewish man was speaking to a Samaritan woman in broad daylight.

Jesus cranked into gear with his unique brand of unconditional love. A love that had no strings attached. A love that transcended every conceivable human barrier and boundary. He gave a love that was perfectly willing to break rules and shatter convention to convey its power to others.

Jesus knows that authentic agape love is always inclusive rather than exclusive. It invites people in rather than boxing people out. Several years ago, I told my congregation after yet another abysmally low attendance at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, that our mother denomination had excluded so many folks, liberals, moderates, Masons, women, homosexuals and even Mickey Mouse—that soon they could hold their annual meeting in a phone booth in Muleshoe.

The Lubbock newspaper picked up this quote and a woman from Muleshoe called me and asked, "Pastor, what makes you think the Southern Baptist Convention would be welcome in Muleshoe?"

Agape love is always inclusive, never exclusive, and God does the culling, not us. My favorite parable is one of our Lord's shortest: "The kingdom of God is like a great fishnet and all different kinds of fish are hauled in."

Jesus was modeling the courageous inclusiveness of the kingdom. He was geographically inclusive by going out into Samaria and Judea rather than staying right around the spiritual capital city of Jerusalem. He was gender inclusive by engaging a woman.

He was theologically inclusive by making a friendship with a Gerazim worshiper. He was economically inclusive by identifying with a poor person. He was racially inclusive by loving a Samaritan and morally inclusive by embracing a woman of ill repute.

There is only one reason anyone should believe what we say about Jesus, and that is: that we love with the same kind of sweeping, exhaustive, unconditional love with which Jesus loved. For God's sake, let us quit telling folks how much more we believe the Bible than the fundamentalists do. Let us quit telling folks how much more we hate sin than the fundamentalists do.

We must stop being reactive to the SBC and its policies of exclusion and pathologies of control. We must boldly call Texas Baptists to the inclusive love of Jesus Christ. The SBC is an old, dead wineskin that cannot hold the new wine of Christ's global gospel in today's world. We must discard it and adopt a new wineskin for the combustible, dynamic gospel that is fermenting and maturing among us.

I long for the day when the BGCT quits defending itself and launches out with abandon into the courageous mission of Christ's inclusive gospel, calling Texas Baptists to such a great vision that only the power of God can accomplish it.

Let us resolve that no child in Texas will go to bed hungry and put that resolution in full-page ads across the state. Let us resolve that we will take every unwanted child to raise with love and care, and put that in full-page ads across our state. Let us resolve that we will undo racism in our land and put that in full-page ads across our state.

And let us resolve that we will support missionaries who want to go into the world with the inclusive love of Christ. Let us raise the money to do so and put it in full-page ads across our state. Then folks will see that we mean business about having no creature separated from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus gave this woman the Living Water that so thoroughly quenched the aching and longing and restlessness inside her soul. With it, she would never thirst again for the temporary security of an abusive relationship. Indeed, this Living Water is a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

Jesus taught the woman true worship, which is that devotion that knows neither Mt. Gerazim nor Mt. Zion, neither Shechem nor Jerusalem, neither Samaria nor Judea, nor any other human institution, nor any creed, nor any ritual, nor any tradition, nor any doctrine. It is a true worship that is done in the Spirit and in the truth that "Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." So, "Present yourself as a

living sacrifice, wholly acceptable unto God who is your reasonable service."

Jesus made the woman into a bold witness, perhaps the first evangelist of John's gospel. She was so excited to proclaim her newfound faith in Jesus Christ that she left her water jugs at the well and raced back into town.

She forgot her menial servitude to her man, because she had found a new Master. A Master who will never mistreat or abuse or neglect her, who related so keenly to her that she knows her story even before she tells it. Twice she said, "He told me everything I have ever done." Though the text does not say it explicitly, we all know what she said after that: "And he loves me anyway! And he loves me anyway!"

The woman who had nothing had gained everything she would ever need.

Fred Craddock tells the story of the young boy in East Tennessee whose mother had borne him out of wedlock. He did not know exactly what "illegitimate" meant, but he knew it was not something good. The scorn and rejection that befell his mother in that small mountain town fell upon him too.

About the only public place he ever cared to go in that town was to the church, and he was not very public about that. He would slip in every Sunday after the invocation and take a seat on the back pew, then slip out when they pronounced the benediction. He went because he loved the preacher. He was mesmerized by that preacher. The pastor was tall, stately with long white hair and a long white beard, and a deep voice.

When he spoke, it seemed he might have been speaking the Word of God himself. One day when the boy quietly slipped into the back of the church he saw that the two rear pews were already full, as were the next two pews and the next two. He had to sit in the fourth or fifth pew. The old preacher spoke with particular eloquence and cogency on that particular day.

It seemed he looked straight at the lad during the sermon. When the service was over and the benediction was spoken, the boy stepped out into the aisle to leave. However, two men shaking hands with each other blocked his way. The boy panicked. He could not get through to the door. What would people say when they recognized him as that little bastard boy?

Then, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He slowly turned around to gaze up into the face of the old preacher who asked in a voice that would quiet the angels: "Son, tell me, whose boy are you? Silence came over the chapel. Everyone stopped their chatting and looked directly at the preacher and the boy.

The preacher, looking deep into the eyes of the frightened lad, broke the silence and said, "Why I know who your are! You are a child of God, that's who you are—a child of God." Then he put his arm around the lad's shoulders and walked him through the cluster of church people to the door, and said, "Go on, boy! Get out there and claim your inheritance."

There is a world out there dying to claim its inheritance. How will they know they are rich if we do not read them the will? ■

Is Genesis a Blueprint for U.S. Policy in the Middle East?

By Robert Parham, Executive Director
Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville

The Bible is no blueprint for U.S. foreign policy, despite what fundamentalist Christians say.

They believe the Bible is a literal blueprint for the nation's Middle East policy. They have announced plans to mobilize 100,000 churches and one million American Christians to support Israel. Their leaders include Jerry Falwell, Oliver North, Ralph Reed and many less notable Southern Baptists.

"God gave the land to the Jew," Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, told Beliefnet.com. "I didn't give it to them. It wasn't my land, it was God's land. He gave it to the Jews."

Another proponent is Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., who told his Senate colleagues, "I believe very strongly that we ought to support Israel; that it has a right to the land. Israel is entitled to the West Bank because God said so."

"Look it up in the book of Genesis," Inhofe said.

Indeed, what does Genesis say?

God directed Abram to "the land of Canaan," according to Genesis 12:1-5. In another verse, God said, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen 12:7). In yet another passage, God said, "For all the land which you see I will give to you and your descendants forever" (Gen 13:15). Still another text records, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur . . . to give you this land to possess" (Gen 15:7).

Based mostly on these passages, fundamentalists conclude that the United States should advance God's promise of land to Abram, better known as Abraham, and support Israel.

So, what's the problem? The problem is biblical literalism. Fundamentalists read selective passages literally. And yet, the Bible literally does not map out the geography of the land of Canaan.

Does the land include only what the human eye can see? Genesis 13:15 reads, "For all the land which you see." If one interprets the larger passage literally to be "the land," then shouldn't the reference to eyesight be read literally? If this is the case, Israel's current boundaries exceed the capacity of human eyesight.

Or does the land include the geographical references in another biblical passage? Genesis 15:18 reads, "The Lord

made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.'"

These boundaries would define Canaan as all the land between Egypt's Nile River and Iraq's Euphrates River. If this passage is read literally, does it mean the United States should urge Israel to liberate the territories occupied by Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq?

And what does one do with the Jordan Valley? Genesis 13:11 records that Lot, Abram's nephew, "chose for himself all the Jordan Valley." God's promise of land is to Abram and his descendants, not to Lot and his family. The Bible provides no reference to the land reverting to Abram after Lot's death. To whom does this valley now belong?

The Bible speaks to all of life, teaching us about moral character and giving us guidelines for discerning social relations. But the Bible offers no literal blueprint for American foreign policy in the Middle East.

Thankfully, a number of noted evangelical scholars and leaders have challenged fundamentalism's misuse of the Bible to justify their narrow theo-political agenda.

These mainstream leaders have said, "Significant numbers of American evangelicals reject the way some have distorted biblical passages as their rationale for uncritical support for every policy and action of the Israeli government instead of judging all actions—of both Israelis and Palestinians—on the basis of biblical standards of justice."

In a letter to President Bush, they said, "An even-handed policy towards Israelis and Palestinians does not give a blank check to either side, nor does it bless violence by either side."

Congregational leaders can counterbalance fundamentalism's distortions with clear teachings about what the Bible really says about "the land." And truthfulness about the Bible may lead to more peace and security for all who live in the land. ■

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Remembering Browning Ware

By Hal Haralson

Our mothers were sisters. Our grandparents went by covered wagon to Monument, New Mexico in 1910 to homestead 160 acres on the prairie. Oscar was a Baptist preacher and rode horseback into the ranches of New Mexico to preach to the cowboys. Bertha lived in a dugout with six small children. She took three Mulberry seedlings to plant near the dugout and the well they dug.

In 1913 on one of his trips, Oscar was caught in a snowstorm. He died from the illness resulting from the exposure. His death left Bertha with six children under the age of twelve and pregnant with the seventh one. Our uncle Dell told me he heard his mother praying under the Mulberry trees asking God to help her keep her family together and to educate them. She did just that. There were five sons (four of whom became lawyers) and two daughters who became teachers with Masters degrees.

Our grandmother and her seven children went back and forth between Monument and Colorado City, Texas, until the homestead was perfected. The 160 acres remain in the family 100 years later. The three Mulberry trees are still there, rising out of the prairie, fifty feet tall.

Myrtle was the oldest child and married J.W. Ware, a Baptist preacher. They had four sons. The oldest was named Browning Worth Ware. The other daughter, Adah, married D.W. Haralson, a farmer. They had three sons. The oldest was named Hal Holmes Haralson.

My earliest memory of Browning was when he came from Dallas to visit our farm in Loraine, Texas. He was my "city cousin." Ever the competitor, he soon was challenging my father in every imaginable arena. Browning was six feet tall and 170 pounds. My dad was five feet four inches and weighed 130 pounds. They competed in horseshoes, washers, chin-ups, and my father won them all. These contests continued year after year and Papa always won.

At the supper table one evening, Browning looked up at Papa and started speaking in what could only be described as an unknown tongue. Dale, my younger brother and I were beside ourselves, wanting to know what they were saying. The language was known as "Zambizi of the Flu-Flu." It supposedly originated in the deepest jungles of Africa. Years later we learned we had been led down the garden path.

When Browning entered college at Baylor, he hitchhiked from Waco to Loraine. My father had selected his first car—a 1946 Ford. He helped Browning complete the transaction and he drove his car to Waco. The bond between the two was strong.

My father died in 1970. His funeral was at the First Baptist Church of Abilene where he was a deacon. The pastor, Dr. James Flamming led the service. The family was waiting to enter the church when the door opened and in walked Browning. The clothes he wore were obviously ill fitting. They were Jim Flamming's clothes. Someone had gotten word to Browning of my father's death. He was on a deer lease in the hill country, 200 miles from Abilene. He left the lease immediately and arrived just in time for the service. Since he had only his hunting clothes, he had to borrow from Flamming.

Browning loved hunting. The fellowship around the campfire with his friends was his delight. I hunted with him on a lease near Junction, Texas, for several years. This was while he was pastor of Calder Baptist Church in Beaumont. He would wait until the last minute to leave on Saturday night. Making the long drive from Junction to Beaumont, he would arrive just in time to shower, change clothes, and step into the pulpit.

On one trip his car broke down at 3:00 A.M. in the middle of nowhere. The water pump had gone out. He repaired it with the necktie he was to wear for church that Sunday and some bailing wire. It was during that time on the lease that he began to call me "Halesco." I never knew where the name came from. I suppose it was some Hispanic version of Hal.

Browning was a prankster. The story is that when he was a student at Baylor, he and several of his friends staged a gangland slaying at the Elite Café in Waco. One of the fellows went into the café and sat in a back booth with the collar of his raincoat rolled up his neck. Two "thugs" (one rumored to be Buckner Fanning), entered the café and started beating the guy in the booth. The beating was a joke, but looked and sounded very real. The man was "shot" (with blanks), dragged out of the café, and shoved into a car which then spun off into the darkness. The headlines in the paper read: "Gangland Slaying at the Elite Café: One Feared Dead." Someone got the license number and description of the car. They had to hide it for months.

Browning's call to the ministry led him ultimately to First Baptist Church of Austin. He was pastor there for 20 years, longer than any other. Many times as a child I heard my mother admonish me to "be like Browning." I tried, but it didn't work.

An incredible chain of events led me to Law School at The University of Texas. We joined First Baptist Church and my cousin became my pastor. The last trip my mother made

before she died of cancer was to Austin to see her favorite nephew ordain her son a deacon. I was later to be chairman of the Deacons under Browning.

About five years after his divorce, Browning came to me and said he had found a woman he thought he wanted to marry. She was a widow who lived in Golden, Colorado. Her husband was a Presbyterian minister who died of a heart attack.

I knew immediately he was talking about Juanell Johnson, who had been one of my closest friends at Hardin Simmons University. She sang and played the piano with me in youth revivals. What a “coincidence.” My friend of forty years was to be my pastor’s wife. Judy and I were invited to the wedding at the First Baptist Church of Elbert (population 20, near Throckmorton, Texas).

As I was leaving the ministry in 1960, I became pastor of this church. We moved into the parsonage. I preached on Sunday and my depression returned. I resigned on Wednesday night. The people of Elbert were gracious and loving. Judy and Jill, our daughter, were allowed to live in the parsonage while I decided what to do next. The wedding was 25 years from the week of my “pastorate.”

One day a call came to the church asking for Browning. He was out for lunch and since this was before the days of cell phones, the secretary told the man they didn’t know how to reach him. The caller told the secretary he owned the ranch at Mountain Home where Browning’s son was working and that Brooks had been killed. “Who should I call?” “Hal Haralson” was the reply. The rancher gave me the news.

I drove to Sid’s Café on Lamar where Browning ate frequently. He was coming out of the café when I got there. I pulled him to my side and told him Brooks had been killed in an accident on the ranch. He was quiet for several minutes. He turned to me and said, “I am sorry you had to be the one who delivered the message.” He was concerned about me even under those circumstances.

He responded to every call for help. While in San Marcos attending one of Ramsey Yelvington’s plays, a woman called Browning’s name and asked him to come to the lobby. He returned after a short period of time and told us to go ahead

if he did not come back. He didn’t. He spent the night in a sleazy motel room with a man who was drunk and threatening suicide. The lady had seen Browning on television and thought he would help. Neither of them were members of First Baptist Church.

I only confronted Browning once in our lifetime. It was over a situation that was causing a great deal of concern among members of our church. Several people asked me to talk to him. I did. It was one of the most difficult things I ever did. He listened attentively and thanked me for speaking to him. He said he knew it was difficult for me to do this. The problem was resolved and the incident was never mentioned again.

He lived the last five years of his life with cancer. Near the end of his life he found his last “pastorate.” A down-home eating place in Georgetown called the Monument Café. He would arrive about nine o’clock and make breakfast last two hours. He spoke to every waitress, asking about her family and listening to her expressions of pain.

We talked about the beginnings and the end of his life: the homestead at Monument, New Mexico, and the Monument Café in Georgetown. Browning’s compassion for people grew out of the pain he had experienced in his own life. His mother died when he was a Baylor student. His youngest daughter Camille suffered from cancer when she was ten. His son Brooks died when he was in his thirties. His closest friend took his own life the day after hunting season was over. His first marriage ended in divorce. Alzheimer’s took his wife Juanell from him and robbed him of companionship in his final years. Connie, his youngest brother, died of cancer a year before Browning.

In his column, *Diary of a Modern Pilgrim* (carried in various newspapers for forty-nine years), Browning wrote: “My friend wanted to see the Isle of Patmos, the rocky residence of the Apostle John. In his vision, surrounded by the sea, John saw release from sickness, tears, and death. No more sea.”

At the death of his friend Browning wrote, “Go, friend, there is no more sea.”

Go, B-Ware—cousin, friend, pastor—there is no more sea. ■ Haleesco



Cross and Community: Philippians as Pauline Political Discourse

*By Jeph Holloway, Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics
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The story is told of a village in which many citizens were struck by a mysterious illness so severe that it rendered its victims in a condition indistinguishable from death. In fact, the worry arose that some might have been inadvertently buried alive. The people of the village assembled to discuss the issue. One group advocated drilling a hole in the lid of the coffin through which a pipe might be inserted leading to the surface over the grave. In case of mistaken burial, fresh air might circulate in the coffin and a revived loved one might call for help. Another group offered a different approach to the situation—affix a spike inside the lid of the coffin about chest high so that when the coffin lid is closed, any question of the person's death would be settled. Obviously the two groups were answering two different questions concerning the same situation. The first group sought to answer the question, "How can we make sure that we do not mistakenly kill someone?" The second group sought to answer the question, "How can we make sure that the people we bury are dead?"¹

What decisions we reach and what actions we take depend very much on what questions we ask. Of course, what questions we ask reflects our way of viewing the world and discloses what really matters to us and how we see our place in the world. What questions we pose of the Bible, for example, and what questions we think various passages in the Bible might address, too often predetermine what we might draw from our engagement with Scripture. As well, what questions we take to Scripture also says much about us.

For instance, when we raise questions about the political stance and practice of Christians, all too often our questions reflect a set of options that already predetermine what answers we might derive from Scripture and even narrow the scope of biblical materials we consider appropriate for our inquiry. For many, the primary passage for investigating the relationship between the people of God and governing authorities is Romans 13. Current research, however, suggests that an even wider array of materials in the Pauline corpus needs to be read in light of the basic issue of the political stance and practice of God's people in the world. The Book of Philippians, for example, long considered simply a letter of thanks for the financial gift of Philippian believers to Paul, might be fruitfully engaged as a document of political discourse providing a narrative pattern disclosing a way of life for believers facing a world of competing political claims.

Several observations make such an inquiry of Philippians appropriate. First, there is the growing recognition that apolitical readings of the Bible reflect more the modernist notion of a separation of politics and religion than was conceivable in the Greco-Roman world. To say that Philippians is about religion while Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* are about civic concerns is to draw a line of distinction the ancient world would not have recognized. Whether we think the privatization of religion and its removal from the public arena is a good thing or a bad thing, it is a relatively new thing and a modern contrivance that requires the assignment of many features of Christian faith and experience to the realm of the purely personal and private. Those who decline to ask what political significance the Book of Philippians has might have located themselves in a modern arena which has predetermined the limited role Christian faith has for issues of public import.

The flip side of any recognition of a modernist split between religion and politics is recognition of the pervasive presence and influence of the Roman imperial cult in the precise area where the Apostle Paul focused his church planting efforts. New Testament scholarship of an earlier era saw emperor worship as a late development of the First Century, only becoming a significant challenge for Christians in the time frame reflected by the Book of Revelation. More recent analysis notes that the imperial cult was both a tool of political control and a vehicle of civic fealty beginning from the days of Augustus.² "It is even argued, not only that imperial religion and politics are inseparable, but that the imperial cult . . . was the very form by which imperial power relations were constituted."³ To refuse to inquire into the political dimensions of Paul's letter to the Philippians is to read the letter from a different location than that of Philippian believers whose confession of Jesus as Lord placed them at considerable risk in an empire that demanded that their political loyalty find expression in the imperial cult.

Apart from wider contextual issues, explicit features of Paul's letter to the Philippians themselves suggest that matters of imperial politics must be considered in any reading of the book.⁴ Paul writes the book from within a highly charged context in which issues of state power have come to full force. Paul is in prison under imperial guard "for the sake of Christ" (1:13). In addition, Paul indicates that the Philippians face

conflict of a sort similar to his own: “the *same* conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me” (1:30). Since the only conflict the Philippian believers had both seen in Paul (when he was at Philippi, see Acts 16:19-40) and had of late heard about concerning Paul was at the hands of Roman authorities, the conflict mentioned in 1:30 likely has something to do with imperial relations. There are no indications that Philippian Christians were being imprisoned for their faith or were facing official harassment directed by Rome itself. As de Vos says, though, it is likely that they were suffering at the hands of the wider civic community due to their “withdrawal from the traditional Greco-Roman cults, especially from the Imperial cult.”⁵ Because of their confession of Jesus as Lord, the Philippian believers refused to demonstrate their loyalty to Rome in the prescribed manner of Caesar worship. Such a refusal would have been seen as a threat to community well being and relations with Rome. Economic sanctions, strained social relations, and even censure from local authorities were likely consequences of the Philippian believers’ commitment to “stand firm in the Lord” (4:1; cf. 1:27) in the face of demands for social and religious conformity for the sake of civic interests.⁶

Such a setting helps make sense of language in Philippians only rarely used by Paul. Paul begins the letter by admonishing the Philippian Christians, “Let your civic conduct (*politeuesthe*) be marked by your commitment to the gospel of Christ” (1:27). He signals the end of the letter by reminding his readers that their citizenship (*politeuma*) is in heaven from which they await “a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (3:20). The *polit-* word-group is used only here and one other place in the Pauline corpus (Eph. 2:19). Further, nowhere else does he bring together the explicit titles of Savior (*soter*) and Lord (*kyrios*) with reference to Jesus as Messiah (itself a title with political weight). But these terms were regularly used in the imperial cult as designations for the great benefactor of Roman order and peace—the Caesar.⁷ It is reasonable to think that Paul in Philippians is concerned that the civic stance of believers toward the wider community be characterized by a prior commitment to Jesus and the gospel. This commitment supercedes and qualifies all other claims, even and especially the claims of Caesar as displayed in the imperial cult.

Other aspects of the letter take on a different hue and tone when read in light of the assumption that Philippians is an expression of Pauline political discourse. The considerations detailed so far—suspicion of apolitical readings as anachronistic, the religious dimensions of Roman power, reference to conflict in the civic arena, and distinctive lexical features of Philippians—suggest such an assumption is appropriate. It remains to indicate how this assumption illuminates major features of the letter.

In his letter Paul calls the Philippian church to embody an explicit theo-political alternative to the larger Greco-Roman world, a world that was itself a hierarchically stratified society

of patrons and clients, overseen by the divine Caesar, and ultimately secured and maintained by Rome’s power to crucify. As an *alternas civitas* the Philippian believers are to prove themselves to be “blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [they] appear as lights in the world” (2:15). As lights providing a distinctive witness to the gospel, Philippian believers are to relate to one another not as superiors and subordinates, but as those united in concern for the mutual interest and well being of fellow members of the fellowship. They enjoy the presence of Christ in their midst, the Christ who’s cross symbolizes not the power to threaten and dominate, but the full measure of humble service on behalf of others and the willing renunciation of claims to status, privilege, and control (2:1-8).⁸ In this way the Philippian Christians will “work out” their salvation in fear and trembling, that is, give public expression and significance to their confession of Jesus as their exclusive Lord (2:12).

As a Roman colony Philippi likely had ample exposure to the claims of Roman poets and orators to the effect that with the spread of Roman power and control came the spread of Roman peace and prosperity. Propagandists of the empire such as Virgil, Horace, or Seneca announced to the world the advent of a new era of order, law, peace, and justice.⁹ Of course, this golden age was won at the expense of the vanquished. As Wengst says of *Pax Romana*, “Peace produced and maintained by military force is accompanied with streams of blood and tears of unimaginable proportions.”¹⁰ If Roman peace came through the vehicle of Roman legions, it was often maintained through the Roman cross. Crucifixion, the “supreme Roman penalty,” was the ultimate expression of Roman power and domination, serving as “a means of waging war and securing peace, of wearing down rebellious cities under siege, of breaking the will of conquered peoples, and of bringing mutinous troops or unruly provinces under control.”¹¹

The order won through Roman power was a system through which the exchange of goods and services was regulated through an imperial network with Caesar at the top and slaves at the bottom of a pyramidal structure of asymmetrical patron/client relations. Favor and benefit, bestowed from above, were secured by knowing one’s place and by showing proper loyalty and honor to those in power. In the imperial context this meant subject people demonstrating proper honor and fidelity toward Rome so that Roman power might be directed in beneficial ways toward a community. Cities of the Roman Empire vied with one another to express their loyalty and allegiance to Rome in hopes of gaining advantages that only Caesar could bestow. The most overt and immediate way in which such loyalty could be shown was through the imperial cult. Both among “the more prominent families within particular cities and among the cities of a province, intense competition emerged to honor the emperor with festivals, temples, and monuments.”¹² It hardly needs to be stressed that Roman benefits would not be dispersed in an equitable manner. There were winners and losers in all such

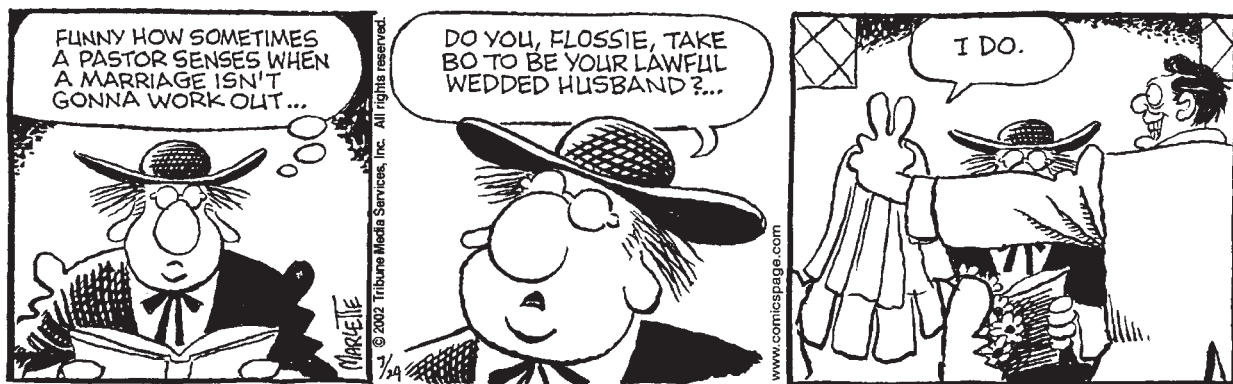
transactions. Fierce competition for imperial favor meant elaborate building programs, special embassies to Rome, and a whole series of honors—temples, priests, games, statues, sacrifices, and decrees. Through these the leading citizens of a city would seek honors for themselves and enhanced status in their city by sponsoring the various mechanisms of emperor worship.¹³

Paul, however, is unwilling to call this Roman order secured by the cross a golden age. Christians in the Roman colony of Philippi live, he insists, “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (2:14) and are called to live as witnesses to a different order, though one also shaped by the cross. Paul’s exhortation in 3:17 encapsulates the main concerns of Paul’s political discourse in Philippians. It serves as a point of entry for discussing this different order shaped by the cross of Christ: “Join together in imitating me, brothers and sisters, and observe carefully those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.”¹⁴ In this summary admonition Paul draws together several of the letter’s main concerns—his concerns for the Philippian believers 1) to enjoy and show a united front as a distinctive community, 2) exhibiting in their fellowship a way of humble service supremely expressed in the cross of Christ, which 3) demands the joyful renunciation of all claims to status, prerogative, and privilege in confidence that any ultimate reward or glory rests in the hands of God.

A pervasive concern for unity among the Philippian believers marks the entire book. From the concentrated use of *pas* language in the introduction (1:1-8) to the explicit admonitions of 1:27-2:4 to the personal exhortations to Euodia and Synteche (4:2), Paul expresses his concern for a Christian community in which each and every member knows the encouragement, comfort, and fellowship of a people united in mind, love, spirit, and purpose. In 3:17 the hapax legomenon *symmim_tai*—“join together in imitating”—voices again this emphasis for united effort on the part of the Philippian believers. The way of life embodied in the lives of Paul and others provides the model not just for individual believers but is the single pattern (*typon*) for the collective witness of the whole Christian community.

Paul’s concern for the unity of the church at Philippi certainly expresses his basic vision of the character of the church in general. But it also indicates a specific concern for how the Philippian believers respond to the conflicts between themselves and the wider civic environment occasioned by a Christian confession that entailed withdrawal from the imperial cult.¹⁵ The opening admonition for their civic conduct to be marked by their commitment to Christ (1:27) is coupled with the first explicit call to unity in the letter, itself couched in military language and imagery (“stand firm in *one* spirit, contending *together* for the faith of the gospel”). Paul encourages the united front as the appropriate tactical response to the opposition and enmity experienced by the Philippian believers in their relations with the wider populace of Philippi—“in no way being intimidated by those who oppose you” (1:28).

That Paul issues his call to unity (1:27; 2:1-4) in connection with his account of the conflict and opposition faced by the Philippian church (1:28-30) suggests another possible relationship between the unity of the Christian community and conflict with the wider civic environment. Such unity, securing group boundaries and fostering group identity, is certainly an appropriate response to the social displacement experienced as a consequence of disengagement with the imperial cult. But Paul’s call to unity also suggests that the initial response by the Philippian believers to the conflict occasioned by their Christian confession was disunity.¹⁶ De Vos argues that various strategies had emerged among the Philippian believers for negotiating their situation. One strategy was that of an effort by some to assume the status of Jews (e.g., by becoming circumcised) so as to gain exemption from the expectation to participate in the traditional pagan religious practices such as emperor worship. Paul challenges this option in 3:2-11. Another temptation was that of continued involvement with traditional pagan religious practices with the outlook that even involvement in the imperial cult need not be seen as in conflict with Christian confession. In 3:18-20 Paul draws a clear contrast between Christ as Savior and Lord versus the bogus claims concerning Caesar and uses the sharpest invective possible (“enemies of the cross”) to



describe advocates of idolatry. This option too is out of bounds for those whose “citizenship is in heaven.”

In light of competing strategies as to how to deal with conflict and opposition with the wider civic community, Philippian believers had themselves become divided. Paul’s concern for unity among believers is directed at fostering the necessary sense of community that will provide the encouragement and social identity needed in the face of external conflict; at the same time he is concerned to challenge the divisions within the Philippian church. And yet another concern also likely drives Paul’s concern for unity in the Christian fellowship at Philippi—the church’s task of bearing witness to a social order that stands in contrast to that represented by Rome. The formation of a fellowship of unity is not simply for the sake of the Philippian believers themselves, but is essential to their task of shining as lights in the world, of holding out the word of life to a crooked and perverse generation (2:14-16).

Philippian believers are to join together in displaying a model of social existence that stands in sharp contrast to the order of the dominant society in which they live. But such a model is not simply one of unity. A community can be unified in many different ways and for many different ends. The Roman Empire exhibited a unity formed through violence, threat, and idolatry for the purpose of securing the Roman vision of social order. Paul makes it clear that the key to unity for the Philippian church is a life of humble service that takes Christ’s obedience on the cross as the ultimate pattern for life. In 3:17 he speaks of one pattern that finds instantiation in several exemplars: “observe carefully those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.” While there are many exemplars—Timothy’s service on behalf of others (2:19-22) and Epaphroditus’ willingness to risk death for the sake of ministry (2:25-30)—the primary model is Christ Jesus who emptied himself and took the form of servant and humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (2:7-8).¹⁷

The Roman cross is central to the formation of the social order called for by Paul, but in a way quite different from how the cross functions for Rome. Instead of the cross as the ultimate means of safeguarding the power, status, and privilege of those benefiting from Roman patronage, the cross is the symbol of and standard for a humble outlook that prioritizes the interests of others and refuses the sense of self-importance and privilege that otherwise can create conflicts that threaten community well-being. Instead of the cross as the tool of oppression and terror that insures Roman order with the divine Caesar seated at the pinnacle of power, the cross of Christ serves as the pattern for the Christian community’s practices of service and ministry. This is the cross of the one who took the form of the slave, the one who ranks lowest in the Roman order of things. This is the cross of the one who, although he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God a means of self-aggrandizement or personal advantage.¹⁸ The cross of Christ defines the character of the

unity of the Christian politeuma as one sustained by loving fellowship, mutual deference, and sacrificial service. The cross of Christ defines and shapes a community of believers who are to live in sharp contrast to the Roman world and who in so doing will “appear as lights” in the midst of a “crooked and perverse generation” (2:15).

Paul asks much of the Philippian Christians. He asks that they find their social identity first and foremost not in terms of their wider civic environment, but in terms of Christian faith and fellowship. Their civic identity must be marked by their faithfulness to the gospel; their citizenship has its locus not in Rome but in heaven; their savior and lord is Jesus Christ, not Caesar. They are called to live as a distinct community marked by their common commitment to Christ and the way of the cross; and yet they live this commitment out, not in some reclusive and withdrawn manner but as lights in the world. They are “saints in Christ Jesus”—God’s holy people defined by their relationship with Christ. But they are saints in Christ Jesus “who are in Philippi” (1:1)—called to embody a way of life of overt contrast to a culture of competition, power, domination, violence and idolatry.¹⁹ It is no wonder that the believers at Philippi were experiencing the same sort of conflict as suffered by the Apostle Paul.

In the face of this conflict Paul calls on the Philippian believers to strengthen the bonds of Christian fellowship, to avoid any attitudes or actions that threaten the unity of the fellowship, and to display a way of life that takes the Roman cross not as the symbol of domination and control, but of humility and service. Such a way of life stands the Roman order on its head and names as its lord the Christ who embraced the cross for the sake of others, not the Caesar who wields it for the purpose of power and privilege. Clearly, for the saints in Philippi to embody this vision for the church means placing themselves at odds with a system that rewarded those who honored the Roman pattern of patronage and veneration of Caesar. The losses incurred in such a move could be considerable and it is understandable if the Philippian believers differed among themselves as to how to negotiate their situation.²⁰ Yet Paul will not let the threat of loss of status, privilege, or even heritage come before the integrity of Christian confession.

In 3:17 he exhorts the Philippian believers, “Join together in imitating me.” The pattern for imitation provided by Paul is analogous to that of Timothy’s, Epaphroditus’, and especially Christ’s.²¹ But specific features of Paul’s own experience of following Christ bear a particular significance in this setting. Paul had known status, privilege, and a worthy heritage as a Hebrew of Hebrews, as a Pharisee, and with respect to the Law. But all of this Paul counted as loss for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus (3:5-8). Whatever things had been gain to Paul he now consigns to a forgotten past and focuses instead on what lies ahead, “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:14). Paul’s own model is that of willing renunciation of all claims to status, prerogative, and privilege in confidence that any ultimate reward or glory rests in the hands of God.

Paul understands that confessing Christ as Lord rather than Caesar and displaying to the world a model of unity based on humility and service rather than competition for honor means the formation of a community likely to be considered subversive and a threat to the Roman order of things. It would not be long after Paul wrote Philippians that Nero would consider Christians as easy scapegoats for the burning of Rome, since Christians were of “a class hated for their abominations” and known in turn for their “hatred against mankind” (Tacitus, *The Annals*, 15.44). Such an account suggests wide recognition that Christians had placed some distance between themselves and the surrounding culture by their refusal to engage in the conventional practices of Greco-Roman society, including the imperial cult.²² That the believers in Philippi were already experiencing the same sort of conflict as that known by Paul (1:30) suggests that they had also become known as “a class hated for their abominations” in light of a Christian confession that prohibited their involvement in everyday features of civic life.

But if such a situation accounts for the suffering and opposition experienced by the Philippian believers, it in no way permits a compromise of their Christian confession by either assuming the identity of Jews exempt from emperor worship or by participation in idolatry persuaded that there is no real harm in such. The cross of Christ is not only the measure of humble service that sustains a fellowship of unity and love, it is also the sign of renunciation of status and privilege that is concretely embodied in Paul’s own willing renunciation of his status and credentials for the sake of knowing Christ (“I regard all things to be loss”). The Philippians are to join together in imitating Paul—who imitates Christ—and maintain their loyalty and faithfulness to Christ even if it means suffering the loss of status, positions of power in the community, or even their privileges as inhabitants of a Roman colony. Scholars debate whether Paul calls for the Philippian believers to actually renounce their Roman citizenship.²³ But such debate might be beside the point. Neither citizenship is anything, nor non-citizenship, but steadfast loyalty to Christ lived out in a community shaped by the narrative of Christ’s cross, even if it means suffering loss.

Whatever the consequences, “Paul is warning them not to compromise their allegiance to Jesus, and to be prepared, by refusing to take part in cultic and other activities, to follow their Messiah along the path of suffering. . . .” And yet, as 3:20-21 indicates, Paul also assures them that loyalty to Jesus is loyalty to “the one true Lord, . . . the true Savior who would rescue them and give them the only glory worth possessing.”²⁴ Paul encourages the Philippian believers to join together in following his and Christ’s model of willing renunciation of all claims to status, prerogative, and privilege in confidence that any ultimate reward or glory rests in the hands of God.

If we read Philippians as an expression of Pauline political discourse several important observations follow. First, the point made long ago by John Howard Yoder can be affirmed and furthered: “The New Testament speaks in many ways about the problem of the state; Romans 13 is not the center of this teaching.”²⁵ Yoder also points to Revelation 13 and the Gospel of Luke as important resources to contextualize Paul’s call for “revolutionary subordination” in Romans 13. But if we have accurately detected the political character of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, then Paul himself cannot be read simply as the New Testament representative of an “ethic of subordination.”²⁶ Rather, we must understand any Pauline ethic of subordination in light of his call for the church to embody its own socio-political alternative. Such does not mean overt, specifically armed, resistance to the power of Rome, but it might mean following the path of Christ onto a Roman cross when alternative visions of the good order of community collide.

In addition, a political reading of Philippians deepens any suspicion that we can treat religion and politics as distinct and separable spheres. A reading of Philippians in light of the political context facing Paul and believers at Philippi renders a coherent understanding of the book and perhaps makes sense out of features that have otherwise been problematic for some (e.g., why the “sudden” shift in chapter three to a concern with features of Jewish practice). If such a reading is sound we find in Paul a powerful voice resistant to the Enlightenment insistence that “Christians and other religious people . . . treat their religious convictions as publicly



irrelevant.”²⁷ Instead we have the astonishing insistence that practices such as humility, selflessness, and the willingness to lose status, power, and prestige carry political weight as they bear witness to an alternative social order. The honoring of Jesus the slave, the exaltation of Christ of the cross, provides a profound challenge to a world where the imperial cult sanctioned and served self-interest, competition, and the pursuit of honor at the expense of subordinates.

If it is Paul’s concern to describe the formation of a social order shaped by the cross in a way distinct from how the cross serves the interests of Roman order, at least one other important implication remains for consideration. In his *The Goodness of God*, D. Stephen Long observes: “A consistent theme in the church’s political theology has been that Christianity does not assume that violence and warfare constitute the true *polis*. Thus, warfare does not signify a truly human nature; it does not constitute politics.”²⁸ Of course, other voices had insisted that the public arena is essentially conflictual and in such a way that leads inexorably, indeed, naturally to violence. If such is inevitable then it stands to reason that the best that can be done is to determine ways in which such violence can serve the good ends of public order. Doctrines such as “Just War” theory have functioned to control and legitimize what is construed as an essential aspect of the human condition in its social embodiment.

Yet Paul envisions a community of a different social order. Competition, strife, and hostility are not necessary for the social order defined by the cross of Christ. Instead the demands of mutual love, humility, sacrificial service, and a willingness to suffer loss rather than require it of others provide the “constitutional framework” for this alternative *polis*. While Paul is certainly aware that conflicts arise between believers, it does not follow that conflicts necessarily come to violent expression. The church is to model in the world a set of practices that demonstrates God’s intentions for human community. When the saints at Philippi embody the practices of humility and love that serve to undergird the unity of fellowship, they are to the world the sign of what God intends and makes possible for public life. To deny this is either to deny that the church is corporate or social in character or it is to assent to the inevitability of violence in the Christian community. Neither option seems to be in keeping with Paul’s political discourse in Philippians.

Can the Philippian believers, however, actually take Paul seriously when he argues that the embodiment of this distinctive social order is the means by which the church expresses its public significance? Are there not more overt and concrete means by which believers shine as lights in the world? Can the witness of a community united in humility and service, of a *polis* defined not by competitive grasping but by willing renunciation, effectively challenge the attractions and security of the Roman order of things? Paul seems to think so.

Paul has been at pains throughout the letter to establish a pattern of similarity between himself, his own experience, and the Philippians and their own experience (see 1:7, 30;

2:17-18; 3:17; 4:14). One significant feature of Paul’s experience of suffering and imprisonment is that it has “turned out for the greater progress of the gospel” (1:12). Indeed, he closes the letter with the subtle assurance that witness to the gospel has the capacity to challenge and subvert the received order of things, even within Caesar’s own ranks: “All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household” (4:22). “Paul either has found or has made disciples of the ‘Lord’ Jesus among members of the imperial household, who are thus on the Philippians’ side in the struggle against those who proclaim Caesar as Lord.”²⁹ The apparently indomitable Roman Empire already has been penetrated by a successful witness at its very core.

Since the Philippian believers partake of grace with Paul (1:7), experience the same sort of conflict as he does (1:30), share his joy (2:18) as well as his affliction (4:14), they can also share his confidence that their situation also will turn out for the greater progress of the gospel. They can be confident that by the witness of a community united in service, humility, and selfless concern for others that they present a civic witness worthy of the gospel of Christ and appear as lights in the world, even in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. ■

¹ I do not remember where I came across this story. I do remember that Stanley Hauerwas wrote somewhere, “Creativity is forgetting where you read it.”

² See especially Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997).

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ On what follows see N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, Richard A. Horsley, ed. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 160-83; Craig Steven de Vos, *Church and Community Conflicts: The Relationships of the Thessalonian, Corinthian, and Philippian Churches with Their Wider Civic Communities*, SBLDS 168 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 233-87; Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul’s Praxis and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 72-78; Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵ de Vos, 264.

⁶ Oakes, 89-96; de Vos, 262-65.

⁷ See S. R. F. Price, “Rituals and Power,” in *Paul and Empire*, 71.

⁸ Georgi, 74-76, gives epigraphical and numismatic evidence relating the light symbolism of 2:15 to the religio-political dimensions of the imperial cult and insists that Paul is explicitly challenging the Philippian believers to become “competitors of the statesmen who govern the present world” (76).

⁹ See Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 7-54 for texts and discussion. Tacitus’ (*Agricola* 30, 3-31, 2) complaint of a Briton general is often cited. Concerning the

Romans Calgacus says, "They make a desolation and call it peace."

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹¹ Martin Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 138.

¹² Horsley, 95.

¹³ Paul Zanker, "The Power of Images," in *Paul and Empire*, 76-82.

¹⁴ On the strategic role of this verse in the argument of Philippians see my *Peripateo as a Thematic Marker for Pauline Ethics* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Research University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ de Vos, 277-79.

¹⁶ Ibid., 265 following Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 366.

¹⁷ There has been much debate on whether or not Paul intends Christ's actions to serve as a pattern of imitation. See the discussion in Gerald F. Hawthorne, "The Imitation of Christ: Discipleship in Philippians," in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 163-79.

¹⁸ See N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 56-98.

¹⁹ See Fee, 64-66.

²⁰ Oakes (*Philippians*, 89-91) gives a poignant and realistic portrayal of what such losses might have looked like, but restricts the arena of loss to the economic sphere.

²¹ See William S. Kurz, "Kenotic Imitation of Paul and Christ in Philippians 2 and 3," in Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *Discipleship in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 103-26.

²² Robert Wilken interprets Tacitus' phrase "hatred of mankind" as reference to Christian "antisocial tendencies." See his *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984), 49.

²³ Wright ("Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," 179) says no; de Vos (*Church and Community Conflict*, 281-86) says yes. Oakes (*Philippians*, 62) estimates that less than half the congregation would even have been actual citizens.

²⁴ Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," 179.

²⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Behold the Man! Our Victorious Lamb*, 2d Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 194.

²⁶ Walter E. Pilgrim's description of Paul's "church/state" model in contrast to Jesus' "critical distancing" and Revelation's "ethic of resistance." See his *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

²⁷ Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 337.

²⁸ D. Stephen Long, *The Goodness of God: Theology, The Church, and Social Order* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 274.

²⁹ Fee, 460.

The True Word

By Oda Lisa Hernandez,
Wimberley, Texas

Where can we find truth from Above,
regarding the one to preach it?
For forty years, I've heard it all.
There is one voice altruistic.
Yet, one man used oral testing,
claimed a million reasons to die.
Pronounced that God would take him,
but was allowed to live that lie.
A man deemed songs with Satan's sting,
who, himself, was quite a braggart,
hid the blackguard in his own heart,
except his Mexican swagger.
Jerry fell well with Y2K,
advising Christians to buy guns.
Then, he blamed a purple puppet,
for holding the bag of its "mum."
A similar Jerry-atic,
whose southern vines produced sour grapes,
he spreads seeds of intolerance,
cultivating vast fields of hate.
If God snatched up all the Christians,
leaving others behind to cry,
then where is Christian endurance,
if believers can't even try?
So who, among these examples,
can reflect God's good in the world?
All have the tongue of turpitude.
Only Jesus has the true word. ■

Simple—No Strings, No Hassle!

By Terry Cosby, Pastor
First Baptist Church, Hereford, TX

I'd seen it before. They know how to work the system. She had called the church that Sunday morning as I was headed toward the worship center from my office. I normally wouldn't have been in a position to answer, but the phone rang as I walked by. I grabbed it thinking it was someone wanting to know what time the worship service started. I usually tell them since we are a small church we will just wait 'till they get here and then we will start. Not this time. The lady on the phone told me she needed help with a motel room or some place to stay. I told her to come by about 12 or 12:15 and ask for one of the deacons. I really didn't expect her to show up. I was wrong.

After greeting the guests I was returning to my office to put my Bible on my desk, and I heard Gloria, my secretary, talking to someone. Nearly everyone had already left and I heard Gloria tell Javier to take the kids and she would be with them shortly. When I went into the office I knew why. There was the lady who needed help.

She showed up right on time. If I'd preached a shorter sermon we wouldn't have to mess with this. Oh, well, who knows? Maybe this lady is telling the truth. Maybe she does need help. Sometimes it's hard to know for sure. The story sounded a little too familiar.

Her name was Melanie. She heard there was work in Hereford (I stifled a smile). She had on a hard hat and wore tattered work jeans. She wore construction boots and had a backpack. She looked like she could work on a construction crew. Rough hands, rough features.

"Just fill out the papers." I asked Gloria to come into my office a minute. "There's no way to check with Judy at the courthouse to see if this lady is making the rounds or if she's

telling the truth—it's Sunday. We'll just get her a room at the Kings Inn. Do you mind taking her down there? It wouldn't look just right for the preacher to check a woman into a motel."

"Sure," Gloria replied. I planned to follow at a distance to make sure my secretary made it okay.

So then we heard her story. Not much emotion from Melanie or me. She was probably feeding us a line, but what the heck. Gloria calls the Kings Inn and tells them that she is coming and where they should send the bill. They are accustomed to us doing that a few times a year. We all know the routine.

Melanie tells her story. I listen. I know I look skeptical, but I go ahead and get her a room anyway. The hotel manager agrees to check her in and to bill the church. Simple. No strings. No hassle.

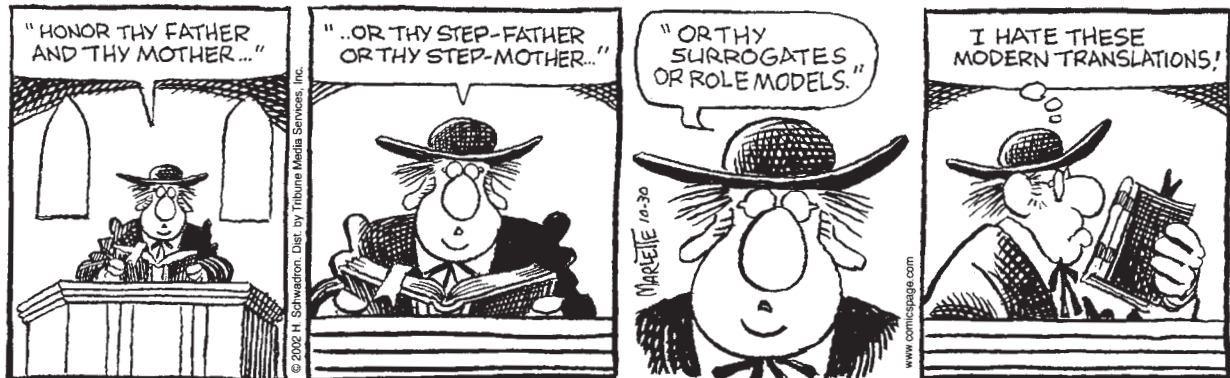
We also give Melanie a \$5 coupon book from Mickey-D's, along with the room at the hotel, which I wouldn't stay in and neither would anyone else in this church.

Gloria saves me from embarrassment and agrees to take her to the motel. We all walk out to the cars together. Then Melanie messes it all up.

"What goes on up here on Sunday morning," she asks? A little shocked, I answer coldly, "We worship—sing hymns, pray, and have preaching." "What did you preach about today?"

I stopped and for the first time saw Melanie's eyes. I never really looked at her before. Gulping down the lump in my throat, I stuttered an answer, "What The World Should Expect From the Church."

Simple. No strings. No hassle. . . . And no heart. ■



Strange Conceptions

By *Martin E. Marty, Contributing Editor*
The Christian Century

The Holy Ghost is a pedophile. No, that opener does not mean that I have gone off half-cocked or whole-cocked. Blasphemy is not my game, now or ever. Keeping the sacred sacred is part of our mission on these pages, and I would not risk losing readers' trust on this score. So why begin that way?

I wanted to try that sentence on for size, to see how it felt to word-process it, to let it trip on the tongue and resound in the ear. It's all part of an exercise in empathy. Calling the Third Person of the Trinity a pedophile is stranger stuff than calling a human, even a prophet, such. But there are parallels.

The prophet in question is Muhammad. As every Muslim in the world now knows—via Internet and grapevine and propaganda machine—former Southern Baptist Convention president Jerry Vines made the charge at an SBC gathering in June. He added as a little fillip that the Prophet was not only a pedophile, but “a demon-possessed” one. His documentation for this was that Muhammad “had 12 wives, the last one of which was a nine-year-old girl.” Current SBC president Jack Graham seconded the characterization.

I hold no brief for Islam or Muhammad and have no interest in defending the prophet's marital practices—practices which, Islam's apologists remind the public, were run-of-the-mill for biblical heroes like David, Solomon and the patriarchs whom Baptists admire. I do hold a brief for keeping things cool, as Vines and Graham do not, and for honest and fair attempts to see things in context. Rip something out of context, and it can be doubly offensive.

Some years ago in Russia my wife and I stood before an icon of the Annunciation. Our icon-expert guide had moved on and a tourist asked our bus-driver what that icon represented. She answered, “Oh, that little bird is impregnating

that little girl and their baby is going to be different.” Maybe that is how communists conceived the Conception, or maybe it was just her innocent half-informed response. But the “little girl” emphasis reminded us of the context of Mary's betrothal and of her age at the time of conception. Here is where the bizarre but parallel notion of pedophilia comes in.

Every anthropologist, Talmudist and conservative New Testament scholar can substantiate what writers of your and my Sunday school literature well knew: If Mary was like other girls up and down the block—and the biblical narrative stresses her ordinariness, her humility—she would have been only 12 years old, maybe 13 at the time. Now, that is not nine, but in our ordinary humble lives impregnation at that age would be, shall we say, frowned upon. We Christians learn to put on different spectacles when we read about biblical patriarchs and kings or about Joseph, the Holy Spirit and Mary than we do when we read the newspapers.

My file of instances of “People Whipping Up Muslims and Christians in Order to Stimulate Holy War” is growing. The one pocket bulges with instances from the world of Islamic militants. It is sad that the file of clippings on Christians also is beginning to bulge. There are many ways to fight terrorism without demonizing what “the other” holds sacred. If Christians want that “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West to turn into a war of religions, the bloodiest kind of horrors which, in the present case, could be terminal, one must say: “Father, forgive them,” but “they know what they do.” ■

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“Whatever things are lovely . . . think on these things” *Philippians 4:8*

What’s the Good Word?

By Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in baskets of silver.

The wise man who wrote this proverb understood that words can be priceless treasures. They can be sublimely beautiful, marvelously powerful, immeasurably effective.

When John introduced his Gospel by saying that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” he laid out one of the profoundest concepts ever to engage the human mind. Its profundity is fathomless and its simplicity is sublime.

Mark Twain is said to have observed that the difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.

It was the search for exactly the right word and precisely the right combination of words that kept Virgil at the hard work of composing his masterpiece, *The Georgics*, for seven long years even though it consisted of only 2183 lines.

Charles Rann Kennedy says in *The Terrible Meek*, “all the things that ever get done in the world . . . are done by words.”

Christendom’s peerless theologian and the author of *The City of God*, Augustine, referred to himself as “a peddler of words.”

Though the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, the Parthenon in Athens, and the Forum in Rome have long since fallen in ruins, their ideas live on because of their words.

A baby’s first word is the occasion for any family’s delight and celebration. After making marvelous little pre-speech sounds for weeks, the small creature one day forms an actual word, a sound that makes sense. Soon there is another word, and then another, until torrents of words tumble out in one of the most remarkable of all human achievements—human speech. In spite of many books and uncounted articles that have been written about the origin of human speech, there is much about the phenomenon that is still utterly unknown and that is quite possibly unknowable.

Words are a perfect wonder.

Gibberish, on the other hand, is nonsense. It is sound and fury signifying nothing. Without meaning it carries no message. It communicates no sense from the one mouthing it or to the one hearing it.

A word “fitly spoken,” however, is reason expressed in

a language that others can understand. It makes sense. It communicates. It carries meaning. It can be strangely powerful.

In coming now to say something about the Christmas word, it should be understood that this is rightly perceived to be a deeply sobering responsibility. Yet it has exhilarating potential. The matter needs not be obfuscated with much speaking but ought to be so simple and plain that “wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein” (*Isa 35:8*).

The Christmas word is *Immanuel*. God is with us. The eternal Word of God has become flesh. The Creator has identified with the creature. Divinity has embraced humanity.

The Christmas word is *Incarnation*; and incarnation is the best communication ever conceived by God or humankind.

The Christmas word is *Grace*; and God’s amazing grace everlastingly trumps human inadequacies, human stumblings, human sin.

The Christmas word is *Joy*; joy to the world so that the pain of birth is totally eclipsed by the joy of new life.

The Christmas word is *Giving*; and we know deep down, at this season better than any other, that giving is better than getting, that it is God-like to give.

The Christmas word is that there is a *Star* in the sky; a Star shining bright even though there are ominous clouds on the horizon.

The Christmas word is that there is a *Song* in the air; and the Song’s pure beauty overrides the noise of braying donkeys, bleating sheep, bawling cows, and all the cacophonies that this old world can dream up and hurl at us.

The Christmas word is *Angels*, messengers of God, innumerable angels over us and around us and among us although the cruel oppressor’s ruthless legions are garrisoned ever so nearby. God’s messengers are hardly subject to our human weights and measures. All our puny attempts to weigh them and measure them and get them to hold still while we corner them and count them remind me of my old theology professor W. T. Conner’s dry witticism that “it’s really better not to know so much than to know so much that’s not so.”

The Christmas word is *Good News*; and God’s irrepresible Good News has come just as fully and freely to

unwashed shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night as to the rich in their fine, warm house or to the high and mighty in their ivory palaces.

The Christmas word is *Salvation*, the salvation word which God had determined to say before the foundations of the world were laid, salvation that is simple and not complex, practical and not theoretical, clear and not garbled, understandable and not incoherent, kind and not cruel, good and not evil.

The Christmas word is that the *Kingdom of God* has now come; the kingdom of right relationships which was coming, has come, and now is.

So come and join in the Christmas parade.

Step lively to the beat of this Different Drummer.

Say *Yes* to all the promises and “yesses” of God that in the fullness of time have found their consummate Yes in Jesus Christ.

What’s the good word? The good word is *Merry Christmas*.

And God bless us every one. ■

The Next Reich?

By Al Staggs

Like civilizations past,
We suffered from our delusion
That we were the chosen,
That we were the last word as regards Truth.
Our wealth and our strength
Only confirmed the rightness of our cause.
And body bags are flown to a far-away place
To bring our children and our grandchildren home
After our cause
And our enemies are executed.
And the bodies of women, children and old men
Lay scattered on the landscape of a foreign land.
But we will have no camera to record
The results of our wanton murder.
So few back home will know.
Few will be troubled.
We will continue to live our lives as before
Drinking deep from the wells
Of the world’s oil
To satisfy our insatiable and expensive tastes.
And we will go to our churches on Sunday
And sing ‘God Bless America.’
But can God hear the strains of our
idolatrous chorus
When the armies of our nation commit murder
Under the orders of our emperor
Who, the world knows, is wearing no clothes?
And Silence has taken hold of the tongues
Of this nations so-called “prophets.”
For they are afraid to offend those who
Supply their gold.
They are afraid not to hold high the flag,
Our flag, which for much of the world,
Resembles a twisted cross. ■

CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY

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