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KUDZU *by Doug Marlette*

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What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?

By Joe E. Trull, Editor

Tony Campolo asked the question at our recent “Red Letter Christians” conference at Truett Seminary. He was quoting Shane Claiborne, one of a growing number of young Christians disillusioned by the modern church’s obsession with consumerist Christianity and political agendas. Shane is trying to live “The Simple Way” (his church) of Jesus.

Shane is considered radical. Why? Because he and a growing number of young disciples of Jesus are taking Jesus at his word. For example, when Jesus said “Love your enemies” (Mt 5:44), did he really mean it? Did Jesus really command Christians to love those who hated them and did them harm? Or should Christians ever torture or kill their enemies? A recent Mercer University/Faith in Public Life Poll revealed that 57% of white evangelicals living in the South believe that torture is “often or sometimes acceptable.”

Or what about Jesus’ “non-retaliation” teachings to “turn the other cheek” and “go the second mile” (Mt. 5:39-41)? Was Jesus just talking? Naïve? Did he not understand the real world? Did Jesus really mean what he said?

And what about, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt 5:9). Did Jesus really mean that Christians are to work for peace, rather than rally for war? In the community where I live, a leader in a men’s Bible study group today sent out an email calling for the members to join him in a rally to oppose the leader of the Iranian government, Mr. Ahmadinejad, who was to meet with a group of Quakers and other “liberal religious groups”—a better remedy, no doubt, would be a pre-emptive nuclear strike by Israel or the U.S. government against this ungodly leader and his nation!

Is this what Jesus called us to do and be? I think not. And please don’t

quote the Old Testament battles, wars, and conquests—did not Jesus come to reveal a better way? “You have heard it was said to those of ancient times, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ . . . But I say to you . . .” (Mt 5:38-39). Ghandi noted that if we followed that old law, we would live in an eyeless and toothless world!

During the last two years I have visited many churches (mostly Baptist) in the DFW-Denton area of north Texas. This experience has been most disillusioning. At first I thought I finally had reached that grand old age of “Things aren’t what they used to be—and they never were!”

Even though this aphorism may be true, the real problem for the church today is not that the music is too contemporary or the sermons too plagiarized—no, the real problem is the church no longer believes Jesus meant what he said!

Two main church types prevail. The first is the modern “non-denominational” community church (though they may secretly be affiliated with a denomination). This type is basically a proponent of consumerist Christianity. By that I mean, every aspect of the church—the music, the activities, the sermons, the mission statements, the staff (including their attire), the building itself—everything is in tune with modern American culture and what is popular!

This consumerist church gives the people what they want, not what they need! It focuses on making everyone “feel good.” Usually these congregations are large, although many smaller churches copy them. They offer everything you ever wanted in life—cafeterias, bookstores, gymnasiums, private schools (where your children can remain untainted by the evil world—whatever happened to “salt and light?”), and sermons that soothe your ego and reinforce your prejudices. The

music is not that much different from the rock concert you attended on Saturday night, with words that put you in a mesmerized trance of “Jesus and me” rather than the biblical pattern of “Jesus and We.” And seldom if ever will you hear a prophetic word about living on earth as Jesus did!

Then there’s a second kind of church—the “true-blue” one that focuses on right belief and doctrinal purity, usually to the neglect of ethics and character. Sometimes this group tries to include a bit of contemporary music and method, hoping to steal some of the growth spurts of the consumerist church. However, this feeble attempt to be “contemporary” is much like putting lipstick on a pig (where did I get that analogy?).

Nevertheless, the “true-blue” church mainly holds steadfastly to its theological correctness—either explained in Articles of Faith that come from God through Moses, the prophets, and denominational headquarters, or a creed put on the church’s website.

I recently viewed such a site and read their simplistic statements about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, Salvation, and Eternity.

Anything wrong with that? Of course not, as far as it goes. But in all eight paragraphs listing over 50 scripture verses, not one word about the Christian’s call to discipleship in this world. Not one word about any of the commands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Not one word about Christ-like behavior or taking Jesus’ words seriously!

And ever since James Robinson gathered evangelicals to endorse Reagan for president, too many modern preachers see themselves as political pundits. On October 27, CNN interviewed a Baptist pastor who was joining thirty other ministers to
(continued on page 17)

EthixBytes

A Collection of Quotes Comments, Statistics, and News Items

“This country will not be a permanently good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a reasonably good place for all of us to live in.”

Theodore Roosevelt, 26th U.S. President.

“As a Christian, I know how to die, but nobody ever taught me how to grow old.”

*Billy Graham, commenting on his final book *Nearing Home*, on aging.*

“The other day I got an e-mail message saying simply this: Rosa Parks sat in 1955. Martin Luther King Jr. walked in 1963. Barack Obama ran in 2008. That our children might fly.”

Roger Coen, Op-Ed Columnist, NYT, Nov. 6, 2008.

“The only thing that would disqualify Gov. [Sarah] Palin from being governor or vice-president, in my opinion, would be if her husband didn’t want her to do it.”

SBC ethics executive Richard Land (RNS).

“We spend more in three days in the Pentagon than for the 800 million poor in Africa in an entire year. . . . Wall Street pays in bonuses each year more than all the world has given to the 800 million poor in Africa.”

Jeffrey D. Sachs, MSNBC Morning (9/24/08).

“We cannot kill our way to victory.”

Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testifying about the U.S. war in Afghanistan, which has killed hundreds of civilians.

“Our country right or wrong . . . when right to be kept right; when wrong to be put right.”

The full statement of the famous

quote by Carl Schurz (Baptists Today, 10/2008)

“I don’t create institutions. Never have, never will.”

*Jesus in William Young’s novel, *The Shack*, which CT editor Derek Keefe calls “a tale of tragedy redeemed, not a theological treatise.”*

“If we hope less, our concept of God is too small.”

Matthew Elliott

“Your victory has demonstrated that no person anywhere in the world should not dare to dream of wanting to change the world for a better place. We note and applaud your commitment to supporting the cause of peace and security around the world. We trust that you will also make it the mission of your presidency to com-

bat the scourge of poverty and disease everywhere. . . . We are sure you will ultimately achieve your dream.”

Nelson Mandela, the first black president of South Africa, to Barack Obama.

“Contrary to the rumors that you have heard, I was not born in a manager. . . . it was actually on Krypton!”

President-Elect Barack Obama,

“I believe in the sun, even if it does not shine. I believe in love, even if I do not feel it. I believe in God, even if I do not see him.”

Inscription on a Warsaw Ghetto wall by an Unknown Jew, circa 1942.

“Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a memory no one can steal.”

Old Irish Proverb quoted at the 9/11 Memorial Service. ■

SPECIAL OFFER

THE NEWLY RE-PUBLISHED MASTON CLASSIC *WHY LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE?*

In cooperation with Insight Press, *Christian Ethics Today* has reprinted T. B. Maston’s classic work, *Why Live the Christian Life?*, considered by many to be the renowned ethicist’s best text. As indicated in our annual appeal letter, CET is offering the book to any of our subscribers who contribute \$50 or more to the Journal.

Also available are other previous offers: an Audio or Video version of “The Minister and Politics Conference” in D. C. in June, 2007, featuring messages by Jim Wallis, Melissa Rogers, Gregg Boyd, and Tony Campolo; a CD of all issues of CET, Volumes 1-12 (1995-2006), 59 issues indexed by subject and author; or a copy of these books: *Whatever Things Are Lovely* (Valentine), *Red Letter Christians* (Campolo), *Homely Joys* (Barnette), *Ministerial Ethics* (Trull/Carter), or *Putting Women In Their Place* (Audra/Joe Trull).

Finding God In The Darkness

By William E. Hull, Research Professor Samford University, Birmingham, AL

Note: This article is an expanded version of a sermon preached in the Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama, October 19, 2008.

Darkness is one of our most compelling metaphors for the human condition. It depicts that inward confusion when ignorance frustrates our ability to find the way ahead and we cry, "I'm in the dark!" It also describes that sinister environment in which foes lurk to do us harm under the cover of night. Ultimately it comes to denote that doubt and despair we call "the dark night of the soul," separating us from God himself and rendering inaccessible his kingdom of light.

Few experiences plunge us into inward darkness like a life-threatening illness that brings its victim to the brink of death. Psalm 88, for example, perhaps the saddest song in the hymnbook of the Hebrews, recounts what it is like to live on the edge of extinction. Notice how many of its images evoke what it is like to live engulfed in shadows: "at night" (v. 1), "the abyss" (v. 3), "the pit" (v. 4), "the grave" (v. 5), "regions dark and deep" (v. 6), "overwhelmed with waves" (v. 7), "eyes dim with grief" (v. 9). At the climax of this litany of woe, the psalmist anticipates what it will be like to die and inhabit the "darkest shades" of all (v. 10). So gloomy is his mood that he can only ask God questions that he assumes have no answers (vs. 10-12):

Do you work wonders for the dead?

Is your love declared in the grave?

Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of oblivion?

Fortunately, these profound musings received brilliant clarification in Psalm 139. There another psalmist tries to imagine if there is any way to flee from God's presence even if he were to make his bed in the abode

of the dead (v. 8). All else failing, he finally wonders whether God would abandon him if he wrapped himself only in darkness, if what little light he had left were as black as night (v. 11). After all, why would the Almighty want anything to do with a pitiable creature who had nothing to offer him but misery and woe? Yet it is just here that the key insight emerges: *God is not dismayed by our darkness!* Indeed, it is not even dark to him but is as bright as day. Miracle of miracles, all of the darkness that we ever experience can itself become light when God is with us (v. 12). Paradoxically, it is precisely in our darkness that God's light shines brightly.

Like the psalmist of old, I was recently overtaken by darkness with the diagnosis of a life-threatening disease, the dreaded Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis often referred to as ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease. Many have joined me in the hope that it might somehow be controlled or even cured but, thus far, it has pursued its relentless course without any hint of miraculous intervention. We are quick to assume that God is with us when an illness is healed but, as the psalmist agonized, where is God when the illness grows worse? Even though God has not given me any good news to share with you regarding the remission of my malady, he has been with me even when bad news covered me like the night. Furthermore, he has been using that darkness to shed light on the meaning and purpose of what is happening to me (Ps. 18:28). So let us look now for his light in my darkness which may help you do the same when the lights seem to go out in your life.

The Sense of Threat

No one could have been more surprised than I to receive the diagnosis of ALS. I had never been seriously ill a day in my life. My wife provided a healthy diet with careful control of cal-

ories, carbohydrates, and caffeine. No alcoholic beverages or tobacco products ever crossed my lips. I was a regular at the fitness center with a rigorous regimen of exercise. I showed up faithfully for an annual physical exam, took all my medications, and practiced preventive medicine. So what had I done to deserve so daunting a diagnosis that afflicts only one in 100,000 persons? Most illnesses can be blamed on an accumulation of bad habits, such as cancer on smoking, heart attacks on high cholesterol, and strokes on hypertension, but what could I blame for ALS?

As a pastor, I had made numerous hospital visits and knew well the many misfortunes that can befall the human body. It was only realistic to assume that one day I would endure my share of these pathologies. But ALS is different, for there is no known cause or cure. No bacteria or viruses invade the body, hence there is no external enemy to combat. Instead, nerve cells mysteriously begin to die, causing the muscles that they once activated to degenerate and die as well. Everybody loses a few neurons as they age, but not on the lethal scale of ALS, which is more like the body deliberately deciding to self-destruct. With my spiritual ancestors, the Hebrews, I had always sought to honor the body as God's good creation, rather than viewing it like the Greeks who, in their language, made a pun comparing the body (*sōma*) to a tomb (*sēma*) from which the soul is liberated by death. But now I felt threatened by my own body, an experience I had never known before, because it had unilaterally decided to commit suicide for no good reason that medical science can discover.

But God is using my darkness to shine light on the deeper meaning of this threat. I am beginning to realize that death is not accidental but deliberate, not optional but essential,

not peripheral but central. After all, everything that lives also dies, whether plant, animal, or human, which must mean that the Creator ordained birth and death to be opposite yet inseparable sides of the reality we call life. If we pray only for health, then finally none of our prayers will be answered for, as G. B. Shaw remarked, the ultimate statistic is that one out of one dies. Rather than being dismissive of death because we are young and strong, or in dread of death because we are old and weak, or in denial of death because we fear its consequences, the darkness that it brings is tutoring me to realize that death is an inherent and indispensable part of life, that dying is every bit as natural as living, that the grim reaper is not an alien intruder but a necessary scavenger of all that lives on planet earth.

Why, we ask, should our earthly story be bracketed so decisively by the bookends of birth and death? Is it not to remind us that this world is not an end in itself; or, as Paul put it, that “the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18)? God offered humanity a paradise in Eden with a way to avoid death (Gen. 2:17), but we had to learn to overcome pride and jealousy, revenge and violence before we would be ready for it (Gen. 3-4). So God used death to end our earthly journey, thereby defining life as an apprenticeship in how to build a better world after his own heart. By imposing temporal limitations on every life no matter how powerful and entrenched it might be, God enabled each new generation to build upon the past yet go beyond it, freed from tired traditions and their intransigent advocates determined to block progress for as long as they lived.

Let us push this inquiry one step further into that black hole called the problem of evil. ALS, like many other fatal diseases, not only kills its victim, but does so in gruesome fashion. Instead of disabling muscles at random, it attacks groups of muscles, two favorites being those of the throat and chest, leading either to death by

strangulation because one cannot swallow or to death by suffocation because one cannot breathe. While medical intervention can mitigate some of these horrors, this is hardly a way to “go gentle into that good night.”¹ I raise the issue of suffering, not to solicit your pity, but to ask if a cruel streak runs through the heart of God? Sherwin Nuland has described in vivid clinical detail how six of the most common disease categories take us to the grave, and none is a pretty picture.² Death itself is bad enough, so why should its prelude often be so painful? As the childhood prayer puts it, why can’t we all just go to sleep some day and die before we wake?

In framing such scenarios, we tend to think of God as an all-powerful and all-loving sovereign who, starting from scratch, could have made us any way he pleased, so why didn’t he do a better job in providing for our demise? But the Bible tells us that God began to create, not out of nothing, but out of a chaos with no “form” to give it order, with a “void” called “the deep” as its only foundation, and with a brooding “darkness” as its overarching canopy (Gen. 1:1-2). In creation God was doing the same thing he does in redemption, namely, making the best of a bad mess. That is why he continues to work on his unfinished creation (Jn. 5:17), having made us in his image so that we can partner with him in bringing it to completion (Gen. 1:27-28; Rev. 21:1).

Which is to say that my body is still a work in progress with vestiges of its original chaos lurking here and there that medical science has not yet learned to tame.³ Having been created by God no more makes my body perfect than having been redeemed by God makes my soul perfect. Meanwhile, God never gives up on what he wants us eventually to become through a long and painful process of physical and spiritual evolution. The cost to God in doing it this way was well expressed by in a letter from a friend: “with all my being, I believe God is the saddest of all that His good and faithful servant has to battle ALS

but . . . He is there with you every step of the way.”

Still we ask insistently, why didn’t God just make our bodies perfect from the beginning, since he is perfect, thereby sparing us as well as himself so much suffering? And the answer from Eden is that, when offered half a chance to be like God, even by a snake, we will break every rule to claim it, then begin blaming others for the vaulting pride that drove us to seize it for ourselves (Gen. 3:1-13). Think of the millions today who pay any price to belong to the cult of the body beautiful. We love to worship our own bodies and, even more, to have others worship them, on which hangs a huge fashion and cosmetics industry. If the Creator were to provide each of us with a perfect body, we would soon make it into an idol to be worshipped, then it would become the source of inordinate pride fostering a sense of superiority over others, finally making us feel that we are gods who can take destiny into our own hands. If it sounds a bit harsh to claim that we would act today just like Adam and Eve did in Eden, consider the strategy of eugenics and holocaust by which Adolf Hitler sought to create a superior Aryan race. God’s ways of helping us cope with illness may seem slow and clumsy, but they call from him an unremitting love and from us an undying faith, which are the very responses needed to make us spiritually mature.

The Sense of Loss

I have never embraced the notion of retirement, a modern concept that emerged a century ago after Otto von Bismarck prepared the way for Social Security. I love my work more than leisure and would be miserable devoting myself to playing golf, taking cruises, and watching television. Therefore I had long planned for my senior years to be given to a number of reflective tasks, especially probing deeply and writing broadly about the central insights that have shaped my earthly story. Having spent many years in demanding leadership positions, I had no time for such pursuits when younger, but now I could give myself

to this challenge without competing pressures, drawing on such maturity as I had managed to attain in three score years and ten. The longer I lived, the more ambitious my agenda became and, having always been healthy, I hoped for at least ten or fifteen years to accomplish as much of it as I could. With all my heart I wanted this final chapter of my life to be climactic rather than regressive, a capstone era that would permit me to harvest the best of what had been growing in my soul for a lifetime.

As I launched this culminating phase of my career, every aspect of my work seemed to converge in support of these plans. My role as Research Professor at Samford and as Theologian in Residence at Mountain Brook Baptist provided an ideal balance between academic and religious life. My office associate, after more than a dozen years working together, knew exactly how to provide needed support provisions. At home I was able to utilize the entire third floor of our residence for a study that was the envy of every minister who visited it. The Hull Legacy Project launched jointly by Mountain Brook Baptist and Samford University offered abundant financial resources and skilled editorial services for whatever books I had ready to be published. It is not an exaggeration to say that I possessed

the perfect setup for what I wished to accomplish. To this day I cannot think of a single thing that would have made my situation better.

But now, of course, it is all in ruins. Everything I do takes twice as long and leaves me twice as tired. I can seldom work in either of my offices and have had to drastically reduce my involvement in both campus and congregational activities despite the enrichment they afford. I have some 10,000 volumes in my home study but cannot climb the stairs to open any of them. I seldom write a single paragraph, much less an entire page, without needing a source that is beyond my reach. Less than a year ago I made a list of twenty books that I had already worked on sufficiently to consider revising for inclusion in the Hull Legacy Project, whereas now I will do well to complete one or two of them. Only those who have lived the life of a scholar for many years can appreciate how deep is the darkness that I am here describing.

And yet my frustration over an unfinished agenda is nothing compared to the heartbreak I feel over relationships in danger of being ended. I mention only three, although the list is endless. First are the friends who have engulfed us with their loving care. They have written cards and letters numbering in the hundreds that not only pledge their prayer support

but share with eloquent intensity their deepest convictions regarding those eternal realities on which we must ultimately depend. They have brought food to the door so delicious that it would make a gourmet chef envious. They have volunteered, even begged, to do anything day or night that would be of help, no matter how menial. I am simply astonished when I contemplate their incredible capacity for goodness.

Then there are our two children and their spouses who were well into their most productive years when my condition surfaced. Having claimed the best of the legacy that their parents left behind, they were now beginning to move into new areas well beyond anything that we could have offered them. Our grandchildren were reaching the end of a lengthy educational pilgrimage and were about ready to show us what they could do with their fresh approaches and newfound skills. The most interesting era for our extended family lay in the next decade that I was about to be denied.

Nearest and dearest in this circle of devotion is my wonderful wife Wylodine. Unlike some marriages that are allowed to stagnate under the weight of many years, ours has never been richer than now. As she put it, my diagnosis was like a dagger in her heart because we were both eager to spend all of our remaining years together.



For more than a quarter-century Wylodine has been going progressively blind from low tension glaucoma, to which she has added a host of other ailments including heart arrhythmia, bronchiectasis, arthritis, asthma, and diabetes. As my work load decreased and her many maladies increased, I gladly took on more household chores to accommodate her frailties. But now our roles have been reversed and suddenly she has been forced to become the primary caregiver. John Claypool used to joke that Wylodine would surely make it to heaven if she didn't overshoot the place. Never was that more true than now when, by the constancy of her devotion, she has shown me a love that surpasses even my highest notions of heaven.

The upshot is that I had approached this stage of my life with the best agenda I could conceive, the best resources I could assemble, and the best relationships I could form to help me accomplish it. Then ALS struck and said, I'm going to take it *all* away from you! Living with that overwhelming sense of loss is about as dark as it ever gets this side of hell. How could God possibly shed any light in that total eclipse of my hopes and dreams? He did it in two stages. The first was negative, clearing my thoughts of false assumptions. The second was positive, giving a whole new perspective on what was happening to me.

Negatively, I began to probe whether my problem was that the world was too much with me. Why grieve over giving up what it has to offer if I were about to inherit a better world in its place? Would not heaven provide an eternity to complete the agenda that I could not finish here on earth? Family and friends might not join me for awhile, but think of the great host of departed loved ones with whom I would already be reunited. Could I not just turn my back on this world of suffering and death in favor of that world of perpetual bliss described so luridly in the "Left Behind" series? Such an approach has doubtless offered solace to countless millions of believers, but it did not satisfy me. Heaven and earth

are both God's domain, thus I could not set them in competition with each other by creating an otherworldly religion of escapism. Somehow I needed to affirm my commitment both to this world and to the world to come.

Positively, I was able to resolve that dilemma by taking a closer look at the multitude of tender mercies being showered on me by so many. We live in a culture of cutthroat competition where winning is everything, whether it be the slash-and-burn rhetoric of the current presidential campaign, the compulsive greed that has brought Wall Street to its knees even as it grovels for the spoils of its own profligacy, or the bone-crushing mayhem of the latest football game. By contrast, every response to my plight has been characterized by loving concern, by a desire to help rather than hurt, by a willingness to give generously with no thought of reward. Instead of being avoided or even exploited because I am now vulnerable, I have been respected and valued as a child of God. On every hand I am the beneficiary of a win/win approach to life rather than the victim of a win/lose approach to life in which the victor takes all.

Once I grasped the stark contrast between these two lifestyles, the light began to dawn. Each Sunday we gather here to pray that the eternal realities of God be established "*on earth as in heaven*" (Mt. 6:10) and I have seen that prayer being answered in the lives of countless people I can call by name. For them, heaven and earth are not separate and competitive but are connected and made compatible every time they pray in the spirit of him who is Lord of both worlds. I have spent my ministry trying to convince people that Christ can bring heaven to earth, and now I am being repaid thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold as that happens (Mk. 4:8). My future is not uncertain, for I have already anticipated it in the here and now. When I learned that my days were numbered, I had no desire to binge-and-splurge on passing fancies that will perish with me. Instead, I want to claim that love of God that outlasts everything

(1 Cor. 13:8), including death and life itself (Rom. 8:38). I am neither clinging to earth nor fleeing to heaven, but am seeking to be God's partner in building both a new heaven and a new earth to replace the first heaven and the first earth that are passing away (Rev. 21:1).

The Sense of Hope

The ultimate issue, therefore, is whether we inhabit one world or two. Beyond all the kingdoms of the Caesars is there a kingdom of God? Is there a realm both of the natural and of the supernatural? Of the physical and of the spiritual? Of the temporal and of the eternal? Of the seen and of the unseen? When we pray, are we actually talking to someone other than ourselves? Whence cometh those whispers of conscience that prompt us to view some things as good and others as evil? Why do strange iconoclasts called prophets risk rejection and even martyrdom to demand a more just social order? Why are so many people incurably religious even when others are completely indifferent or downright hostile?

At present, the notion of two worlds is under fierce attack in the name of secularism, naturalism, and empiricism. Launching the charge in the nineteenth century were Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, all of whom viewed religious claims as wishful projections of the human imagination. Now we have the "new atheists" such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris with their aggressive efforts to ridicule the consistent witness of Scripture and the church for more than three thousand years. Even more serious is the contention of cognitive neuroscientists that we are hard-wired by evolution to think and act as we do. Brain-imaging studies are being used to locate the source of moral and spiritual values in genetics rather than in God. Underlying this sophisticated electroencephalography is a militant materialism, a conviction that everything arises from atoms, that neural firings shape behavior, that there is no such

thing as a soul.⁴ What shall we say to this ultimate skepticism regarding a second world? The problem is that if religion is merely an expedient of our own invention, why is it so fiercely resisted? Why murder a long succession of prophets if all they did was tell us to obey our DNA (Mt. 23:34-35)? Which brings us straight to the utterly crucial issue of Jesus. For here was a person who lived simultaneously in two worlds every day of his ministry. He could take the most commonplace experiences of earth and, in a parable, show their affinity with the kingdom of God. For him that heavenly realm was “at hand” (Mk. 1:15), pressing into the most obscure corners of life yet not fully present in all its power. Because the two domains overlapped, as it were, he lived in earth’s present but out of God’s future and called his followers to do the same. Yet for what scientists might call an explosion of altruism all he got was a criminal’s death by a frenzied mob on an obscene cross.

And so the choice is clear. If there are not two worlds, then Jesus was wrong in his most basic assumptions about spiritual reality as the modern skeptics allege. While pondering that issue, I attended the funeral of a friend at which the congregation was asked to sing “God Be With You” while the family departed the sanctuary. As the refrain repeated the phrase “Till we meet at Jesus’ feet,” I at first wondered if the song were hopelessly out of date in a day when we are so deep into autonomy and equality that we never think of sitting at anybody’s feet. But as I gradually gave myself to the message of the text, I realized that I know a great deal about what it would be like to sit at Darwin’s feet to discuss natural selection, or at Marx’s feet to discuss dialectical materialism, or at Nietzsche’s feet to discuss the will to power, or at Freud’s feet to discuss the ego and super-ego. By the time the song ended, I concluded that I would rather spend eternity at Jesus’ feet than with any of these other choices offered me in this life.

To express a preference, however,

is not to prove a case. I can no more prove that there really are two worlds than the sociobiologists and neuroscientists can prove that there is only one. So let me speak to the skeptics who cannot help but wonder whether Jesus might have been wrong. Measured by the unconditional love that he showed us how to share, by the community of radical grace and unlimited forgiveness that he called us to enter, and by the nationalistic passions feeding our global bloodbaths that he taught us to transcend, I would rather be wrong with Jesus than right with those who offer only a mechanistic and materialistic understanding of what it means to be human.

The scientists who go looking for meaning under a microscope do extremely valuable work that I fully appreciate. But their method, by its nature, is blind and deaf to spiritual reality, which is why they never write a Hallelujah Chorus or build a cathedral or get themselves crucified trying to tame the human heart. As George Steiner put it, “if one is at liberty to choose one’s company, that of the believers is of overwhelming distinction. To discard it . . . is to leave the greater part of our civilization vacant.”⁵ Which is to say that I am willing to bet that eternity will be more like the heaven-come-to-earth that Christ gives his followers than it will be like the scenarios sketched by the new breed of militant atheists among us.

Some shrink from peering into the abyss of death as we have done, thinking such an exercise to be speculative at best and morbid at worst. But life seeks its ultimate meaning only as it wrestles with the question of whether death is a dead end limiting us to one world or an open door ushering us into a wider world. The Kentucky writer Wendell Berry, lifelong friend since I was his family’s pastor as a seminary student, in his novel *Jayber Crow* tells about a village barber who looks and listens for the answers to life’s deepest questions as he cuts hair. Jayber describes one such moment of transformative insight:

“One of your customers, one of

your neighbors (let us say), is a man known to be more or less a fool, a big talker, and one day he comes into your shop and you have heard and you see that he is dying even as he is standing there looking at you, and you can see in his eyes that (whether or not he admits it) he knows it, and all of a sudden everything is changed. You seem no longer to be standing together in the center of time. Now you are on time’s edge, looking off into eternity. And this man, your foolish neighbor, your friend and brother, has shed somehow the laughter that has followed him through the world, and has assumed the dignity and the strangeness of a traveler departing forever.”⁶

I am no longer standing together with you in the center of time. Rather, I am now “on time’s edge, looking off into eternity.” What invincible surmises will you bring when summoned to that boundary?

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- 1 Adapted from Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas, 1934-1952*, (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1971), 128.
 - 2 Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).
 - 3 The word for “darkness” used four times in Psalm 139:11-121 is elsewhere associated with the forces of chaos and death (Job 12:22; 17:12-13; Psalm 23:4, and especially Psalm 88:6, 12, 18).
 - 4 A remarkably prescient introduction to the spiritual implications of this neuroscience as anticipated in E. O. Wilson’s work on sociobiology is Tom Wolfe, “Sorry, But Your Soul Just Died,” *Forbes*, Dec. 2, 1996, 210-223.
 - 5 George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), 181.
 - 6 Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2000), 129.

Making Peace! An Advent Sermon: Isaiah 2:1-5

By Austin M. Dennis, Pastor, FBC, Mt. Gilead, NC

Less than a decade after WWII, as the world continued its struggle to rebuild, the decorated General and President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered a speech in which he said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."¹

Eisenhower said the cost of one modern heavy bomber equates to a half million bushels of wheat, or homes for 8,000 people, or two fully-equipped hospitals, or a brick school in more than 30 cities.

Today, the military-industrial complex Eisenhower prophetically warned Americans against is a juggernaut. The United States accounts for 48% of the world's total military spending. Nearly half of each of our personal tax dollars went to war in 2006. The U.S. spends more on swords and spears than the next ten most militarized countries combined.

By diverting the cost of *one day* in Iraq, we could feed four meals to every child in the world suffering from acute malnutrition.² The cost of one day in Iraq equals the full cost of attendance for one year at a public college for more than 17,100 students.³ The cost of one day in Iraq equals health insurance coverage for one year to 380,900 uninsured children in America.⁴ This is what is lost by beating plowshares into swords and pruning hooks into spears.

We assume Isaiah's call for making peace is not directed at us. We assume Isaiah isn't calling *us* to do anything. We assume Isaiah's vision is too idealistic to become a present reality. We assume Isaiah is describing something unrealistic, far away, possibly taking place well into the future. We treat his words as nothing more than romantic poetry. Read quickly and carelessly, this text calls forth images of a smoky

mountain in the distance, bright light pouring all around, people skipping down paths together, hand in hand, smiling and laughing as they beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Like a scene from Sesame Street, narrated by Mr. Rogers.

By making such assumptions, we trivialize Isaiah's vision for peace. Instead of allowing Isaiah's words to mold and shape *us* into habitual peacemakers, we allow ourselves the privilege of molding and shaping Isaiah's words to serve our own violent habits and practices. Read carelessly, we never see the blacksmith in this text, hunched over his anvil, heating and hammering, reshaping and recasting the weapons of war into weapons of peace.

This is where we fail. We assume that what Isaiah is describing is a vision of heaven, not a vision for how the earth will be under the reign of the Messiah. But this text isn't describing what we'll see once we're dead and buried and safe in the arms of our heavenly Father. This text is describing a way of life for those who will call Messiah their Lord. That means the church. That means us, *today*.

When Isaiah says, "In the days to come," he's prophesying about today, because today we are under the reign of the one whose coming was foretold. Jesus Christ is Lord and King *today*. Jesus Christ has come and is coming again to judge between the nations. He is the Master who teaches the way of peace, who calls for the tools of war to be melted down and transformed into tools for peace by Holy Spirit-led artisans and craftsmen. So the day is not to come when we rid ourselves of tools for war. The day *has* come because *Jesus Christ* has come. His instruction has already gone forth from Zion. The word of the Lord has already come from Jerusalem. But we

haven't been listening.

In fact, we've long ignored our Master's instructions for making peace. Instead, we've placed our hopes in the military functions of our government to bring peace. We've not only failed our Master by leaving peacemaking up to the State, but we've also failed to show the State an alternative vision of true peacemaking. In doing so, we've failed to serve as a moral conscience for the State's astonishingly misguided immoral actions.

We must find a way to show that violently pursuing national interests under the guise of removing tyrants is immoral. Bribing our nation's poorest and least educated young people with scholarships for military service is immoral. Teaching our young men and women to shove bayonets into dummies while yelling, "Kill! Kill!" is immoral. Teaching them to sing songs about mutilating their enemies is immoral. Leaving returning veterans to fend for themselves, neglecting to help them when they become homeless, cooping them up in dilapidated hospitals, often rejecting their pleas for psychological and medical care is immoral. Calling dead Iraqi children "collateral damage" is immoral and demonic. And not only have substantial numbers of American churches ignored these immoral actions, many continue to defend and applaud the Masters of these murderous arts and crafts.

The documentary, *Why We Fight*, shows how prevalent our country's military contracts have become in the everyday lives of Americans. In one scene a reporter visits the Raytheon bomb factory and interviews one of the workers, an older woman. As they interview her, she is guiding a huge bomb down an assembly line. She says, "When I see something explode," she admits, "I think, 'Did my hands help make that?'" Then she says, "I guess I'd

rather be helping Santa make toys.”⁵

It’s as though we’re such good students of the master crafters of war, even we Christians can’t imagine an alternative kind of life, one in which we *don’t* have to work for a bomb factory.

Professor of preaching at Duke Divinity, Richard Lischer, said in his Lyman Beecher Lectures that during this period of war with Iraq “we have learned more from media analysts about strategic weaponry and military tactics than we can possibly absorb. But morally, we have learned nothing. We know what we *can* do but are ignorant of what we *ought* to do. We don’t even have a language for discussing our ignorance.”⁶

I believe we don’t have the language because we’ve chosen the wrong Master. Without the true Master’s language, we can’t imagine alternatives to violence. Without learning the word of the Lord, Christians can’t have “minds worth making up.”⁷

If we allow the State to be the masters of our imaginations, we forfeit the ability to have our imaginations shaped by the words of the prophets and the words of our Savior. If we leave it to the generals of war to be our masters, we end up rejecting Jesus as our true Master. We can’t worship two

Masters. Remember, Matthew says we will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other (6:24). We cannot serve the Master Jesus *and* the masters of war. So who’ll be our master craftsman? The one who harnesses our fear of terrorists, or the One who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers”?

When I was in Israel in 1999, I toured glassblower shops in Jericho. Extraordinarily complex creations adorned the walls ready to be sold. Multi-faceted, crystal-clear (or beautifully colored) cups, plates, figurines, vases. These glass smiths would sit on benches with long pipes extending into kilns burning upwards of 3000 degrees Fahrenheit, exhaling expertly into the molten glass hanging delicately from the ends of their instruments and tools. But what was most impressive about these craftsmen was that their work has remained virtually unchanged since glassblowing was invented two millennia ago. The earliest blown glass discovered was found near Jerusalem. Glassblowing began in the Middle East, and Arabs are still among the experts in the world in their craft. They’re the original master craftsmen of this beautiful art.

But the reason they’re masters is because they were first *students of a mas-*

ter. For years or even decades, before they could become a master, they had to sit beside the master and learn how to use the tools. How to inhale and exhale into the molten glass. How to mold and shape the glass. How to purify or color the glass. And even how to use the words and name the instruments and methods of their craft.⁸

It’s the same with all arts and crafts, all subjects and sports. We can’t master anything unless we sit beside a master first. We allow this form of learning to inform nearly every aspect of our lives. We know we can’t learn how to read unless someone first teaches us the alphabet and reads to us. We know we can’t learn how to dance unless we have a choreographer and an instructor. We know we can’t learn to throw a football until someone shows us how to place our fingers over the laces.

In the same way, we can’t learn to be peacemakers unless someone shows us how to follow the One who said, “Love your enemies,” the master craftsman who teaches us to use the words and name the instruments and methods of making peace.

Many of you are thinking, “Of course, we all want peace. But this is the real world, and what you’re saying isn’t realistic.” But I believe we can’t do anything realistic until we do some-



thing eucharistic. We can't learn how to commune with one another in peace until we take communion and pass the peace. If Jesus is the *real* master craftsman of peace, how can our communion with him not teach us how to do something eternally realistic?

The first way we learn how to do something realistic is by sharing the Lord's Supper. The Eucharist—its language and choreography—is the central formational practice by which we learn to become peacemakers.

Like a blacksmith hunched over an anvil, the pastor leans over the altar table to bless the bread and the cup. The pastor breaks the bread, which is Christ's body, and pours out the wine from the cup, which is Christ's freely, non-violently given blood. In this act of breaking and pouring, we imitate our Master, Jesus, who did this for his first disciples on the last night of his life. By imitating him, we perform a sacrament that teaches us what it looks like to be formed into the likeness of Christ.

But it is what happens next that completes the change in us from the outside in. We ingest the broken body, thereby becoming joined to it. We ingest the poured out blood, enabling it to flow in our own veins.

Do we know what this means for

us? It means we become part of the Body and Blood that would rather be broken and poured out than resort to violence to get its way. It means we become part of Him who doesn't resist when his enemies arrest him, beat him, mock him, and crucify him. It means we come under the direction of a Master whom God raises from the dead in spite of the world's attempt to get rid of him. But it also means if we're joined to such Body and Blood, we can do no other, if we are faithful, than imitate its brokenness and its willingness to be poured out, even if our enemies are the ones shedding our blood. To live any other way is to reject communion with Jesus. If we live any other way, his Body rejects us. Then the only way to be rejoined with him is through confession, repentance, and a return to the Table to ingest again the broken Body and poured out Blood.

Certainly this way of life is hard to bear. But we see everyday the terrible costs that the artisans of war inflict on the world. The hardness of *these* costs are *unbearable*.

Our calling as Christians to embody Isaiah's vision of artisans of peace is one of urgency. Listen, then, as the Master Craftsman invites us to his table. Come eat the bread, his

body, and drink the wine, his blood. Practice again the art and craft of peacemaking, under the tutelage of the crucified Master we're called to love and to follow. ■

- 1 Eisenhower, Dwight D., "The Chance for Peace" (Washington, D.C. April 16, 1953) pub. online at <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/speeches/rhetoric/ikechanc.htm>.
- 2 BBC, 2005.
- 3 The College Board. *Trends in College Pricing 2004*.
- 4 Kaiser Family Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, May 2004.
- 5 *Why We Fight* (Eugene Jarecki. BBC Storyville, 2005) Digital Video Disc, 98 min.
- 6 Lischer, Richard, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 16.
- 7 Hauerwas, Stanley, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 98.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 93-111.



The Red Letter Christians Conference

By Charles Kiker, Tullia, TX

Thanks to *Christian Ethics Today* for sponsoring the Christian ethics conference on the campus of Truett Seminary of Baylor University on September 16-17. Thanks also to the CIOS/Piper Foundation of Waco for making the conference possible at reasonable cost to those attending.

Alan Bean (Executive Director of *Friends of Justice*) and I attended the conference. Although Editor Joe Trull seemed to be pleased with the attendance, saying it was the best of the three sponsored so far by the Christian Ethics Today Foundation, I personally expected a higher attendance. The attendees were mostly older, with a smattering of Truett Seminary students. Truett faculty members were conspicuous by their absence. It was an ethics conference, and Truett currently has no ethics department, although reportedly they are in search for someone to teach ethics and missions.

The conference, while it seemed to lack a unifying theme, was advertised in the brochure as *Red Letter Christians, An Emerging Evangelical Center, and Public Policy Issues*. The brochure, and the list of presenters, enticed me to make the trip from Tullia to attend. I do not regret the time nor the expenditure.

James Dunn gave his characteristically enthusiastic and well informed presentations regarding church and state, and by extension, the place of religion in politics. Dunn is a vocal advocate of separation of church and state, but, he insists, that does not mean that evangelical Christians should not be involved in politics.

David Gushee, Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University, was expected to represent the “emerging evangelical center.” This emerging group would avoid both the extremes of the Christian right, represented by such as James Dobson, Pat Robertson, and the late Jerry Falwell, and the so-

called evangelical left represented by Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, and others. But Professor Gushee, in his presentation, seemed to be moving away from any evangelical center and toward radical Christianity.

And that brings us to “Red Letter Christians.” What a scary thought to political progressives who don’t know about red-letter editions of the Bible. To these folks “Red Letter Christians” in a red state at a Baptist University could conjure up visions of hate-mongering homophobes, doctor-murdering anti-abortionists, or other religio-politically crimson groups.

The term actually originated with a secularist talk show host who commented on certain Christians who pay special attention to the words of Jesus printed in red in some Bibles. Thus Tony Campolo proudly owns the appellation, and also gladly accepts the designation of radical evangelical. He is evangelical in his doctrine and espouses a high view of Scripture. Campolo related his experience of being tried for heresy by some theologians of the right. They could find no heresy in him. Their only complaint was that he takes the Bible too literally!

As a Baptist (and Tony is a fellow American Baptist), maybe I fault Tony just a tad for his emphasis on believing the Apostles Creed. I’m not taking issue with the statements of the creed, but reaffirming the traditional Baptist position that “we Baptists don’t need no creed!”

Campolo pleads guilty to insisting that the words of Jesus must be taken literally, while those on the religious right frequently do not look to the red letters. But to Campolo, “Love your enemies” really means to love your enemies! “Be merciful” really means to be merciful. This is radical Christianity. It stakes out a position and practice not between, but above and beyond the extremes of left and right.

Friends of Justice (<http://friendsofjustice.wordpress.com>) seeks criminal justice reform. No presenter at this conference so much as mentioned this issue. I think the presenters and attendees would be very positive toward the *Friends of Justice* position if they were aware of the systemic gross injustice, especially toward the poor, in the criminal justice system.

That’s why we were there: to plant seeds of awareness. Hopefully in the next *Christian Ethics Today* conference, those seeds will have sprouted and taken root. ■

Charles Kiker is a retired American Baptist minister who was instrumental in forming *Friends of Justice* in response to the infamous and now discredited Tullia Drug Sting.



Source: "The August Column Inside Our Global Warming: How the World's Climate, July 2008" Center for Global Warming, July 2008. The statistics were taken from the American Meteorological Society and the American Meteorological Society, revised April 2008.

Rescuing JWT

By David Gushee, Professor of Christian Ethics, McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta.

There is a lot of talk these days about “best practices”—a concept that fits the Wikipedia age of shared knowledge and pooled resources. Now that we’re into the fifth year of our apparently endless war in Iraq, I suggest here that the historic Christian just war theory (JWT) is a best practice that can help Christians think about war and help world leaders mitigate war’s worst consequences.

However, the misuse of JWT, especially in the United States, is a common “worst practice” that contributes to war. It happened in the run-up to the misbegotten Iraq War, and it happens in the run-up to just about every US war. Partly because of the abuse of JWT, we are a church that can’t “just say no.” That is a violation of the teachings of Jesus and thus a failure in discipleship.

Most presentations of JWT begin with a listing of its criteria, which are more or less as follows:

Just cause—War’s cause is just if it is aimed at stopping the systematic or long lasting violation of the rights of life, liberty, and community of large numbers of people. This can include situations of national self-defense, the defense of neighbors or allies, or international humanitarian intervention.

Last resort—All means of conflict resolution and prevention must be exhausted before going to war.

Just intention—The motives of the war-maker must be restoration of a just peace for all involved. Illegitimate motives include personal vengeance, economic gain, territorial conquest, national revenge, or ideological conquest.

Probability of success—No matter how legitimate the war on other grounds, the costs suffered in war require that there must be a reasonable chance of success in waging it.

Clear announcement—The government about to wage war must

announce its intentions, the reasons for war, and the conditions that could be met for the war to be avoided.

Proportionality—War is so costly in lives and treasure that the total gain to be achieved by the war must outweigh the reasonably anticipated costs of that war.

In most presentations of JWT, all seven criteria must be met before a war can be legitimately waged. Moreover, once a war has begun, vigilance must be used constantly to assure that the principle of “noncombatant immunity” is being observed, and “proportionality” (costs and benefits) must be readdressed frequently.

Although they purport to be applying the same criteria, there are two distinct types of JWT adherents in US churches today: the “permissive just war” people, who always or almost always support specific US wars; and the “strict just war” people, who rarely or sometimes support such wars. I believe the split exists because there are assumptions underneath the principles of JWT that strongly tilt their application.

Permissive JWT fears injustice and disorder more than war and assumes that war is essentially inevitable in a sinful world. It tends to trust the US government and sees JWT primarily as an elite tool to be used by national security leaders who along have the information necessary to make decisions about war. It strongly distrusts international institutions, treaties, and perspectives related to US policies and offers a somewhat looser or more expansive interpretation of specific just war criteria. This version of JWT is the one most widely employed in politically conservative Christian circles and is wide open to supporting wars that should not be supported.

Strict JWT, on the other hand, fears the horrors of war most profoundly and assumes that peace, though a dif-

ficult achievement, is both normative and possible. It tends to be skeptical of US government claims about the need for war, sees JWT as a tool for discernment and prophetic critique, and believes that international institutions, treaties, and perspectives function as a critically important corrective to US myopia. Finally, it offers a strict interpretation of the specific just war criteria.

I believe that the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament—together with the witness of the world’s bloody history, the destructiveness of modern war, the sobering evidence of how we ended up fighting in Iraq and its grievous costs—provide plenty of reason to embrace strict rather than permissive JWT. Only strict JWT is a Christian “best practice.” The other version must be abandoned.

What should Christ-followers do? **Learn the criteria** of just peacemaking theory and JWT so well you can say them in your sleep. **Teach them in your churches** or ask your leaders to teach about them. **Establish a peacemaking small group** or add a peacemaking dimension to your existing small group/s. **Read, watch, and listen** widely in diverse news sources so that you have the best information possible about peace/war issues as they emerge. **Sharpen your critical edge** as a follower of Christ in a sinful world and in a nation that has initiated military action dozens of times in the last two decades. Assume a starting point of skepticism. Be very hard to convince that it is time to start killing people again. Be prepared to say a very public “no.” For the sake of Jesus Christ. ■

Can Sarah Palin Be Ready In Eight Years?

By Dwight A. Moody, Religion Commentator, Lexington, KY

Sarah Palin was not ready to be Vice-President of the United States this year. Yes, she was a spectacular stump speaker; and yes, she unleashed a tidal wave of Republican energy; and yes, she is charismatic, charming, and altogether winsome. But she wasn't ready for prime time.

To be Vice-President you need to be able to think on your feet, to know what is going on in the world, and to appreciate the way the world impacts the nation.

The interview with Katie Couric demonstrated in embarrassing fashion the depth of her ignorance—could not name a single Supreme Court decision except *Row v Wade*—and how untutored she is as to the nuts and bolts of political leadership—she did not know the McCain record on federal regulation. These are not incidental or secondary issues: for you and me, maybe, but not for a person who wants to succeed to the presidency. They are scandalously serious, and for a candidate for such a high office to dismiss them as irrelevant to the national debate is disrespectful to the public she had hoped to win.

The conversation with Katie was bad, but not nearly as incredulous as the interview with the “President of France.” I sat before the television ten days ago and listened with increased

astonishment at the shallowness shown by Sarah. Two radio comedians from Canada—station CKY in Montreal—pretended to be Nicholas Sarkozy and led the would-be Vice President on a wacky verbal goose chase. After more than eight minutes of premeditated prankosity, they came clean and confessed, but not before allowing Sarah Palin to make an absolute fool of herself.

I did not even know at the time all the jokes these two disc jockeys jammed into those eight minutes: like calling French singer Johnny Halladay a special envoy to the United States, or identifying entertainer Stef Carse as the Prime Minister of Canada, or naming regional comedian and radio personality Richard Sirois as the governor of Quebec. But Palin had bragged that her proximity to Canada counted as a significant source of international experience, and to be shown up as ignorant as I am about Canadian political life was, and is, a scandal.

I was incredulous that Palin's managers could be taken in so easily, that such callers were not vetted more thoroughly—or just to think that the President of France would place a call to Palin. What does this say about the people surrounding her?

I felt sorry for Sarah Palin, even as I shuddered at the combination of

naiveté and nerve that powered her push for the White House.

Then the pseudo-Sarkozy said, “You know, from my house I can see Belgium.” It was a public poke at Palin's claim to see Russia from Alaska. Anybody—surely anybody—knows that a premiere in Paris can not see Brussels; anybody, but Sarah, it seems, and there is no indication she saw it as a red flag, a signal that something is not quite right.

Can this woman be ready in eight years?

She charged that Obama did not have the experience to run for President; but at least he had two Harvard degrees, where they teach you where Paris is in relation to Brussels; and at least he had been to Europe, where his passport was stamped by authentic French officials; and at least he had served in the club of one hundred where important matters of state are customary conversational fare.

If Sarah Palin can spend some time on a few more campuses, and can travel to a continent or two, and can eavesdrop upon the debates of those who know that of which they speak, she just may make it to the center of power and privilege a few years down the road.

But I'm still shaking my head. ■



My Church Has Passed Me By: A Psalm of Lament

By Rob L. Staples, Prof. of Theology Emeritus, Leawood, KS

O God my soul is distressed within me and my heart is sad. Your Church, the Church I have loved and served all my life, has passed me by. Some might attribute my distress to what people down here have called the “generation gap.” That is possible, since I have attained the biblically allotted age of “threescore and ten,” as another Psalmist described it. But I don’t think I am deadened to the needs of the young, since I taught young people for an entire career and always tried to see things through their eyes.

O God, I am sad because it is getting hard for me to worship in your Church today. You know I have sensitive ears, and those booming drums and blasting trumpets really hurt my eardrums. I leave Church on Sundays with a splitting headache. Is this what you want us to endure, in order to worship you? I once tried ear plugs but even that failed to filter out the

worst noise. Besides, it seems irreverent for one wanting to hear a Word from you to enter into your presence with stopped up ears.

And, Lord, those choruses we sing! I wouldn’t mind so much if I could just sit. But they often have us stand up so long the arthritis in my knee starts screaming almost as loud as the PA system. If I sit down by myself, I appear uncooperative. I would gladly stand up to worship you, ignoring the pain, if really worshiping you were what we were doing. But we sing those choruses over and over, and over again. Surely, O Lord, your memory isn’t so short that you cannot remember what we say unless we repeat it several times. Even if you didn’t get it the first time, surely you would after the second repeat. But after 4 or 5 repeats of the very same phrase, surely you must think we are like the pagans your Son spoke about who “think they will be heard because of their many

words,” or like the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel trying to get the attention of their deity.

O Lord, I know I am “over the hill,” as they say down here. I sometimes feel guilty when I do not enjoy what teenagers enjoy. It seems that young people today have grown partially deaf from listening to what they call “boom boxes” with the volume turned up so loud it can be heard two blocks away. I know I should be sympathetic to such physically handicapped persons. Forgive my callousness, O Lord. But do you really want your Church to be turned into a boom box? Your Son once drove the money changers from the temple. I wonder what he would do with the amplifiers, tweeters, woofers, and projectors in our churches, should he ever happen to drop in.

I guess I could endure the noise, Lord, if there were more substance to those choruses. But there isn’t much



substance there. Of course, some of them simply repeat the words of Scripture, and one should appreciate that. Forgive me if I sometimes prefer just to hear the Word read, and hear it in a quieter atmosphere. Or else melt me and mold me and make me half deaf so I can enjoy your Word when it is boomed at me musically over and over through a public address system whose volume is turned up several decibels too high.

I long, O Lord, for the “old paths.” I long to hear the great hymns and anthems that exalt you, and contain great truth about redemption. There is good theology in those old hymns. Of course they aren’t “old” to you! Ha. Ha. Pardon the humor, Lord, but I’ll bet you enjoy a good laugh. I like organ music; it helps me worship. Many of your churches have thrown out their organs and substituted something like what is called a “rock band.” I prefer choirs over what they call “worship teams.” I like to sing from a hymnbook. But many churches don’t use hymnals and the words must be read from what is called an “overhead projector.” And I enjoy historic time-honored liturgies. I like to affirm my faith in the words of the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed.

I know the argument: Young people cannot relate to worship unless the music is like what they sing outside the Church. Isn’t there something wrong with that argument, Lord? Should the world be setting the agenda for your Church? I thought the way we worship should be different from the way secular folks worship other gods. Shouldn’t we be teaching that to our teens?

You know, O God, that I appreciate the attempt to create what is called “blended worship.” You know, sing one old hymn and then a modern chorus or two, mixing them up, hoping to have something for everybody. You know I have honestly tried to worship that way. But it is difficult, Lord, for just as I am getting truly blessed by the words of “Arise, My Soul, Arise,” we burst into a frothy chorus. Correct me if I am wrong, dear Lord, but I believe frothy church music will promote a

frothy faith. I do not want my faith to be frothy. I want it to have a backbone of steel.

What shall I do, O Lord, now that the Church has passed my by? I once worshiped very meaningfully out in the American West where they worshiped the way our servant John Wesley worshiped in England. But there aren’t many places where I can do that. I thought of becoming an Episcopalian, but I find that many of them have also bowed the knee to Baal, becoming pragmatic, giving folks what they seem to want. And Roman Catholicism is not for me, for I believe you are the only Father who can speak infallibly.

I am often told that “contemporary worship” fosters church growth. You know I am all for growth, Lord. But then I remember that some forms of cancer grow awfully fast too. I recall when your Son was tempted by Satan to become a pragmatist in his worship in order to gain the kingdoms of the world, his main concern did not seem to be growth, at least not growth purely for the sake of growth.

Please understand, Lord, that I am not speaking merely of one congregation, but of the many I have visited over the past few years. I love my pastor and the people with whom I worship weekly, in spite of the noise. And I am not pleading for myself. I would not have bothered you just for myself. But most of the folks I have met across the land who are over threescore years of age feel as I do. I beseech you on their behalf. I guess we are too old to be listened to anymore. I hope it isn’t self-pity when we feel lonely, now that the Church has passed us by. But we remain loyal to our Church anyway. There is something to be said for loyalty, isn’t there Lord? As for myself: I guess I can make it, with your help, the rest of my days. But the Social Security life expectancy tables of the IRS (that’s something like Caesar’s tax system that your Son lived under) say I may expect to live another 18 years or so! How long, O Lord, how long can I endure?

Well, thanks for hearing my cry. O Lord. I will not bring this com-

plaint to you again. I will just meditate and “lurk” in hopes of hearing some encouraging word from you.

One of your prophets named Reinhold Niebuhr once said there may be brief periods of religious spontaneity when the lack of liturgy does not matter, such as on the American frontier, but such spontaneity does not last forever, and when it is gone a church without adequate conduits of traditional liturgy and robust theology is lacking the waters of life.

O Merciful Father, I think I see signs (just “a cloud the size of a man’s hand”) that Christians may be growing weary of the recent experimental forms of worship and are turning back to something more substantial, more time-tested, more biblical, and less frothy: Especially less frothy.

Let it be, dear Lord, let it be. But how long, O Lord, how long? ■

Note: Before retirement, the author had a long teaching career at Southern Nazarene University in Bethany, OK and Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City.

“What if Jesus Really”

(continued from page 3)

endorse a presidential candidate from their pulpit, in defiance of a law forbidding churches with tax-exempt status doing so. Forget the tax question. Do they really believe that they can bring in the kingdom of God through a political party?

So I come back to where I started. *Did Jesus really mean what he said?* I challenge you, this week, to read Matthew 5-7 and then ask that question. The answer will trouble you, I think. I know it troubles me. ■

JET

Correction: In endnote 2 on p. 12 of Issue 71, the website of PASCH should be www.peaceandsafety.com.

The Ethics of Medical Error

By John Mustol, M.D., Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA

Surgeon Atul Gawande wrote what all physicians know in their hearts is true, “All doctors make terrible mistakes.”¹ I was a general surgeon for twenty years, and I can testify that this is true. To be responsible for a patient’s life, knowing just how fallible I am, knowing that inevitably sooner or later, sometime in my career (probably more than once), I would be responsible for a patient’s serious injury or death – is a spiritual and ethical challenge for doctors. Doctors are human beings and medicine is a human endeavor. Errors are part of life for doctors. So how should doctors deal with their mistakes? How should the “patient-victims” be managed? What are the ethics of medical error? What is the spirituality of medical error?

Medical mistakes are common. The Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) report in 2000 estimated that there are 44,000 to 98,000 deaths per year “as a result of medical errors.”² Leape estimated that “preventable injuries afflict 938,000 hospitalized patients annually.”³ Waterman and colleagues surveyed 3,171 doctors in the U.S. and Canada and found that 92% admitted to being involved in an error of some kind: 7% in a near miss, 36% in minor errors, and 57% in major errors.⁴ I suggest that Waterman’s statistics are wrong. Gawande is right. Some of the doctors he interviewed are good liars. The true numbers are 100% across the board. The reality is that American medicine is a very human enterprise.

The medical establishment has been glacially slow in facing up to its fallibility. In 1984, Dr. David Hilfiker, then a family practitioner in rural Minnesota, published a remarkable article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, entitled “Facing Our Mistakes.” In this paper, he spoke openly about some of his own errors and near-misses and called for a more open and humane approach to physician error.⁵ His pro-

posal lay dormant for 16 years until the IOM’s report in 2000. This seems to have been the bombshell that awakened the medical establishment. Since its publication, there has been considerable movement in the field, but resistance persists among physicians.

If doctors have been slow on this issue, Christian theologians and ethicists have been stone dead. There is virtually nothing written from an explicitly Christian perspective on the theology and ethics of medical fallibility and error. David Hilfiker’s writings contain Christian ideas, but he never explicitly identified himself or his writing as Christian. I have searched numerous books on Christian bioethics, as well as the literature, and turned up nothing. Taylor and Dell’Oro offer as the purpose of their recent book, published six years after the IOM report, “the retrieval of vulnerability in ethics” through reflection on “the phenomenological meaning of specific realms of human moral experience hitherto neglected.” They wish to go “from dignity and integrity to vulnerability and relationality.”⁶ I read the book with anticipation, but was disappointed to find their otherwise fine book does not address medical error nor human fallibility as components of their paradigm of human vulnerability and relationality. In a paper on vulnerability, Hoffmaster, who also ignores medical error, claims that vulnerability is missing from moral philosophy because moral philosophy ignores the body. “Western moral philosophy is grounded in reason – the purer the better.”⁷ He seems to be saying that Western philosophers (and, I suggest, theologians too) are, in effect, Cartesians. They are disembodied minds thinking about abstract principles and theories ignoring the fact that their minds are really their bodies of flesh and blood, made of the dust of the earth, subject to all the messiness of

earth-bound existence. The Christian tradition and the gospel of Jesus Christ should, I would think have a lot to say to this issue. But have Christian theologians and ethicists been silent?⁸

Our current approach to physician error is embedded in modern culture with all its myths and assumptions about power, efficiency, progress, individual autonomy, and human perfectibility. M. Therese Lysaught writes: “Weakness, dependence, and imperfection are not part of the story our culture tells us about itself; these realities are deeply at odds with contemporary values of efficiency, productivity, physical beauty, and perfection. . . . We who have been so deeply formed by the myth that we are autonomous beings do not want to be reminded of the radical contingency of our control over nature, over our lives, over our destinies. . . . Illness reminds us that we are in fact embodied, hardly the Cartesian selves, the disincarnate minds that we prefer to think we are.”⁹ Doctors and, perhaps, theologians and ethicists, are deeply influenced by these modern myths.

The medical tort system is currently the principal means of addressing errors in healthcare, but it does a poor job if it. It is an arbitrary and coercive system based on fear and it exacerbates the spiritual and emotional trauma of errors for both the physician and the patient-victim. The tort system offers neither deterrence nor timely and fair compensation and is fundamentally unjust to the patient, the physician, and to society.¹⁰ Where is an ethical critique of the tort system based on Christian theology, and where are alternatives based on Christian theological ideas? Here again, Christians have had little to say except to talk about caring for the wounds and needs of doctors when they are sued. As a doctor who was sued twice myself, I do not demean the pain that suits bring, but don’t we have more

to say? While Christians have remained silent, the secular medical establishment is developing interesting new alternatives such as “fair-compensation” being implemented by the Veterans Affairs Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky and Catholic Healthcare West.

Medical error, with its potentially dire consequences suffered by the one whom the doctor intended to help, offers an array of theological, epistemological, and ethical questions. As a physician, I have had experiences where, faced with a difficult clinical problem, I prayed earnestly to God for guidance only to find myself forgetting something, making a poor judgment, or committing a blunder that hurt the patient. I have, on such occasions, asked God why he did not answer my prayer or why he answered it in this way—allowing me to make a hurtful mistake. In a universe that is subject to varying degrees of random, chaotic, and unruly behavior (including the brains of doctors), and when the consequences of one’s error are visited on others, how do we explain the grace, providence, and justice of God? Theodicy is an essential component of an adequate Christian treatment of physician error.

Medical errors can only occur in a world of realism. When we don’t know something or we get something wrong, and it results in injury, was it due to the inherent uncertainty of earthly existence or was it my fault? Where is the line between the intrinsic imperfection of human beings and moral failure? If earthly existence is inherently uncertain, and errors are inevitable, does this mean that doctors do not bear responsibility? Does “ought” imply “can”?¹¹ What is a Christian response to this question?

And what do Christians have to say to the problem of disclosure? The consensus today is that all harmful errors should be disclosed to the patient and/or family. But if I make a serious mistake that does not harm the patient, what is my moral responsibility then? Do I disclose it or not? Is apology required?

Many doctors experience guilt when they make a mistake. Can guilt be objective in this case, and if so, when?

How should it be dealt with? When is forgiveness required and how does it work? How does a doctor forgive herself? It would seem that with the gospel of Christ as a resource, Christian theology would have a lot to say about guilt and forgiveness.

I will close this little paper by offering one principle that might form the basis of a Christian ethic of medical error. Doctors, like all of us, are self-centered. Historically, when addressing the problem of medical error, they have focused overwhelmingly on themselves. Their trauma and stress over malpractice suits dominates their thinking and their conversations. I propose that from a Christian perspective this is misguided. The essence of the medical profession is love—seeking to help another human in need.¹² When a doctor’s error harms a patient, this does not change. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (Lk. 9:24)

I suggest that Jesus was offering a general principle here, a paradox of life. The physician whose error has harmed a patient will find her own healing, not by trying to protect and save herself, but by continuing to love the patient—by giving of herself for the sake of the one whom she has injured, even if it is costly to herself. The focus should be on the patient. This is not to diminish the pain for the doctor or the trauma of being sued, nor to deny the injustice of the tort system. But if we have made a mistake, whether we are sued or not, owning up to it, disclosing it to the patient, seeing to the patient’s welfare, and seeking to prevent further errors should be our primary concern, and are, it seems to me, what Christ calls Christian doctors to do. Christians, it seems to me, ought to be advocating for a more compassionate, cooperative, reconciling, and healing approach to the management of medical error.

Medical error is a nexus of ethics and spirituality, of power and weakness. It is where fragile, vulnerable humans encounter the destructive power of the modern technology they hold in their hands. Medical error combines the moral and the emotional, the technical

and the spiritual, the transcendent and mundane. The physician who has made a harmful mistake is faced with the terrible reality of her power and weakness. It is a direct challenge to her sense of self and her worldview. Medical error can be a wrenching, twisting, disorienting event for the doctor as well as the patient and family. Christian theologians and ethicists can offer a great deal. It is time for them to step up to the plate. ■

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- 3 Leape, Lucian L., “The Preventability of Medical Injury” in Marilyn Sue Bogner, ed., *Human Error in Medicine* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1994), 21.
- 4 Waterman, Amy D., Jane Garbutt, Erik Hazel, William Claiborne Dunagan, Wendy Levinson, Victoria J. Fraser, and Thomas H. Gallagher, “The Emotional Impact of Medical Errors on Practicing Physicians in the United States and Canada.” *The Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety* 33, no. 8 (August 2007): 468-69.
- 5 Hilfiker, David, “Facing Our Mistakes,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 310, no. 2 (January 12, 1984): 118-122.
- 6 Taylor, Carol R. and Roberto Dell’Oro, eds., *Health and Human Flourishing: Religion, Medicine, and Moral Anthropology* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 4.
- 7 Hoffmaster, Barry, “What Does Vulnerability Mean?” *Hastings Center Report* 36, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 42.
- 8 Christiane Schubert, a Ph.D. student in social work and social ecology at Loma Linda University is currently writing her dissertation on a restorative justice model for dealing with the effects of medical errors in hospitals as an alternative to arbitration and medical malpractice litigation. Ms. Schubert graciously responded to my e-mail. She will be publishing her dissertation as a book. Perhaps this will prove to be the inaugural entry of Christian theology and ethics into the field of human fallibility and medical error.
- 9 Lysaught, M. Therese, “Vulnerability within the Body of Christ: Anointing the Sick and Theological Anthropology,” in Taylor and Dell’Oro, 165-66.
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Preaching Good News to the Poor

By Debra Erickson, PhD Ethics Student, University of Chicago Divinity School

It is by now old news—or should be—that evangelical Christians have developed a social conscience that goes beyond wedge issues like abortion and gay rights. Some are even (gasp!) registered Democrats. In the most recent issue of *Books and Culture* (put out by the editors of *Christianity Today*), sociologist of religion Peter Berger, currently Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University, launches the latest missive in the debate over what it means to do justice and love mercy. He invites scholars of religion, and particularly Christian theologians, to reconsider the prosperity gospel that is sometimes related to and often conflated with Pentecostalism, the fastest-growing religious movement in the world with followers numbering in the hundreds of millions.

Rather than deeming the poor around the globe who flock to prosperity churches—where they are taught that faith in God leads to health and wealth—to be gullible, stupid, or greedy, Berger offers a sociological account of the movement's this-worldly values: thrift, hard work, and family stability will, over a relatively short period of time, lift people out of poverty. Those who follow prosperity preaching may attribute their material success to faith rather than deeds, but that is not Berger's concern here.

A connection between spiritual and material well-being can also be found in the early evangelical movement, recorded in the writings of Anglican John Wesley, a leader of the transatlantic Methodist revival. Wesley urged his followers to "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can." Unlike unflattering stereotypes of contemporary evangelicals, Wesley was so concerned with the physical well-being of his poor adherents that he wrote a home-remedy guide, *The Primitive Physick*, in which he collected

folk treatments for various ailments and rated the efficacy of ones he had personally tried. Wesley coined the phrase "cleanliness is next to godliness," recognizing ahead of the curve that sanitary conditions were less likely to breed disease. Berger notes these historical similarities, but points out that the prosperity gospel explicitly pursues the material goods that earlier Protestants viewed as merely a byproduct of righteous living.

The work of evangelical historians, including George Marsden, Mark Noll, and Harry Stout, as well as evangelical philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, has enhanced the image of evangelicals in the academy. And the high public profiles of socially conscious Rick Warren, Jim Wallis, and others have contributed to a more positive assessment of evangelicals among non-evangelical opinion-makers. Berger asks whether a similar re-assessment can be made about prosperity believers and Pentecostals, the latter of whom he terms "the elephant in the living room of respectable Christendom."

How will his plea be received? Never mind that Berger published this essay in a journal primarily aimed at evangelicals; evangelicals eager for respectability may not be so eager to acknowledge their kinship with prosperity churches. Other observers of these charismatic movements express surprise that intelligent and accomplished people continue to believe in supernatural causality that defies rational explanation. But responses of fascination or repulsion (rather than a conviction of significance and even religious merit), Berger might say, keep evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike from truly understanding Pentecostalism's (and prosperity's) appeal.

Berger's line of argument has more than a passing similarity to a central

thesis of just-published *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream*, in which authors Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam contend that the working class is drawn to the conservative social stance of the Republican Party because they have suffered disproportionately from the fallout of sexual liberation, no-fault divorce, and abortion on demand, positions championed by the left. Rather than distracting them from root economic causes (the liberal view), Republican emphases on family values and law and order address the social disruption that contributes to the economic woes of the working class.

Together, Berger's essay and *Grand New Party* point out two ways of condescending to the poor. The first, a favorite of conservatives, is to blame poverty on poor people's lack of industry and moral rectitude. The second, a favorite of liberals, is to claim that the poor aren't smart enough to know what is good for them. Neither attitude helps. Whatever else we think of them, Berger argues, Pentecostalism and prosperity preaching empower the poor. Let's hope they are taken seriously. ■

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Another 'God that Failed'

By Martin E. Marty, Chicago, IL

"The Fall: Original Sin & Free-Market Capitalism," "After the Meltdown," and "Government Is Not the Problem: Thirty Years of Bad Economic Policy," by William Pfaff, Charles R. Morris and Jeff Madrick, in turn, highlight a single issue of the Jesuit magazine *America* (October 10). Their articles are typical of the first round of religious responses to the epic or epochal shifts occurring in global economic life this autumn. There is no Schadenfreude, no joy in the misfortunes of others, in their and most of their colleagues' writings elsewhere in the religious press, because there are no simple "others" when "we" are all in the mix of disasters together. There is, however, some sense of theological relief and release in such articles because such thinkers are suddenly enabled to get some hearing when they "speak truth to power" on the economic front.

"Power" was symbolized in the devotion to, praise, even worship of free-market ideologies in economic, foundation-al, academic, national, and often even ecclesiastical circles by two generations of gifted, articulate proponents of non- and anti-governmental policies which were devoted to unregulated, often unmonitored, market practices and philosophies. During those decades one would hear muffled witness from some who were

devoted to modern Catholic social thought, from often-derided mainstream Protestant inquiry, and from a mix of "free church" and evangelical go-against-the-grain sorts. One of the rare theological voices which got a hearing was that of Harvey Cox, whose widely-circulated March 1999 *Atlantic Monthly* article "The Market as God" shook some readers. The religious right mocked church leadership, claiming it was captive of the left, but such leadership was better known from the attacks on it than on what it set out to say.

The God of "The Market as God" turns out to have had clay feet. One recalls the book by Arthur Koestler, Ignatio Silone, and others, "The God That Failed" (1949), referring to the Communism to which these had previously devoted themselves. "The Nation as God" could signify occasional criticisms of overblown "civil religion" in the same decades. In favor, however, were the unquestioned defenders, often on theological terms, of the free market as God's intended or preferred way of arranging economic life.

To report as I am doing is to risk being seen as naïve or as moving from sulking to gloating. My writings would reveal little sulking about the main trend of economic life; tenured professors—let's not kid ourselves—

live off many of its mixed benefits. I don't think anyone would find a trace of "socialism" in my work. I used to kid that socialism meant standing and waiting in long lines and being wrapped in red tape, and they are not for me and my kind. As for civil religion, nationhood, and patriotism, I hope I've always dealt with paradox, aware of the ironies of American power but celebrating its potential for good and many beneficial actions. What I hope will be seen is that here again we get those once-in-decades, if not centuries, clarifying moments in which the "-isms" are shown to have been idolatries. And in clarifying moments people of good will and skill have a chance to contribute to critical reconstruction in society and personal life.

In one of Jesus' parables that comes to my mind daily, we read of an accumulator who built granaries and barns to store his treasures and made himself into a kind of god. Then he died, having built up those treasures, but not having been "rich toward God." What such richness might look like could be central in America's new spiritual search. ■

Note: This article originally appeared in *Sightings* (10/13/08), a publication of the Martin Marty Center of the University of Chicago Divinity School.



Readers Make Our Hearts Sing

By Fisher Humphreys, Professor of Theology (ret.)

All of us who are involved with *Christian Ethics Today* have a lot to be grateful for. Our subscriber list continues to grow; our friends continue to support us financially; the CIOS/Piper Foundation continues to underwrite some of our special ministries; the conferences we sponsor are well-attended and, according to those who attend, helpful. We are happy that we have been able to carry out our mission “to provide laypersons, educators, and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.”

One of the most rewarding experiences we have is getting feedback from our readers. We receive a steady flow of telephone calls, letters, e-mails, and comments made in person. Whether our correspondents agree with us and praise us or disagree with us and ask us to make changes, they make our hearts sing. We thank them all, sincerely.

No other correspondent has given us greater occasion for reflection on our work than the Reverend Mr. Darren Paulson, pastor of the Providence Community Church in Vacaville, California. In particular, he recently sent an e-mail message that led us to do some serious reflection on the journal and its ministry; we are indebted to him for his message.

His message happened to arrive just after our editor, Dr. Joe Trull, had undergone shoulder surgery, and Joe, who likes to reply to correspondence as soon as it arrives, felt he was not able at the time to write a suitable reply to Mr. Paulson's message. He knew that I, a member of the board of directors, had been Mr. Paulson's theology professor in seminary, and that Mr. Paulson and I are friends. He asked me if I would reply to Mr. Paulson, and I was happy to do that.

Here is what Mr. Paulson wrote (he

has given us his permission to print this, of course):

Hi Joe! My name is Darren Paulson, and we've "spoken" before via email. I was introduced to *Christian Ethics Today* by Fisher Humphreys, my theology professor at Beeson Divinity School. I enjoy reading the journal very much. As you know, I often disagree with the views expressed; however, I think it's healthy for Christians to expose themselves to viewpoints that differ, while understanding we can be brothers and sisters while disagreeing on the "nonessentials."

I am writing today to express my disappointment with your response to the letter written by Brian Gasiorowski in the most recent edition (Volume 14, Number 4). He wrote, "I have noticed an over drift in your articles from Christian ethics to liberal politics. . . ." You proceeded to explain your view of what "liberal" may or may not mean while ignoring, in my opinion, Mr. Gasiorowski's point. You have made it quite clear that you do not like labels—I understand that—however, I feel you are being a bit dishonest if/when you act as if you do not understand what some people mean when they accuse you or ask you if you are, in fact, a liberal. Although I do not like labels either, and consider myself "liberal" in some respects, I don't duck questions or run away from the discussion if someone calls me a "conservative." I try and find out what issue the person is speaking of and address it in its context.

I guess the problem I have, Joe, is this: every article I read about G. W. Bush, for example, is negative. If this journal is going to consistently take one side, and one side only, as it pertains to the presidency, than just come out and admit that. However, if you're going to present the journal as "ethical" than I think you ought to present

viewpoints that express a wide variety of opinions, not only in regards to Bush, but also the death penalty, the social Gospel, Calvinism, women in the ministry, and other topics. Would you not admit that the journal expresses one side of these issues, and one side only? I am waiting for an article that fairly portrays Calvinists; we are not all fanatics who don't believe in evangelism or missions. How about a Pro-Bush article? Although I agree he has made many mistakes, I don't find him evil-incarnate. Do you think all Christians who oppose women as pastors are male-chauvinist pigs who think the "woman's place is in the kitchen"? If I read only the articles in your journal, I would think this is the case.

Look, I appreciate—I really do—your opinions—they are valid, legitimate, well thought out viewpoints that I have no problem with a Christian holding. However, they are consistently only one side of the argument. In fact, they are always one side of the argument—on whatever topic you are discussing. Either write a mission statement and purposes article that admits this proudly, or start presenting opposing views (two sides, at least) of each argument. If you want "to inform, inspire, and unify a lively company of individuals and organizations interested in working for personal morality and public righteousness," then be fair in this. If you desire to "interpret and apply Christian experience, Biblical truth, theological insights, historical understanding, and current research to contemporary moral issues," then be fair in this. And above all else, if you desire to "support Christian ecumenism by seeking contributors and readers from various denominations and churches," then, please, Mr. Trull, be fair in this.

I'm eager to hear back from you. Sincerely, Pastor Darren Paulson.

Here is the message which I sent to Mr. Paulson:

Dear Darren:

Joe Trull has asked me to write you, and I hope that's OK with you. The reason is that he had surgery on his shoulder two weeks ago. It turned out to be rough. He had open-heart surgery about two years ago, and he says the recovery from the shoulder surgery has been much more difficult than the recovery from the heart surgery. He is in a lot of pain, and he has to take pain medicine which makes him woozy. In fact, he and his wife Audra were supposed to meet Caroline and me for supper when we came through Dallas a few days ago, and he had to cancel because he's so sick. He hates not to reply to readers quickly, so he asked me if I'd respond to your note. Naturally you'll understand that this response is mine rather than his, though I expect he'd share much if not all of what I write.

Before I begin let me say that I appreciate your writing. Journals are usually like notes you put into bottles and float on the ocean, and you never know where the message goes. It's responses like yours that help writers to know what their readers are thinking.

I agree fully with what you wrote in the first paragraph. We Christians do in fact disagree, and it's good to remember that we remain brothers and sisters in God's family even when our disagreements are substantive.

I also agree with what you wrote in the second paragraph, that labels are often unhelpful. One of the reasons is that we can be conservative on one issue and liberal on another, as you said you are. I am, too.

For example, I'm conservative about the Trinity, but I'm liberal about race relations because I think that both slavery and segregation are moral evils. I find it useful to think of four categories of issues: theological, political, economic, and social (I learned this from Richard John Neuhaus). The Trinity is a theological issue; race is a social issue. Right now, during this economic crisis, there is some talk about liberal and conservative economic views; certainly the government's decision to buy stock in banks represents

a liberal trend (some are calling it "socialist"); the conservative thing to do would be to let the banks fail. It's not usual to think of President Bush as liberal, but in this crisis he is acting that way, and some are blaming him for it. I think Mr. Bush has acted very wisely in not taking the conservative path on this, and I'm glad he was willing to be a liberal. Another illustration: Senator McCain has proposed that the rules which require persons who reach the age of 70½ to begin withdrawing their tax-deferred annuities, be suspended because of the crisis, and Senator Obama has agreed and given credit to Senator McCain for the proposal. This is a liberal move, economically. I am glad that the two presidential candidates agree on it, and I hope it will be done; I'll be 70½ next August, and I don't want to be forced to withdraw some of my savings when the market is so depressed.

About articles about President Bush: I had not noticed that most or all of the articles in *Christian Ethics Today* which mention the president are negative about him. Just as on issues in general, so concerning the president, I think we should take things up one at a time. I have just said I appreciate his not letting the great banks fail. I can add other things that I appreciate about him; for example, he seems to have had a real appreciation of the humanitarian crisis in Africa and to have committed huge funds to try to help out there. I appreciate that very much. Perhaps Bono convinced him; I don't know. You might be interested to know that Dr. Thomas Cortis, formerly president of Samford, is now serving in the Bush administration; his role is to oversee the distribution of many millions of dollars of aid for education in Africa.

On the other hand, there are negative things to be said about actions of the Bush administration. At least, I think there are, and, given his low approval rating (about 24%, I believe), apparently most Americans think there are. It is not surprising that these things would turn up in articles in the journal. I trust the articles in the journal have been principally expressions of disagreement with the administration's policies rather than personal attacks, though I realize that people develop very deep feelings about

persons with whose policies they disagree, so that personal attacks do happen.

You mention several others issues, Darren, and I simply don't remember the articles to which you refer. For example, I hope there has not been an article on Calvinism which says that Calvinists are never evangelistic; that would be untrue, and I hope it wasn't affirmed in the journal. I remember one article opposing the death penalty; I thought it was masterful, and I didn't feel there was any need to balance it with an article supporting the death penalty, since it was so fair-minded.

It seems to me that there are two ways to go about trying to find the truth about things. One is for a journal to be completely even-handed and always display both sides of an issue. The other is for a journal to be partisan and to think of other, similarly partisan journals in which the opposite views are presented as its dialogue partners. The latter is what we do in courts; in order to determine whether a person is guilty of a crime, two sets of attorneys act in a fully partisan manner, the defense trying to exonerate the accused and the prosecution trying to convict the accused. Our hope is that this is the best and fairest way to learn the truth. We know it isn't perfect, but nothing is; we think it's the best available way.

So, in *Christian Ethics Today* a lot of partisan articles appear, articles in which writers effectively say, "I think this is the position which best accords with the Christian moral vision." I think that's a good thing, though I realize that some folks would prefer another kind of journal. But—and here I don't agree with your assessment, Darren—I think that it is appropriate to describe this kind of journal as a Christian one, along the lines suggested in the journal's mission statement.

I would welcome a chance to talk to you about all this in a more personal way if you like, Darren. In the meantime, I wish you well with your church; I hope you feel that things are off to a good start.

Cordially, Fisher. ■

Christian Ethics and the Movies

Reviewed by David A. Thomas, Prof. of Rhetoric, Emeritus, University of Richmond

Aging and Music: *Young @ Heart* (2007)

Don't miss this documentary about a very special, unique rock concert. Bob Cilman's octogenarian chorus from Northampton, Massachusetts, will knock your socks off. You will want to watch it again, for theological reasons as well as for sheer entertainment and musical enjoyment. It will serve well as a discussion topic for a casual church movie group, or for a college or seminary class in either music or pastoral ministry. Anyone who works with the very old, or who has a close relationship with an elderly relative, or even just tries to lead an amateur chorus, will be amazed by the ways in which your whole understanding of how the golden years of a person's life *could* be, and probably *ought* to be, the best years. But that is not the purpose of the movie; that truth sneaks up on you.

The Plot. When the youthful British documentary film maker, Steven Carter, attended a concert by Cilman's *Young @ Heart* on tour in London, he was struck by the improbable idea that there might be a story behind the group worth documenting. Cilman allowed him to make a film of the group as they prepared for their next annual tour. For seven weeks, Walker and his crew of four technicians came to Northampton and used their handheld digital cameras to unobtrusively track the group through their paces. The movie is mostly about the rehearsal process, and it reaches a powerful climax with a sold-out concert before its hometown audience.

Clearly, Walker began this project as a lark. During the first half of the movie, he focuses on the quirky, humorously anachronistic foibles of a few old folks trying to get their heads around young people's lyrics and music. A lot of their repertoire,

in fact, consists of exactly the kind of punk and rock music with edgy lyrics that slightly less old folks (like us?) tend to hate.²

At first, Walker acts the part of a director/interviewer, injecting himself as an on-screen presence, interacting delicately with his subjects to get to what he imagines to be the punch line. He relates that 92-year old Eileen was once a Vaudeville stripper, and she still likes to flirt with the movie's technical crew a bit. Lenny, a WWII pilot, is the only one among his group of friends who can still see well enough to drive them to their weekly rehearsals. Steve drives a racy sports car, and still enjoys a robust sex life that takes a little longer, but he says that just makes it more fun. And Stan and Dora need all seven weeks of rehearsal to learn their duet on James Brown's "I Feel Good," because Stan keeps forgetting the words to his solo part. Dora keeps coming in on the wrong beat. Eileen uses a thick magnifying glass to read her music; Lenny doesn't know which side of a CD goes up. So it goes, for about the first half hour.

Walker tries to come across gently, but it is evident that as he feels his way into the subject matter of his film. His attitude towards the chorus members is subtly condescending and even a tiny bit mean.

Something begins to happen to the viewers. We are drawn deeper into the lives of these amateur singers. They become less stereotypical caricatures of geezers, and more like ourselves, more humanized. Despite their having to cope with all of the physical and mental disabilities common to their near-geriatric status, we begin to see them more as they see themselves. Especially, we see how important it is to be a part of the *Young @ Heart* chorus as a caring, productive community to which they belong by merit. They have to earn their right to sing in the

group. They must commit to a serious musical purpose that requires hard work and discipline to be able to perform, not merely adequately, but well.

Bob Cilman, the chorus director in his mid-50s, is a tough task master. He is not afraid to play the drill sergeant to keep his troops in line. It's a revelation to see how respectfully they respond to him. Nobody walks on eggs, in either direction. Cilman began the chorus twenty-five years ago. For several years, they sang oldie standards like "Yabba-Dabba-Doo." Then it expanded into more challenging Broadway hit songs. The chorus members all prefer the classics and opera for their own listening pleasure. The group really began to take off when they made a VH-1 style music video of the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive," complete with young, sexy dancers. Now, the group uses sophisticated contemporary hits exclusively, and they take their show on the road.

As Walker soon learns from his interviews, becoming old does not necessarily equate to becoming senile. While his subjects play along with his little project, they keep telling him what their singing means to them, not just as a novel pastime, but as a new, broadening horizon for their lives. At the halfway point in the movie where he begins to "get it," Walker finally absents himself from the narrative. The movie gets a lot better.

Life Lessons. There are several heart-tugging moments in the movie, because as you might expect, these folks do not have easy lives. Some years, someone in the group dies, and this is one of those years. On their way to present a dress rehearsal performance before the local jail, the assistant director stops the bus to deliver the sad, unexpected news that one of their group had died only that morning. Their live performance an hour later was truly inspired and inspiring. The convicts gave them a teary

standing ovation, as did the theater audience. "The show must go on. He would have wanted us to," takes on a whole new meaning once you understand it. "That's the key," said one of his friends; "Just keep on singing."

The final section of the movie features an irrepressible 81-year old wisecracking *basso profundo* named Fred Knittle, who suffers from severe congestive heart failure, and who sometimes struggles to breathe with the aid of his ever-present portable oxygen tank. Fred comes back after a five-year medical hiatus from the group to perform, not his swan song, but his "ugly duckling" song, as he puts it. He was set to sing a duet with his singing partner, but then, tragically, it became necessary for him to do the song as a solo. Fred's rendition of "Fix You," dedicated to his friend, is by any measure the highlight of the concert, and of the movie itself.³

Music Lessons. At one point in my youth, I thought that the lyrics to radio's Top 40 songs were a good source for my philosophy of life. Admittedly, that was pretty shallow. As I have matured as a narrative rhetorician, I have come to a new, major appreciation of the importance of music as to what it means to be human. After all, Aristotle himself said that music is one of the six essential elements of tragedy, right up there with plot, character, language, the setting, and purpose. When you think about it, music is also an essential element in the rituals of worship. On a mundane, secular level, many of us use music as a sound track for at least part of our waking hours every day.

It opens your mind to a whole new dimension of how music conveys significant meanings when you watch and listen to the *Young @ Heart* chorus perform "Golden Years," "Forever Young," "Yes We Can, Can," or "I Want to Be Sedated." I am reminded of an incident soon after my own 92-year old mother passed away on Mother's Day in 1988. My emotions were blindsided unexpectedly while I was driving along, and the Everly Brothers' pop hit, "[Whenever I Want

You] All I Have to Do Is Dream" came on the radio. I had to pull over because I was overwhelmed by a sudden surge of grief. Now, that simple tune no longer represents just another high school prom cover for me. How many stories of spiritual healing, even physical healing, revolve around the power of music?

Jeremy S. Begbie, the Cambridge University theologian who has just relocated to Duke Divinity School, has elevated the discussion about the possibilities of music in theology. His theory is the first truly new innovation in theological thinking about music—as-meaning that I am aware of. Begbie writes about this interpretation of music as such, not the semantic content of religious lyrics.

Music, he says, is meaningful for both the music maker and the music hearer. For the music maker, particularly, one realizes that it is a physical phenomenon with emotional effects, which is the root cause for theology's traditional mistrust of it. Music is produced by the body, and by instruments that must be mastered and played through study and discipline. For the hearer, the basic elements of tempo and melody correspond to theological consideration of God's view of time, and of voice. For performers, Begbie emphasizes the importance of making improvised music, which he sees as more spiritually enriching than scored music. It goes far beyond the simple truism that music arouses one's emotions, though no doubt that is a part of it.⁴

For the *Young @ Heart* chorus, all of these factors come into play. Making music is such a humanizing force within their experience. For listeners, hearing their concert carries much the same message to the Northampton community. For the audience, the movie shows us ways in which music operates within their octogenarian community. Objectively it's somewhat like a sociological field study, witnessing how music vitalizes people's lives, which, at their age, would otherwise be mostly ignored, catered to and humored, and treated, but hardly taken seriously.

As for me, I've begun taking guitar lessons. ■

The Meaning of Life: *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008)

Woody Allen is nothing if not prolific. Since the mid-1960s, his credits include over sixty movies, of which he has starred in and/or directed over forty. The rest were writing credits. Two of his films won Oscars for him: *Annie Hall* (1978) and *Hannah and her Sisters* (1987). All told, he has been nominated by the Academy fifteen times through the mid-1990s, and once again in 2006 (for *Match Point*). His list of other awards occupies several pages, not to mention numerous other awards for his actors. He is the subject of many serious film studies. He is a shoo-in for a Lifetime Achievement Award, if he ever slows down enough to provide a point of closure on his active career.

Now over seventy years old, he keeps churning them out on a year-in, year-out timetable, unfortunately to less favorable and even mediocre notices. Not that critics matter much to him. Their general line is something indulgent like, "This [movie of the year] is not all that bad." Fans of the early Woody Allen movies have been waiting for years for him to exhibit something of his earlier comedic genius. By and large, his movies all tend to echo the same themes and story lines. Most recently, for variety perhaps, he has set a couple of his stories in London.

Vicky Cristina Barcelona is his most recent offering, set in photogenic Spain. The title needs to insert the word "in" before Barcelona to be completely descriptive of the movie. Woody's trademark Dixieland soundtrack is replaced with lush flamenco guitars. The plot is a modern romance revolving around two rich young New York women on a summer vacation, and their encounters with a bohemian artist and his homicidal ex-wife. Think of something like *My Summer Vacation in Spain*, featuring a few weeks of a *menage a trois*. Star power is provided by Spain's top actors, Javier Bardem

(Oscar winning villain from last year's *No Country for Old Men*) and Penelope Cruz, who play the artist and his ex-wife. Many moviegoers will go just to see them take their turn in a Woody movie. The two young women on a fling, the title namesakes, Vicky and Cristina, are played by Scarlett Johansson (by now a Woody Allen regular) and British actor Rebecca Hall.

You've seen this movie before, more or less. It's about the neurotic insecurities of women and their shaky relationships with shallow, sophisticated men. Vicky, an uptight fiancée of a rising businessman (let's just assume from here on that all the characters in the movie are amply affluent), struggles with just how far she ought to enjoy her last few weeks of singlehood. Her best friend, committed bachelorette Cristina, is struggling to get a firmer grasp on what love is, by trying out the Continental way.

When they encounter a debonair Spanish modern artist, Juan Antonio (Bardem), he immediately makes the two American tourists an offer they cannot refuse, a weekend out of town (together) with him for love making. Vicky hesitates, but Cristina is immediately up for the game. "You have to seduce me first," she tells him. As if. Thus begins a beautiful romance, sort of. Cristina winds up in bed with food poisoning for a couple of days, so Vicky steps in and tours around with Juan Antonio instead; she also finds herself increasingly interested in testing the sexual possibilities, albeit with more pangs of conscience. She's engaged, after all. As soon as free-spirited Cristina recovers from her minor ailment, she moves in with the artist to find the answer to her search for real love.

But then, halfway through the movie, enters Juan Antonio's hysterical ex-wife Maria Elena (Cruz). It seems that in their back story, when she and Juan Antonio separated, Maria Elena stabbed him on her way out the door to her new lover. Now she's back, and she is Not! Happy! to find this new blonde bimbo in what she considers

to be her place beside Juan Antonio, which is to say, in his bed. But things smooth out when Juan Antonio suggests a *menage a trois*, and the two women submissively decide to go for it. At least until Vicky's vacation is over.

The more interesting story line, though the dullest, is Vicky's internal battles with herself over her own quandaries about whether she should go ahead with her wedding plans. Her fiancé pushes the envelope a bit by joining her in Spain for a spontaneous civil wedding then and there, with a promise to also go ahead with their elaborate planned wedding back home. He's a nice guy, but he lacks Juan Antonio's suave, artsy cachet. The square fiancé's main dilemma over their impending marriage is strictly limited to which house they will buy when they get home. Vicky's trying to reconcile herself to a future lifetime with this bland bore.

The Underlying Values. Woody Allen is an adamant cynic who has publicly worked on his *angst* and neuroses—not altogether for laughs—for all those creative movie making years. I believe you can find a deeper, more serious treatment of atheism and its *ad absurdum* logical existential underpinnings in Woody Allen's movies than you can in best-selling author Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens, after all, spends most of his lecture time puncturing hypocritical Christians, violent Muslims, and the venality of the church. Allen shows you the reality of atheism as it is lived out in one's everyday life, with no hope of an answer to life's sufferings. There is even a scene in the movie where Juan Antonio shows Vicky "his favorite sculpture," a statue of Christ in a chapel. But he appreciates it only for its aesthetics: he is "not religious," as he explains. Nor is anybody else. Underneath *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* is Woody Allen's never-ending indictment of the meaninglessness and vanity of life. As Woody told *Newsweek* magazine, "At the end of the picture it seems to me that everyone was unhappy."⁵ Nothing is sacred, and no

one can be really trusted in or out of marriage. No true satisfaction or fulfillment can be found there, despite the beautiful setting, the beautiful people, and the consequence-free sex. Woody Allen movies are a comic version of *Ecclesiastes*, without its ennobling final chapter that admonishes us: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth. . . . here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:1, 13-14). ■

- 1 David A. Thomas retired in 2004 and now resides in Sarasota, FL. He invites your comments at davidthomas1572@comcast.net.
- 2 In the movie, the group is working on seven new songs for their next concert. The sound track also includes several other selections they had previously recorded. Here's some of the featured music in the movie: Allen Toussaint's "Yes We Can, Can;" SonicYouth's "Schizophrenia;" Coldplay's "Fix You," Bob Dylan's "Forever Young," Talking Heads' "Life in Wartime;" The Clash's "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"; and The Ramones' "I Want to Be Sedated."
- 3 You can Google this Coldplay selection online and listen to the group's version free.
- 4 Jeremy S. Begbie, "Music in God's World," in his new book, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Baker/Academic, 2007).
- 5 Jennie Yabroff, "Take the Bananas and Run," *Newsweek*, August 18/25, 2008, 58.

Book Reviews

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed." Francis Bacon (d. 1626)

God Speaks to Us, Too: Southern Baptist Women on Church, Home & Society

Susan M. Shaw,
The University Press of KY, 2008.

Reviewed by Dee Miller,

Council Bluffs, IA

Susan Shaw says she was “raised S(ri)ght.” That’s how she describes growing up as a female in the Deep South, being nurtured by people who have the highest regard for the strongest of Baptist notions—the priesthood of the believers. Her new book, *God Speaks to Us, Too*, will be a walk down memory lane for those who have lived the collective story. Yet the stroll won’t be all joy.

Insiders, as well as those from other faith groups, are afforded a clear look at the cultural tides, theology, and practices of this massive denomination of autonomous congregations [Southern Baptist Convention], though not necessarily of people free to voice independent thought. The lack of freedom is what evokes continued frustration and sadness in so many. And that’s what lies on the other side of the coin from nostalgia. The unpleasant emotions are often experienced as slashed hopes and dreams. All because of the deeply felt disconnect between what this conservative denomination teaches and what women have often internalized as a heartfelt understanding into the meaning of spiritual liberation in today’s world.

Yet not all of Shaw’s informants have struggled with the same intensity. In fact some, like Dorothy (Mrs. Paige) Patterson seem not to have struggled at all. Like many fundamentalists, she understands God to be a “complementarian” who calls for women’s submission in both home and church, with roles divided according to gender. While this may work

for some, Shaw and most other informants of this book would associate the strict adherence to this doctrine as a danger that infringes on the ability of women to fully seek out the will of God for their lives without the historical constraints that have begun to be eliminated in mainline circles.

Along with the good historical view of the 163-year-old denomination comes the author’s assessment of why gender issues have played a bigger part in the “inerrancy” fight, witnessed in her youth, than many would like to acknowledge. She asserts that the loss of privilege for Southern white men, after the blow rendered by the civil rights movement, prompted the desperate fight to protect male privilege in church and home, the only two institutions where men could continue to exercise such elitism.

As an ordained SBC minister, now director of the Women’s Studies Program at Oregon State University (who no longer participates in Baptist life), the author has already lived much of the collective story before researching it! Yet her 150 informants work together to provide a picture window that shows a collage of unique lives, often filled with lonely struggles. Especially for the 12% who are no longer Baptists at all.

In the preface, Shaw clearly states that her informants do not necessarily represent all SBC women. Of that, I’m quite certain. For the text does not even touch on the fact that so many who spend vast amounts of time in the pews of conservative churches suffer from limited exposure to other Christian ideas—a fact that is well illustrated by the refusal of one pastor to even provide her with access to the women in his church! Neither does it mention that many in the Convention still prefer to simply ignore or excuse the suppression of issues by framing them as “irrelevant to us here.” Or just

“political.” Or “scandalous.”

For women who have sustained wounds from challenging the hypocrisy of the strong system, this work serves as a spiritual balm, showing that there are many options available to women who have discovered how unlikely age-old patriarchy is to budge. Yet the most difficult option to exercise for most Southern Baptist women would be leaving, as Shaw sees it. Partly because of the deeply ingrained cultural need to belong, along with what she refers to as “the myth of SBC superiority” that can bleed over into one’s personal identity. Leaving is never easy. As one informant pointed out, it’s very hard not to follow the example of Lot’s wife, looking back at the sense of grandeur once felt as an active participant, even when the bouts of grief are interspersed with a greater sense of relief and rightness about one’s decision to leave.

To be Southern is to be Baptist and to be Baptist is to be Southern in many communities in the South, says Shaw. To be a Southern woman is to have learned from birth to be “sweet and genteel,” often in a passive resistant way. So, in a sense, there is resistance. Yet it is questionable how much change that resistance can bring.

Many of her informants noted that while the denomination had changed, they had not. As one of the participants, I know that I’ve often said that myself. Yet, in looking back, I now challenge that understanding on both fronts. The Convention did not change nearly as much as those of us educated in its institutions from 1960 to 1990 were led, by some idealistic professors, to believe it would. The bigotry that was there at its birth has remained strong and well protected.

However, many whose stories appear in this book, have truly changed, as much from education and enlightenment through sources

outside of the Convention as from the skills and education provided by participation in Baptist life. Some have become bolder and stronger, like the proverbial “tea bag in hot water,” by daring to challenge hypocrisy on issues of social justice and theological confusion that comes through double-speak. Those who have thrived in spite of the system may see and appreciate the first chapter of James with clearer vision.

No doubt it is because of Susan Shaw’s own spiritual transformation that this book was possible. And why it should be read.

Both women and men who become self-actualized always change, and that change includes alterations in what one comes to expect from others. It is only from those changes that resistance can flourish, whether the voices are outspoken or quiet and genteel, reflecting ways of resistance that characterize most Southern women as they continue to support institutions that may not give them an equal voice or right to fully participate. Yet, wherever they stand, each informant appears to have found meaning despite the identity crisis that has permeated the lives of all—a crisis that has found some resolution through spiritual contemplation, regardless of gender.

Yes, that’s what happens to Baptist women who are raised right! ■

The Shack

William P. Young, Windblown Media
Newburg Park, 2008.

Reviewed by Darold Morgan,
Richardson, TX

Here is a best-selling novel that can either be interestingly ridiculed, or it can serve as means to a serious debate about some extremely solemn and important theological concepts. The book has received multiple reviews of major praise for the unfolding of its biblical approach to tragedy. This reviewer believes the book is well-worth reading, providing one connects an open mind with the extraordinary approach the author makes. Let the reader come to his own conclusion about the book which is obviously unlike anything any of us have read in years!

Other reviewers have used a wide-ranging scale of adjectives and adverbs about *The Shack*—imaginative, captivating, creative, exceptional, transforming, absorbing. This in itself is a challenge to anyone to get a copy of this book and get into it. When one gets past the sad and shocking tragedy in the novel; and also when the fascinating portrayal of the Trinity somewhat subsides, one becomes genuinely intrigued by the heart of the book—the dialogue and conversations which are presented in the most extraordinary of situations. This is the meat of the book.

The residual and enduring values of the book emanate from these discussions about the problem of evil in a realistic and brutal setting. How can one have faith in God who made a world where violence and sin and evil are not only possible but so obviously prevalent? The questions raised about the nature of God as the confrontation with human suffering leads the reader to a startling blending of God’s mercy and healing, concluding with a beautiful concept of Christian hope.

This Trinitarian concept of God received not just a novel and definitive approach to one of Christianity’s most sacred and difficult doctrines, but in this setting of a haunting novel there are some fresh and enduring insights about Christian truth. As one reviewer stated: “This is an exceptional piece of writing that ushers you directly into the heart and nature of God in the midst of agonizing human suffering.” ■

Ghosts of Liberals Past

John Young, Author House,
Bloomington, IN, 2007.

Reviewed by Darold Morgan,
Richardson, TX

John Young is a columnist and editor for the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, and a well-known liberal “in the heart of Bush country,” writing in the center of some of Texas’ most conservative regions. This book is a collection



of columns which reflect his opinions, some of which are guaranteed to push up blood pressures regardless of one's political views. His writings are often picked up by news services across the land. Young has become quite well-known for his satirical humor, his acerbic style, and occasionally some exceptionally timely advice in these controversial matters.

Since the book is a collection of his writings, some are dated in this fast moving, ever-changing political scene—local, state-wide, nationally! Young has had a field day for material since Waco is located near Crawford, Texas, where the Bush ranch is located. Couple that with the world-wide attention the Branch-Davidian tragedy brought to this part of Texas, and one has endless directions to trace about attention-getting subjects. Few things are sacred to this able and capable newspaper reporter and columnist. Subjects he writes about are myriad and flammable: gay marriage, gun control, race relations, civil unrest, abortion, the national debt, conflicting political philosophies, election malfeasances, dirty political tricks....and this list is just a starter! Even nearby Baylor University gets an occasional drubbing.

One wonders how Young could get away with some of his remarks in the Waco environment, but frankly, it makes for some very interesting reading. On rare occasions one really needs to read material that is controversial, colorful, and challengeable. Young's book is guaranteed to meet all three of these characteristics, and besides that, he is a very good writer. ■

A Distinctly Baptist Church

Ronnie Prevost, Smyth & Helwys, Macon, GA, 2008.

Reviewed by Darold Morgan,
Richardson, TX

Here is a jewel of a book for Baptist churches everywhere in America. It is written by a Baptist for Baptists. Dr. Prevost teaches Church Ministry at the Logsdon Seminary, a

part of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas.

Based on the premise in these post-modern days that many Baptists have either forgotten or neglected what it means to be a Baptist, the author explains in solid and readable laymen's language how "Baptist doctrine should influence our worship, evangelism, missions, and education ministries. Because it is a "need-meeting" book, Baptist pastors and lay leaders would make a wise and sound move to make this the basis of a teaching series (or even a preaching sequence) in the local church.

Not many among us would disagree that Baptists everywhere, regardless of affiliation, need a more informed clergy and laity when it comes to Baptist history and the teachings renowned as "Baptist Distinctives." Reading this little paper-back book would be a source of much needed reminders of a rich and helpful heritage as Baptist churches face a very challenging array of issues in current society.

Prevost's helpful format of discussion questions at the end of each chapter is practical. Particularly helpful are his chapters on worship and education. ■

Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith

Bill Hybels, Zondervan, 2006.

Reviewed by Aubrey Ducker,
Orlando, FL

Most textbooks are rather bland and unremarkable. Boiling down complexities to an introductory level leaves many reading only the chapter headings and guessing what is included. *Just Walk Across the Room* by Bill Hybels, a textbook for Evangelism 101, cannot be treated so lightly. Using clever headings and provocative discussions Hybels shows that the simplest and oldest methods of evangelism can work today just as they did for Jesus and the disciples.

Most unfortunate for today's church, evangelism has been largely forgotten since the days of Bold Mission Thrust,

Evangelism Explosion, and the Moral Majority. Today, evangelical identifies persons associated with the Religious Right branch of the Republican Party rather than one who seeks to share the Gospel with the world, seeking to fulfill the Great Commission. Baptists in particular have been derogatorily painted as radical evangelicals, an epithet of contempt.

Reaching the world for Christ remains our eternal mission. How to reach the world, remains the seemingly eternal question. Whether through movies such as Mel Gibson's "The Christ," video games and special nights to play at church, including the violent alien killing Halo series, door knocking Evangelism Explosion training, mission trips individually or with a group, perhaps Bill Hybels is onto something when he writes the simplistic first step is to *Just Walk Across the Room*. After that, Hybels affirms the Holy Spirit is responsible. With simple stories and an eleven-week lesson format, Hybels details the little actions that may indeed lead to salvation for a friend or even a stranger. Don't be fooled, however, by the simple plan. After making eternal salvation graciously easy to share, Hybels adds more meaty chapters. By providing the depth necessary to assist laymen in confronting objections of the unsaved, Hybels adds challenges for the soul of even the most schooled evangelist.

Would not all churches like to establish a program to identify and convert the lost? By considering the simple study questions following each chapter, readers can identify their own evangelistic experience thereby allowing greater comfort at following His leading. Further, by exploring situations in everyday life giving rise to evangelistic opportunities, Hybels guides the readers to deepen their spiritual vision.

Known primarily as Pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels has written or co-written more than forty books. If you take the time to read just one, make it *Just Walk Across the Room*. Perhaps you too will discover why Willow Creek is the second largest church in America. ■

Christian Ethics Today

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