

# Christian Ethics Today

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

<b>"When Death Becomes Birth"</b> Joe E. Trull.....	2
<b>Ethix Bytes</b> .....	3
<b>Letter From a Birmingham Jail</b> Martin Luther King, Jr.....	4
<b>Change Comes Slowly But Surely</b> Britt Towery.....	7
<b>Reflections on the Presidential Election</b> Martin E. Marty.....	8
<b>God and Politics</b> James Dunn.....	9
<b>Obama's Peter Moment</b> David McCollum.....	10
<b>Can We Find Common Ground On Abortion?</b> Tony Campolo.....	11
<b>Diary of a Young Pastor</b> Don Wilkey.....	12
<b>Is the Gospel of "More Sex" Really Good News For All?</b> Marie M. Fortune.....	15
<b>A Matter of Ministerial Ethics: Going, Staying, and Leaving</b> Burton Patterson.....	16
<b>An Atheist and a Minister Walked Into a Bar</b> Todd Thomason.....	21
<b>CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE MOVIES</b> Reviewed by David A. Thomas	
<b>Politics, the Church, and Character: Frost/Nixon (2008) and Doubt (2008)</b> ...22	
<b>Ageing, Family, and Racism: Gran Torino (2009)</b> .....	23
<b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>	
<b>The Faith of Barack Obama</b> Reviewed by Darold Morgan.....	26
<b>Does Ethics Have a Chance...?</b> Reviewed by Monty Self.....	26
<b>Hot, Flat, and Crowded</b> Reviewed by Darold Morgan.....	27
<b>A Pilgrim in Rome</b> Reviewed by Robert Flynn.....	30
<b>POETRY:</b>	
<b>A Franciscan Benediction</b> .....	28
<b>Discomforting Worship</b> by Al Staggs.....	29
<b>Financial Report for 2008</b> .....	31
<b>KUDZU</b> by Doug Marlette	

# "When Death Becomes Birth"

By Joe E. Trull, Editor

Recently the reality of the brevity of life has tumbled into my daily existence. Oh, I've always known, like you, that someday we shall die. But also, like you, I always believed not this year—next year or some future time for sure, but not now, for I am too busy for death.

Then in quick succession, prostate cancer and open-heart surgery (without my permission) invaded my life—the clogged arteries announced their presence in the emergency room (a good place to have the attack) just three days after my prostate surgery in 2007. Other signals of a long life (glaucoma, cataracts, shoulder surgery, ad nauseam) are forcing me to face my own mortality in ways I have not before.

But this piece is not about me. The most shocking events of aging are the sudden serious illness and unexpected deaths of close friends. During these last two years, that list has been too long and the friends too dear. Yet, the curtain on the final act of our life often closes without warning and fanfare. It just happens. The play is over and someone closer than a brother is gone—and you weep.

I pause now before my computer, thinking of so many who meant so much to me and to others, and especially to the kingdom of God.

For the past 50 years I have preached hundreds of funerals—yet, only now am I beginning to under-

stand the words I uttered to comfort the bereaved years ago.

Last Christmas day one of the finest friends anyone could have died after a sudden onslaught of lymphoma. Leroy Yarbrough (Dr. Yarberry he liked to call himself) was a great musician—at Trinity BC in San Antonio with Buckner Fanning, at Calvary BC Garland when I was pastor there, directing the Music Department at New Orleans Seminary (where I also served beside him), and then upon retiring to San Antonio, a former choir member convinced Leroy to develop the music ministry at First Presbyterian—they asked for a year, then "twisted his arm annually" for ten more!

Of the hundreds of messages sent to the family through the CaringBridge site, one quoted renowned S.A. pastor and writer Max Lucado:

*You live one final breath from your own funeral.*

*Which, from God's perspective is nothing to grieve. He responds to these grave facts with this great news: "The day you die is better than the day you are born" (Eccles. 7:1). Now there is a twist. Heaven enjoys a maternity ward reaction to funerals. Angels watch body burials the same way grandparents monitor delivery room doors. "He will be coming through any minute!" They can't wait to see the new arrival.*

*While we're driving hearses and wearing black, they're hanging pink and*

*blue streamers and passing out cigars. We don't grieve when babies enter the world. The hosts of heaven don't weep when we leave it.*

*Oh, but many of us weep at the thought of death. Do you? Do you dread your death? And is your dread of death robbing your joy of life?*

*Jesus came to "deliver those who have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying" (Heb. 2:15).*

*Your death may surprise you and sadden others, but heaven knows no untimely death: "You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed" (Ps. 139:16).*

*Dread of death ends when you know heaven is your true home.*

*In all of my air travels, I've never seen one passenger weep when the plane landed. Never. No one clings to the armrests and begs, "Don't make me leave. Don't make me leave. Let me stay and eat more peanuts." We're willing to exit because the plane has no permanent mailing address. Nor does this world. "But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior" (Phil. 3:20).*

And so, Rev. Yarberry, I will miss you. But I'm coming to see you soon—I'll be making noises in the maternity ward. Come see me. And don't forget the cigar! ■

JET



# EthixBytes

## A Collection of Quotes Comments, Statistics, and News Items

“There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.”  
**Machiavelli.**

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but where, oh where, are those who think of changing themselves?”  
**Richard Foster**, author of *Celebration of Discipline*.

“This nation’s ideals of due process, rule of law, humane interrogation, privacy and government openness are not mere embellishments. They are essential to what we are.”

Washington Post columnist **Eugene Robinson**, in response to President Obama’s decision to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

“Average household credit card debt—\$5,100. Years it would take to pay off \$5000 in credit card debt making minimum monthly payments—46. Percent of American credit card holders who make only minimum monthly payments—48%.”  
**Chicago Tribune.**

“The going price to kill a pastor is \$250.”

**Falz Rahman**, chairman of Good News India, on rewards offered by extremist Hindu groups for the killing of Christian leaders in Orissa.

“Since the late 1970s the share of national income going to the top 1% of Americans has doubled and the share for the top 0.1% has tripled. More than 40% of total income goes to the wealthiest 10%—the highest in the last 65 years.”

**Christian Century** (11/18/08).

“And look what happened. Octuplets. Dear God. . . It is not evil, but she is obsessed with children.”

The mother of **Nadya Sulleman**, divorced mother of six who gave birth to eight babies (only the second time in U.S. history), all 12 through embryo implantation in vitro.

“Large multiple births are presented on TV shows as a ‘Brady Bunch’ moment. They’re not!”

**Dr. Arthur Caplin**, bioethics chairman at the University of Pennsylvania, noting the serious and sometimes lethal

complications and crushing medical costs with large multiple births.

“My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy.”

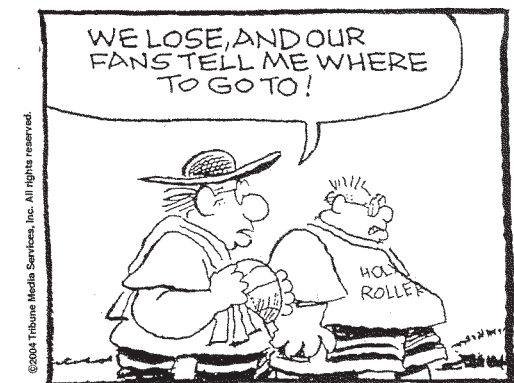
**President Barack Obama**, in a TV interview with an Arabic language network (Al Aribiya, 1/27/09).

“To imagine that the U. S. can easily and cheaply invade, occupy and redeem any country in the Muslim world is sheer folly. That holds true in Afghanistan, too.”

**Andrew J. Bacevish**, retired U.S. Army colonel in Washington Post (10/5/08).

“There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. Yet that will be the beginning.”

Quote from Western fiction writer **Louis L’Amour**, inscribed in the journal given by Michelle Obama to Laura Bush. ■



# Letter From a Birmingham Jail

In the Spring 1963, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was jailed again for the cause that eventually cost him his life. While in the Birmingham City Jail, King was criticized by his white counterparts in the clergy for his non-violent protest marches. King wrote his response on scraps of paper, toilet tissue, anything he could find. The letter was smuggled out of jail and has become a classic. One theologian deemed reading it equal to getting a seminary education.

My dear fellow clergymen, while confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. Since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms. I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of “outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Ga. We have sought some 85 affiliate organizations all across the South—one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Several months ago, our affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here.

## Call to help spread freedom

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the 8<sup>th</sup>-century prophets left their little villages . . . just as the Apostle Paul

left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I, too, am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my hometown. You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. I am sorry that (you) did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any city in this nation. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But (they) consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

## Waiting no longer for rights

For years now I have heard the word, “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs

lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your 6-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a 5-year-old son asking to agonizing pathos, “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us conscious-

ly breaking laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just and there are unjust laws.

### **Unjust laws are no laws at all**

To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Throughout the state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite that fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. Can any law set up in such a state be considered democratically structured? There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust on its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

### **Disappointment without justice**

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the white citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I

agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a more convenient season. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension of the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace . . . I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas that said: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost 2,000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to Earth." All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity. You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. I started thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years

of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation, and of a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of academic and economic security, and because of points they profit by segregation, have unconsciously become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up over the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need not follow the "do-nothingism" of the complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. There is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I'm grateful to God that, through the Negro church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood.

### **Abolish oppression**

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded him that he can gain it. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people get rid of your "discontent." But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channelized through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. I am thankful . . . that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still too small in quantity, but they are big in quality. They have languished in filthy roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry policemen who see them as "dirty-nigger-lovers."

They, unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful “action” antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.

**Integration as moral right**

(D)espite notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I say it as minister of the gospel, who loves the church . . . who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen. I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, “Follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother.” In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice. I have heard so many ministers say, “Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern,” and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular. I am

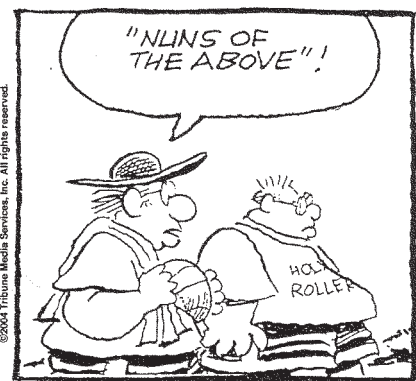
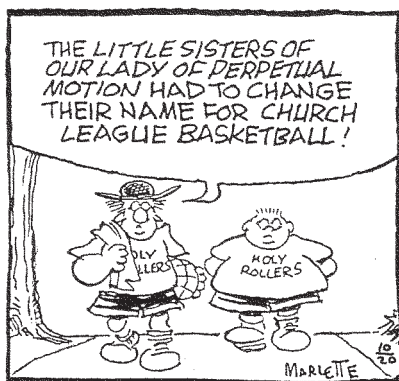
in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists. (T)he judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. For more than two centuries our fore parents labored in this country without wages; they

made cotton king; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

**Recognize the real heroes**

One day the South will recognize its real heroes. The 72-year-old woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride the segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity: “My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.” If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me. ■

Yours for the cause of peace and brotherhood,  
 Martin Luther King Jr.  
 April 16, 1963



# Change Comes Slowly But Surely

By Britt Towery, Retired Missionary, San Angelo, TX

Last November, Senator Barack Obama entered into history as the first black to be elected president of the United States. Next Tuesday he will take the oath of office and become the 44<sup>th</sup> president of our country.

Like any politician, he made many promises. He promised change, he wants to overcome centuries of prejudice and even fulfill Martin Luther King's dream—a man should not be judged by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character.

He promised that a “new dawn of American leadership is at hand.” Barack Obama was realistic when he told us: “There are many who won't agree with every decision or policy I make as president, and we know that government can't solve every problem. But I will always be honest with you about the challenges we face.”

I will always be honest with you! What a promise!

A long time ago the author of *1984*, George Orwell, wrote: “In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Thus political language has to consist largely

of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness” (from *Politics and the English Language*).

George Orwell's attack on the use of obfuscation by national leaders to hide unpleasant truths from the populace is a cynical and too often true, picture of many leader's stance. That is what makes Barack Obama's promises so powerful. You feel it comes from his heart. It is not political speech. He may not accomplish all his dreams and promises. He does not claim to be perfect, but the soul of America has been given a lift, a real change, an opportunity to breathe again.

It is well-documented that no new president has ever come into office with so much to do. An economic crisis few of us fully understand. We just know it is bad. Two huge foreign wars and possibility of more if the wrong thing is said or done by some egoist.

“America, we are better than the last eight years.” The President-Elect said. But he recognized we cannot walk alone. This is what the rest of the world has picked up on. Working with friends, talking to enemies, all to make

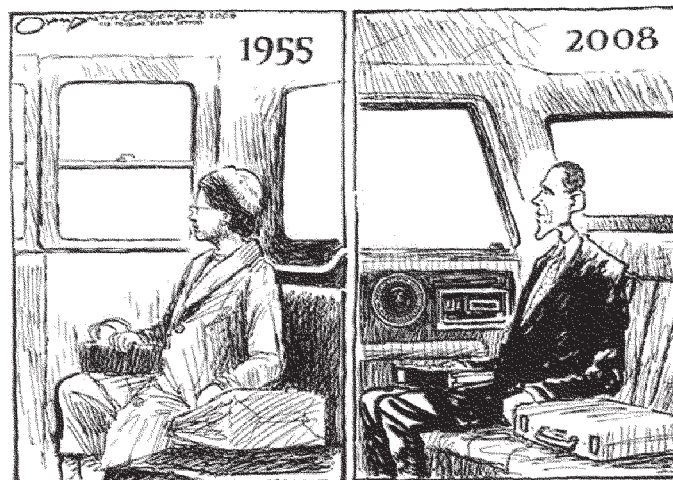
a more sensible and peaceful world.

On Tuesday, January 20, history will be made as a black man, a courageous, determined man, will assume the highest office in the land. I can't help but remember that Sunday night in a San Francisco church when the black pastor put his hand on a little black boy's head, saying he could become president someday. That was 1962 and while I agreed with the statement, I really doubted in my heart I would live to see such a thing come to past.

I don't know what happened to that little boy, but he is of the generation of Barack Obama. I hope he has lived to see the “promised land” of this January 20<sup>th</sup>.

Digging around in history I found more history related to the date of January 20<sup>th</sup>. Exactly 221 years ago, on that very day in 1788, the Pioneer African Baptist Church was organized in the deep, slave-holding city of Savannah, Georgia.

Change may be slow in coming, but with thanksgiving to God, it is coming. ■



# Reflections on the Presidential Election

By Martin E. Marty, Chicago, IL

## Non-Negotiables

The approach to religion-and-politics proposed by President-Elect Obama in his “Call to Renewal” address on May 28, 2006, I may affix to a refrigerator door as a text for morning meditations. Here is an excerpt:

“Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. Democracy requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God’s will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all . . . Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what’s possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It’s the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God’s edicts, regardless of the consequences. To base one’s life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy-making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.”

Now, contrast this with a message posted by the Reverend Pastor Richard Duane Warren, with whom I have no motive to pick a fight. But I wish he would engage in dialogue with his friend, the President-elect, before and after Inauguration Day. Warren: “As church leaders, we know our congregations are not allowed to endorse specific candidates, and it’s important for us to recognize that there can be multiple opinions among Bible-believing Christians when it comes to debatable issues such as the economy, social pro-

grams, Social Security, and the war in Iraq. But for those of us who accept the Bible as God’s Word and know that God has a unique, sovereign purpose for every life, I believe there are five issues that are non-negotiable. To me, they’re not even debatable because God’s Word is clear on these issues.”

These have to do with abortion, stem-cell harvesting, homosexual “marriage,” human cloning, and euthanasia. He chose these five, about which the printed Bible displays only a few inches of text that can even be used as inferences to support them, as “non-negotiable” themes. He shelves as negotiable the multiple yards of printed biblical texts on some social issues which to him seem negotiable. With the President-Elect I affirm that Pastor Warren’s “uncompromising commitments may be sublime,” but I do see that “to base our policy-making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.”

We Bible-believing Christians are offended when some Muslims base social and political policy on the Qur’an, or ruling parties in India, on texts from their holy books, since we do not accept such texts as “God’s Word.” What Pastor Warren and millions in his camp advocate works only in a theocracy, where the whole population accepts or is forced to accept one faith’s “God’s Word.” I really, really would like to eavesdrop if the President-Elect and the Pastor were to converse about this question. ■

## Inaugural Jesus

The apostle Paul claimed that Jesus, in the form of “Christ crucified,” was “a stumbling block [skandalon=scandal=offense] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Cor 1:23) Jews + Gentiles=pretty much everybody. You may ask, “What is Jesus doing in *Sightings*,” given this columns assignment to deal with reli-

gion in public life? Try this: Saturday my internet search engine turned up 484,000 references to “Jesus” or “Christ” linked with “inauguration,” and yours will find even more by today. That’s “public.”

So Jesus is my topic, as we leave the inaugural events behind but still have controversies ahead. Many citizens are at ease with prayers in pluralistic America when they are generic, civil, God-ly. Invoke Jesus, however, and not a few are scandalized by the reference, while others are scandalized by the scandalized. I propose a thesis; correct me if I have it wrong, lest I keep spreading wrongness. Thesis: Jesus is not the scandal. The use of Jesus in public at “we the people of the United States” occasions is usually the offence. Jesus gets from one-to-four-star ratings in the following publics:

First the company of non-believers, secular humanists, atheists, deists, et cetera, who often admire teachings of Jesus. Their American patriarch Thomas Jefferson even published his annotated anthology of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.

Jews have suffered at the hands of millions of followers of Jesus, but some very fine books on Jesus as rabbi get published—by rabbis—without scandalizing. My wife and I attend the “Music of the Baroque” series with many Jews in the audience and some in the chorus and orchestra, as they perform music with Jesus-words, some of them not kind toward Jews. “No problem.” Yet many are uneasy with the invocation of Jesus in general-public and often official events.

Muslims revere Jesus the prophet. Of course, with the other groups just mentioned, they do not accept his divinity, but he is in the Qur’an, and they are respectful, except, again, in certain public settings. Jesus is not in Hindu scriptures, but most Hindus

(continued on page 30)



# God and Politics

By James Dunn, Wake Forest School of Divinity, NC

**Note:** This address was delivered at the September 16-17, 2008, conference on “Red Letter Christians” at Truett Seminary in Waco, Texas, sponsored by Christian Ethics Today.

What a topic! What a challenge! On our good days we know better than to go there. (We know what Barth meant when he said “to define God is to deny God.”) We are not going to be saying: “God told us to go to war here or the Divine instructed us to drill for oil there.” These are absurdities and it’s still true that “those who believe absurdities will commit atrocities.”

Yet, try as we will we cannot keep “God and politics” out of the same sentence.

George W. Truett, for whom this school is named, set out in righteous rhetoric and theological ground rule: The right to private judgment is the crown jewel of humanity and for any person or institution to dare to come between the soul and God is a blasphemous impertinence and a defamation of the crown rights of the Son of God.

And so, mindful of those maxims from Barth, Voltaire, and Truett, of blessed memory, we consider gingerly the assignment: God and Politics, being careful to avoid impertinences and defamations.

Baptist insights shared by other dissenters who have been blessed or burdened or both by bapistication can illumine any discussion of God and politics. Theological thinking may crack open some political nuts.

Take soul freedom: Rooted in the belief that all persons are made in God’s image, that human worth and dignity is a derived value. The IMAGO DEI passage, Genesis 1:26-27, means at least that we can all respond to God, that all human beings are response able, responsible—see how we get that word. And, if responsible, free. No

matter how thin the coin of creation is sliced, it still has both sides, freedom and responsibility. They go together indissolubly.

That belief in soul freedom has led free churchers to believe that everyone and anyone can come to God directly, personally, without filter or formula. No priest, or church or creed or politically correctness is needed. Our confession, “Jesus Christ is Lord” is enough. We are, in that sense, at least red letter Christians.

We, therefore, cannot conceive of coerced Conversion, forced faith, or required religion.

One comes to God freely or not really. That’s not simply some weird Baptist doctrine. St. Bernard in his *1128 Treatise Concerning Grace and Free Will* wrote “Take away free will and there remaineth nothing to be saved . . . Salvation is given by God alone, and it is given only to the free will; even as it can not be wrought without the consent of the receiver, it can not be wrought without the grace of the giver.”

When we transplant that theological thought to the turf of politics, it helps us to understand why it is hard for us as a nation to force democracy on an occupied people—unwilling and unready to accept an ideology, indeed a theology, not their own.

Forcing religion on a people only makes hypocrites. Roger Williams got us started off right in that modality. A demanded democracy may not be authentic, serve well or last long.

So then soul freedom describes a faith that is vital because it is voluntary. Bill Moyers calls it a “grown-up faith.” Martin Marty’s term baptistication “zeros in on the key issue that modernity posed for religion: choice.” It’s clear that this sort of theological thinking impacts politics.

Then, there’s hope: I’ve been reflecting seriously on a common criticism of

many of these best Baptists who have gone before. There’s a complaint about many who have made the biggest difference, many who have meant most to me. They have been, it is said, too optimistic. Their theological optimism has skewed their message. Maybe so. I tend to think that they have brought a deep, abiding hope to politics.

John Leland, Walter Rauschenbusch, E.Y. Mullins, J.M. Dawson, T.B. Maston, Jimmy Carter—all mocked, made fun of, looked down upon by a set of “serious” scholars as possessing a hopelessly optimistic theology—ironically because they were hope mongers.

Leland exercised great good humor—remember the big cheese Rauschenbusch was totally invested in the Kingdom of God, present and future.

Mullins was a forwards looking thinker.

Maston seasoned his southern fried social gospel with a heavy dose of Christian realism. Remember one of his favorite phrases: “abidingly relevant.”

M.L. King had a dream. He sang “We shall overcome.”

Jimmy Carter still believes in human struggle and conquest. Andrew Bacevich reminds us that if we had heeded Carter’s advice we wouldn’t be in the mess we are in now.

It’s popular never to refer to any of this sort of thinker without reminding hearers/readers how wrong they were in their optimism. They were creatures of their time. “Who isn’t?”

They have all found some usefulness, some redemptive glimmer, some opportunity to shoehorn the gospel into the political chaos of their own times.

They have done so not in blind partisanship but in post-partisan idealism. Dr. Dawson, on whom I wrote my doctoral dissertation, said, “having

*(continued on page 30)*

# Obama's Peter Moment

By David McCollum, Contributing Editor, *EthicsDaily.com*, Nashville, TN

During his inaugural address, President Barack Obama quoted the Apostle Paul, but it was a Peter moment.

Obama looked out over the most diverse crowd ever assembled for a presidential inauguration—from all walks of life from every section of the country. And he gave them the basics and core values of the American experience.

At Pentecost, Peter looked out over a large crowd, representing Jewish believers from every corner of the known world, probably one of the most diverse crowds of the evolving Christian community ever assembled to that point. And he gave them the basics and core values of what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

This is not to say that Obama's inauguration speech and what Peter preached at Pentecost are on equal levels. Obama's address was political and he's a major agent of the state. Peter's sermon was theological and he was a prominent disciple of Christ.

From a practical standpoint, the addresses flowed in different directions from separate foundations.

But philosophically, it's interesting how both speakers used a similar template to create a call to action and to energize a crowd. Both drew upon past heroes to refocus on values and principles that could be used to initiate sweeping change.

Christianity expanded and major barriers began to fall by what Peter said. Pentecost paved the way for the growth of a new religion to the ends of the earth.

The American dream expanded and significant sociological and racial barriers fell when Obama became president. Then he placed

the responsibility for implementing the American ideal to all citizens and extended the American experiment of democracy as a symbol of hope to all peoples of the world.

Peter called upon the people to use God's sacrifice and power to be a gift to the world, to boldly spread the ideals of the gospel.

Obama called on all Americans to use the values, dreams and sacrifices of the founding fathers and their heritage of heroes to courageously be a model to the world and spread the American dream.

Peter said in Acts 2:38 (NIV): "And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off whom God will call."

Obama mentioned a promise in his speech: "Eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace before us—we carried forth that part of the great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations."

Parallel to the roots of the early Christian church that was reflected at Pentecost, Obama spoke of the ideal of community, a oneness of spirit that creates a sacrificial dynamic for all. Peter's address inspired action of all types that changed the world.

Examine a few things that happened during and after the inaugural ceremonies:

- A businessman bought 300 rooms in an expensive Washington hotel so the poor, the needy and the veterans could have a place to stay and share in the celebration.
- Businesses donated tuxedos and gowns so the "least of these" in society would have something to wear to the inaugural balls.
- After the ceremony, Luci Johnson, a

daughter of a former president, said in a TV interview she turned to an African-American woman behind her and said, "Congratulations to you." "No, congratulations to us, congratulations to all Americans," she said the woman told her as two strangers from two different backgrounds gave each other a hug.

- The Tuskegee Airmen, a group of African-American fighter pilots who were heroes in the air but second-class citizens on the ground during World War II, were honored guests, included in the celebration.
- And when Sen. Ted Kennedy, who has a brain tumor, suddenly went into a seizure at the congressional luncheon, one of the first people who rushed to his aid—and was at his side when he was placed in an ambulance—was Sen. Orrin Hatch, a staunch Republican who is a kindred spirit with Kennedy on hardly any political issue. But people of all political ideologies responded to Kennedy's emergency with grace and a higher sense of community.

In an America beset by a multitude of problems, there seemed to be a real and infectious spirit of commitment, hope and community that calls on everybody to do their part.

Millions of different people may have listened to a political speech on Inauguration Day. But, in a spiritual sense, maybe we heard a basic call to discipleship. ■

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# Can There Be Common Ground On Abortion?

By Tony Campolo, Prof. Emer., Eastern University, St. Davids, PA

In books and speeches, I have often said that God is neither a Democrat nor a Republican. I have contended that to make either party “The God Party” is idolatry. This, however, does not mean that Christians should abandon political activism. It has been said that all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. Consequently, I have long called for Christians to be involved in both political parties, striving to be the “leaven” that permeates *both* parties with biblically-based judgments and values derived from Christian beliefs.

Taking my own advice, this year I became involved in politics by accepting an appointment to the platform committee of the Democratic Party. In this role, I played a part in framing the abortion plank of the party’s platform. I helped the party to take what some have called a “historic step” by having the party become committed to abortion reduction.

More than 60 percent of all abortions are economically driven. The reality is that without provisions for hospital coverage; pre- and post-natal care; maternity leave so that a woman giving birth will not lose her job; and nursing assistance to help single mothers transition into parenthood; millions of women who want to carry their pregnancies to term will not do so. I became a member of the Democratic platform committee to address these concerns.

The good news is that, with help from Jim Wallis, author of *God’s Politics*, and others, the party platform now calls for these needs to be met. It also calls for education programs to reduce unwanted pregnancies, with room for the teaching of abstinence; and asks for government agencies to make adoptions easier.

These achievements were lauded by Democrats for Life and by the Catholic Alliance for Life. While at the Democratic National Convention, religious leaders of other faith traditions personally thanked me for my efforts. Even leaders of some pro-choice organizations hailed this compromise, claiming that at last they could find some common ground with pro-life advocates.

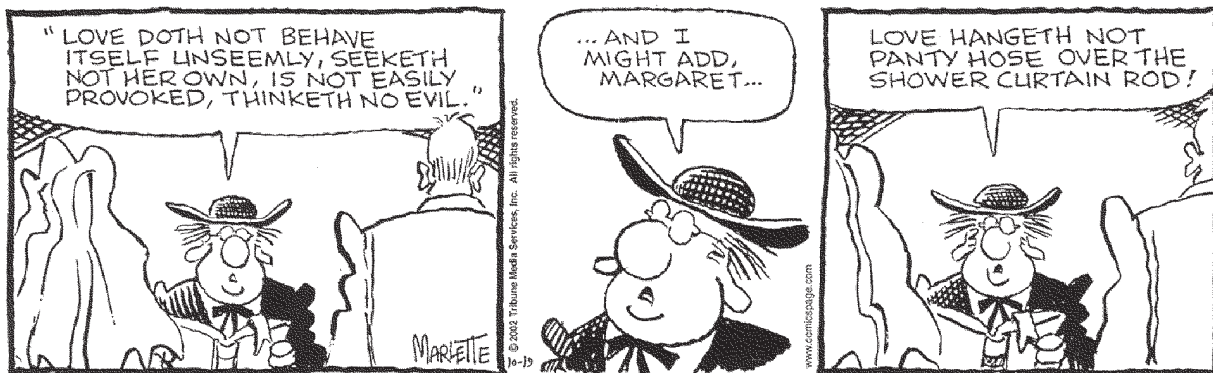
Purists, on the other hand, have had hard words for me, claiming that I should not have been involved in any way with a political party that is pro-choice. While I understand their desire to settle for nothing less than the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*, I nevertheless believe that my decision to work for abortion reduction was a good one.

Consider these questions: If ten children are drowning in a swimming pool, and you can only save six of them, should you save the six? Or should you wait until help arrives that can save them all; even if you know that the six you could save will be lost in the meantime?

To my Christian brothers and sisters who are part of the party that has a pro-life platform, I have to ask whether they are willing to hold the Republican Party to its pro-life commitments. For several years, the Republicans controlled the White House and both houses of Congress, and had a Supreme Court wherein seven of its nine judges were Republican appointees. Yet *no* effort was made to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*—and very little pressure to do something about this was put on Republican leaders by Evangelicals who had given them 82 percent of their votes in 2004. And are they willing to demand that provisions such as I worked for in the Democratic platform become policies of their party? To fail to do so would be to protect the unborn child, and then abandon that child and the mother in the delivery room. And do not raise the matter of how much money these proposals will cost. We all know better than that.

For those who condemn any compromise on this divisive issue of abortion, may I suggest that they consider *not* paying their taxes, since they are financing a government that supports a woman’s right to have an abortion—and in some instances even puts money into organizations that perform them.

There are legitimate concerns about my actions, but I decided that if some of the unborn could be saved, it would be wrong for me not to do what I could to save them. ■



# Diary of a Young Pastor

By Don Wilkey, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Onalaska, TX

On a recent trip to Mississippi, as I stopped to get some gas at a convenience store, I recalled a recent documentary of a reopened civil rights case. A white man from this area was accused of killing a black leader. I thought back over the years to my beginning ministry in this state, and I decided to write a few notes of my own experiences here.

As a young man, I left Oklahoma to move to Fort Worth, Texas, to live for the first time in my life in another state. The year was 1972. I was to begin my studies at Southwestern Seminary to prepare for the ministry. In my first night away from home and after unpacking my worldly goods in the men's dorm, I ventured out on the lawn and met a young man who, like myself, had just come to town to prepare for the ministry.

He was from Ole Miss, (Mississippi University) and we had much in common. We talked about what we expected to do when we finished here, local churches, and our calling into this field of service. After a cordial exchange, I could not resist asking the question about the race issue in Mississippi that I had heard a great deal about.

Upon my request for information about his native state, I could tell I had asked the wrong question. He turned about five shades of red and proceeded to tell me it was none of my outsiders business about the way they treated their black people in his home region. He assured me that everything was just fine there in the 1960s until outside agitators came to his state and ruined the relationship they had with peaceful black people.

Later that night as I said my prayers before I went to sleep for the first night in my new residence, I prayed something like this: "Lord if I ever graduate from this place I want to go where you send me, but please,

please don't let it be Mississippi."

Well, guess what happened after I finished school four years later? My new wife's foster family turned my name in to a church in Jefferson County Mississippi. The town that had just elected the first black mayor in the South (the mayor was the brother of slain civil rights worker Medgar Evers). The new mayor had openly admitted that he was a pimp in Chicago before coming back to his roots to run for office. He chose this area because the county was about 80% black. It had always had a large number of black residents, due to the large number of slaves on the area plantations before the Civil War. Thus Charles Evers won an election when black voters turned out to elect him, as well as taking control of the school, the county, the Little League, etc. The Baptist church was totally white and saw their congregation as the last place they controlled. And they were serious about keeping it that way.

The pulpit committee chairman taped his interview with me, in which I was asked if I would force them to integrate. I was eager for a place to serve and not naïve enough to ruffle any feathers. I assured my wife that they were probably not interested in me anyway after the interview.

After the meeting with the committee it was suggested by a denominational worker in the area that I go to Jackson to meet with a Baptist state official, whose job it was to help churches and potential pastors find each other. I sat down in his office to visit with him and find out about possible places of service in the state. He looked across the desk and asked me "Young man, what kind of church are you looking for?" I had never thought about that much since in that day many seminary graduates were fortunate to find a full-time church. I thought about the question for a

few minutes—I couldn't think of an answer, so I just responded, "I guess, an open church." Questioned again as to what "open" meant, I replied, "One that anyone could attend."

The man looked at me and replied, "Let me tell you something, don't come here to Mississippi and tell us how to treat our black people, after the way you treated the Indians in Oklahoma." I listened, but could not help chuckling to myself.

Guess what! The church actually called me, but I had questions as to whether or not ethically I ought to go. I visited with Dr. James Harris, a wise and gifted Baptist pastor in Ft. Worth, who encouraged me to accept the call. He said, "If you don't become their pastor, they might call the head of the Ku Klux Klan!" He was joking, I think.

My first day on the church field a deacon invited me to go to his place to get some fire wood. I willingly went into a wooded area where there was an older oak tree which would be perfect, since some huge limbs had fallen to the ground. I was informed that it was an old tree rumored to be the site where a "nigger was hanged there."

I quickly learned that in my church the liberals were the ones who believed black people had a soul. The conservatives did not believe blacks were human because they did not have a soul, as whites did.

A former pastor had gotten in hot water with the congregation for allowing blacks to come to the parsonage to play basketball with him. Many of the members allowed blacks in their homes, but only as servants. I was astonished when I discovered how little the black servants were paid for cleaning, cooking meals, and staying late at night to clean and wash dishes. One could easily make three or four times as much money on welfare as you could working for whites. I now

understood what locals meant when they said the government ruined the country when it handed out welfare checks.

The church was built before the Civil War and at one time held a slave gallery at the back. That is, blacks were allowed to attend church but had to sit in the gallery. The church had “recovered” from such liberal tendencies and unofficially decided that blacks were no longer allowed. The church even considered adding a porch to the front to hinder potential black visitors from entering, and also allow the congregation to vacate.

The first pastoral visit I made was to a soybean farm in the area. As I arrived, the farm hands were returning from the fields. I was shocked to see that the white workers went into the house to sit at the table for the meal prepared by the owner’s wife. The black workers took their plates and sat under a tree. I witnessed what was known as back door diplomacy—the custom that blacks were welcome only at the back door—it was taboo for a negro to come in the front door.

The Methodist church was next door to ours and we enjoyed a healthy relationship, sharing services and Vacation Bible School. I recall during one joint VBS, a young black child stood at a distance and looked with envy on the fun the students were having, knowing he would not be allowed to join them. The Methodist church was not very fond of their pastor, but they continued telling the district Bishop they wanted to keep him. The reason was that they were afraid if they lost their pastor, the area Bishop might send them a black minister.

One Methodist minister told me his son was pastor of a church outside of town. Being a naïve young man, the youthful preacher suggested the church ought to be open to receiving blacks into the congregation. He received several death threats after his comment, and he left the ministry. The father knew who these people were that threatened his son and I wondered how I might respond to someone who called up my child tell-

ing them they would kill him.

Another dangerous episode happened in the next county. A fellow-minister told about an episode during a voter registration drive in the sixties. The Klan had burned to the ground a black Baptist church in the region. This particular Southern Baptist church decided to take an offering to help the black church rebuild its church building. Because of this act, the pastor of the assisting church and his family had many sleepless nights in the parsonage, as the Klan would drive by shooting deer rifles around his home.

The area Director of Missions relayed an interesting story to me that I found hard to believe. He told me that the mayor of the large city in our region had both a white and a black family. Much like the Strom Thurmond story of a secret black child, the politician practiced this bigamy openly and most people accepted it.

I discovered many families had house servants who were supposedly genetically linked to those who employed them. It was accepted practice that white men might practice cohabitation with black women, but the opposite was a mortal crime. The unpardonable sin was for a white woman to be with a black man, socially or sexually.

One Sunday our church had a black visitor. He was a medical doctor working at the local clinic and I believe he made an honest mistake about attending. He was the only one who walked by me saying he enjoyed the service. I would like to have had a photo of the deacon who sat next to the door and greeted late visitors by handing them a bulletin. To have seen his expression when he leaned over to hand the church order of service would have been a real photo-op. One of the women got up and walked out of the building. It was rumored that several were disappointed in me that I did not close down the worship service.

The last deacon’s meeting I attended was dominated by rumors that one of the members had invited blacks to

attend our next revival. I recall once when a potential deacon was considered, he was quickly dismissed because “he did not think like people in the area did.” Since he worked at the local black university, he was probably not a racist like they were.

A former minister told me that one week the White Citizen’s Council, a racist white collar version of the Klan, came to town. They were hosting a rally at the public high school. The pastor got into hot water with some when he did not call off Wednesday night prayer meeting to attend the rally.

I experienced the wrath of one of the women in the church concerning a private school. I did not realize her children went to a White Citizen’s Council school in Natchez. About one-half our students attended this school and the other one-half went to a Christian academy. The WCC school was taken over by a Baptist church in Jackson. This was to protect them since it was rumored that private academies could by court ruling be forced to allow black students. The Jackson church took possession of the school because church and state separation would protect the school from integration. I asked the woman if things would change at the school now that it was owned by a church. She was angered that I did not know it was all ready a devoted Christian institution.

I survived about three years at the church and had a good relationship with most of the folks. (Tells you how often I held a Race Relations Sunday.) I had hoped to change some of their racist views, but probably I did not.

I next served a large church in the south central part of the state. The county seat church had a large budget and most of the prominent white citizens attended this fellowship. A former pastor of my first church relayed an interesting story to me about this church and race. One of the prominent wealthy deacons in the church stormed into the former pastor’s office demanding something be done. He carried a copy of the youth Sunday School literature. The cover had a pic-

ture of several students, one of them happened to be black. In response, the pastor sent off a scathing letter to the publishing board about such horrific suggestions and won approval from several in the church.

Also at this church I discovered an old outside rest room. It was the first time I had seen one of these relics of the past. Painted over the letters "Colored Restroom" was a new sign that simply said, "Restroom." Which was about as much radical revolution as the region could take.

About this time the star black athlete Walter Payton was a celebrity in the nation. Walter set the NFL rushing record and would have been welcomed in the White House. However, he would not have been welcome to attend my church in his home town, where his own aunt worked in the church kitchen.

One of the men in the church had played basketball for the Mississippi State Bulldogs and was an all-star in the Southeast Conference. The school had been invited to play in the National Invitation Tournament, but school officials refused the invitation because it would have meant play-

ing against black athletes. Ironically, MSU now has a black head football coach.

I also remember a Baptist Men's rally. It was jam-packed with men, standing-room only in a large church gym. Usually this meant a very special program. It was. A speaker from Texas was invited to share his "spiritual gift." The gift: a white man who could talk like black people. He spent almost an hour telling demeaning jokes about blacks like the old "Calhoun don't want the ball" stories. He said he was not laughing at them, but with them. Yeah, sure! After the meeting I shared with the pastor I worked under that I was thinking of sending a letter to the speaker questioning what he was doing. The pastor quickly told me he did not approve of my using the church letterhead to write such a letter.

While serving in the state, I heard a man who almost became a Christian martyr. His name was H. V. Davis and he told the story of almost being killed by the Klan. He worked with the state Baptist organization in white/black relations. One night he was leading a stewardship rally at a black church. While returning

home, he was run off the road by the Klan. They dragged him from his car, beat him, and urinated on him. He knew they were about to kill him; he pleaded with them to let him live and he would not take any legal action. He lived to serve another day. When I hear American Christians say they are persecuted because Walmart did not wish them a "Merry Christmas," I often think of this minister.

There was a man at the large church I served who would come to the church every morning to read John 3:16 and to pray. When I arrived at church each morning, he was just leaving after his devotional time. At that time this man was deeply troubled that a college choir was coming to the church, that had black members. Though John 3:16 says that "God so loved the world . . ." it never dawned on this man that God loved blacks!

We all have blind spots. In the area where I first served, it was race. Most now would probably like to forget those events ever happened. But they did. God still loves the world, every person in it. What is your blind spot! ■



# Is The Gospel of "More Sex" Really Good News for All?

By Marie M. Fortune, Founder, FaithTrust Institute, Seattle, WA

So Pastor Ed Young of the Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas, got the attention of the media, and his church members. He called for a week of "congregational copulation" to take people's minds off the economy. Pastor Young has added his blessing to our already highly sexualized culture.<sup>1</sup>

I have no problem with supporting consenting adults to engage in sexual intimacy. All the research suggests that sexual intimacy is good for body and soul. I have no problem with Pastor Young reminding his people that they need to remember to take time to be with their partners.

I just wish preachers would stop and think about the possible unintended consequences of their preaching. In his flock of 20,000 members, there are probably 14,000 women. Among those women, probably 4,000 were sexually abused as children. Among the 6,000 men, probably 1,000 were sexually abused as children. At least

500 of these women are living in an abusive relationship where marital rape is often part of the pattern of domestic terror.

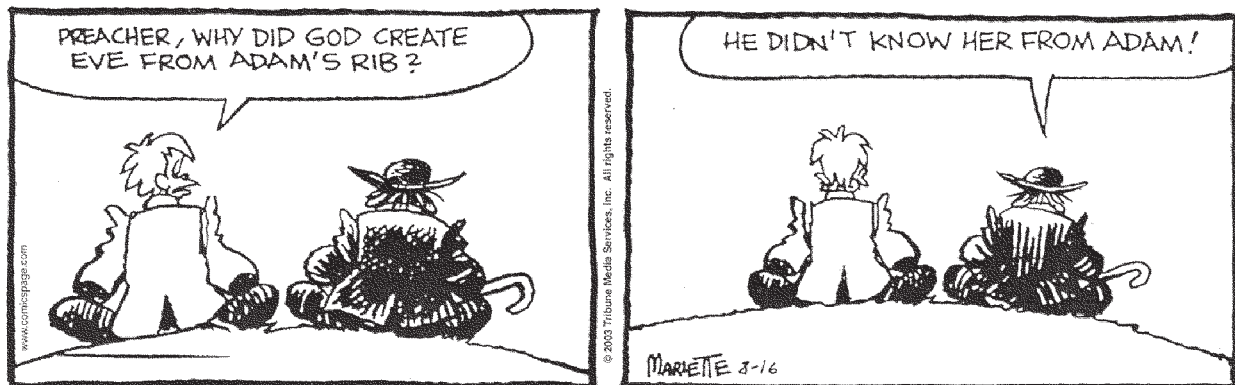
What is the unintended message to those who are survivors of sexual abuse or are currently victims? For some survivors of sexual abuse, sexual intimacy is not uncomplicated and a sense of safety and consent are very important. For those currently being abused by their partner, coercive sex and use of pornography are part of the domestic terror.

Perhaps this gospel of "more sex" could be nuanced with a discussion of the importance of respect, consent, choice, family planning or a Bible study that focuses both on the Bible's affirmation of sexuality [e.g. Song of Solomon] but also the expectation of respect for each other which we find in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. "For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband

does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does (1 Cor. 7:4)." Just to be clear: this means that sexual intimacy requires mutual consent. It is not license for the husband to decide when and if to have sex. It is not justification for marital rape.

Sexuality is a gift from God to all people. But it is a gift that can cause great harm when it is misused. I just wish preachers would stop and think about the possible unintended consequences of their preaching. ■

<sup>1</sup>**Editor's Note:** According to the *Dallas Times Herald*, Pastor Young himself was unable to fulfill the challenge he gave to the congregation, stating by Friday he was so tired that he was unable to complete the goal he had set for his married church members.



# A Matter of Ministerial Ethics: Going, Staying and Leaving

By Burton H. Patterson, Attorney, Southlake, TX

In all professions opportunities come to leave one position and move to another. Leaving is not always voluntary. The first experience mankind had to leave was a time of sorrow for all humanity. God instructed Adam to leave the Garden of Eden. When God instructed Abraham to leave Ur it could have been a time of joy or one of sorrow. The good book does not tell us about Sarah's relationship with her neighbors or whether Abraham was a well-liked member of the society in which he lived. It is unknown whether it was a good time for him to leave or not, but certainly it took a lot of preparation.

In the case of Adam there were no ethical considerations. God indicated what would be done and Adam had no choice but to obey. Adam could not have stayed. Abraham, on the other hand, could have decided to stay. If Abraham had decided not to go he would have taken action directly opposed to the will of God which in theological language is called sin. Going, for Abraham, was the only ethical decision he could make since it was the will of God for him to go.

There are times when leaving is against the will of God. Elijah fled Jezebel and finally God had to ask him, "What are you doing here?" He should have stayed but left. God permitted him to leave but was displeased with his action. A more thought-provoking biblical example is God's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Knowing he was being sent to murder his son, should Abraham have gone?

It is unknown whether John Mark wanted to leave the first recorded missionary journey and one can only speculate on the consequences if he had stayed. Certainly it parted the great Barnabas from the upstart Paul. What were the ethics involved in his

going on the journey, or his failure to stay or his leaving? If you know the ethical answer to whether Abraham should have taken his son to a specific place to kill him, or understand all the ethical considerations in the interplay between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark, you will have no difficulty in determining the ethical considerations which must be considered when a minister is faced with a call to another position or the consequences of staying in the current position.

This article deals with some of the ethical challenges inherent in a free-church which is radically committed to the autonomy of the local church. Synodical churches are relieved of many of the problems outlined below since theoretically the appropriate bishop knows the peculiarities of both the priests and congregations within the diocese.

The "call" to another place of leadership generally starts with a committee visitation to hear the quality of preaching. Prior to the visitation the committee most probably will have requested and received letters from individuals, both in and out of denominational life, recommending (or not recommending) the individual. Such letters frequently will state as much as is possible from a positive standpoint, and as few negative things as honesty allows.<sup>1</sup>

The committee will visit the candidate's church to hear him preach. This may or may not be surreptitious.<sup>2</sup> Assuming the committee has given advance notification of their attendance on a particular Sunday, what ethical considerations must be given to the message preached that day? Should the candidate pull out one of his "sugar sticks" which he has preached a dozen times in various revivals? Should he repeat one of his "stem winders" from a prior pulpit

which his current congregation has not heard? Should he just preach his normal run of the mill sermon? What are his obligations to the congregation which is considering him through their agent, the Pulpit Committee?<sup>3</sup>

Since in rare exceptions, the God of Israel and the God of Christianity have identical *modus operandi*, the rule explained by an orthodox Jewish congregant<sup>4</sup> is operative within the Christian tradition. With this knowledge the candidate surely recognizes that God needs his help in accomplishing the move. Thus it would be incumbent on the candidate to put his best foot forward in bowling over the committee with his homiletical skills. But is doing so ethical? The congregation is looking for a preacher for the long term and anything which would mislead them to think they were getting something other than what they really were getting would seem to cross the line.

After the committee has heard the candidate on several occasions and has settled on the candidate for further consideration, there probably will be a meeting between the committee and the candidate in which each explore the position to be filled. The candidate gives background information about himself and the committee gives background information about the church. Here again there is a major ethical question on how much information should be given. Some specific examples illustrate the challenge.

Example 1. The large downtown church, during the past two years, has experienced significant growth. Attendance is up 20% and giving is up 30%. The committee is quick to share these statistics but fails to note the reason: two fairly large churches in the same city have gone from "traditional" to "praise" worship and the



increase in membership and giving has come from a significant number of older couples moving to a church which provided a worship service with which they were comfortable. The committee also fails to disclose the lower than average ratio of children and young adults to total membership or that the average age of the membership is over 50 and continues to increase annually.

Example 2. The large church shows significant strength but the committee fails to disclose that “ministerial mathematics” have been used to maintain the strength of the statistics. Several of the larger adult departments have a number of “telephone teachers” who call all the shut-ins and chronic non-attenders on Sunday morning. These “teachers” read the scripture which will be studied in Sunday school, give a brief précis of the lesson, have a short prayer, and count them as having attended. Also, the prior pastor did a lot of visitation in the local county jail and frequently preached at the local rescue mission. The large number of converts, most of which he baptized, all were properly noted in the church records as “decisions for Jesus” even though he had baptized some of the same individuals several times.

Example 3. The church has an exceptionally high debt to income ratio and has been having difficulty in making its mortgage payments. The candidate fails to ask about the church’s debt and the committee conveniently fails to mention it as a current challenge which a new pastor will have to face.

Example 4. The church is embroiled in a significant divergence of opinion on any one of a number of issues, such as: Some may want to move the church’s physical location from a deteriorating part of town to a new large growing suburb. Some may want to stay and become ministers of a social gospel to the community around them which is undergoing significant change toward a lower economic status. Some in the church desire to increase the role of women in the visible ministry while others are fighting this philosophy

tooth and nail. Whatever issue is causing the turmoil, the committee fails to bring the internal challenges to the candidate’s attention.

Example 5. The candidate has been living a clean life in his current place of service, but had to leave the prior pastorate before facing an explanation of charges against him of a serious moral nature. In the committee questioning about any prior difficulties the candidate had experienced which might be an impediment to his ministry this sordid chapter of his life is not disclosed.

Example 6. The candidate has held himself out as “Dr.” when in fact his “doctorate” is from a mail order institution which gave him credit for ten years of ministry toward such degree thus permitting him to complete his studies by the payment of several thousand dollars in graduation fees. In reviewing his educational background the quality of his education is withheld from the committee which has little knowledge about such things.

Example 7. The committee is from a church which has a reputation for somewhat moderate views on some issues. The candidate is a strict five point Calvinist who knows that his views would conflict with some of the church’s well know staunch supporters whose views had been aired at various conventions. The candidate fails to tell the committee of the potential for a conflict between his views and those of some vocal members of their church.

Example 8. The candidate personally holds rather liberal views for his denomination but in questioning about his theological orthodoxy fails to point out where his views would not dovetail with the prevailing view of the denomination.

In each of the examples above it should be clear that the failure either of the committee or the candidate to be honest can have great future repercussions. The candidate may be called to the larger synagogue with the larger salary only to find that the church, having been misled about his pulpit ability, moral consistency, administrative capacity or theological persuasion may be forced to take action which

will be harmful to his reputation and that of God’s church.

Another possibility is that a worthy man of God may find himself, from no fault of his own, in a boiling kettle of fish from which he cannot extract himself without serious damage to his reputation as a pastor and administrator.

It probably would be wise for the committee to give the candidate the address and telephone number of the prior pastor and indicate to the candidate he would be wise to converse with the departed minister before making any decisions.

Often the committee will request a résumé. Frequently these tend not to delineate any damaging information which should be disclosed. In both cases any misdirection of the committee by proffering misleading data which keeps the committee from having a clear picture of the candidate, would constitute both dishonest and deception which by definition would be unethical conduct. “To be called as a pastor of a large, prestigious church is the goal that has led many good ministers to sacrifice their integrity on the altar of success”<sup>5</sup> in the preparation of a résumé for a pulpit committee. Such a résumé reveals the character of the candidate and “character is basic to all ethical decisions.”<sup>6</sup>

Both the candidate and the committee easily can rationalize their failure to give adequate information, either by telling only part of the story or not being forthcoming with relevant data. Dietrick Bonhoeffer, in dealing with truth telling, stated “‘telling the truth’ means something different according to the particular situation in which one stands. Account must be taken of one’s relationship at each particular time.”<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer recognizes that within each situational relationship statements could be truthful or not truthful when in other situations the opposite would be true of the same statement. However, he goes on to state, “The concept of living truth is dangerous, and it gives rise to the suspicion that the truth can and may be adapted to each particular situation in a way which completely destroys

the idea of truth and narrows the gap between truth and falsehood, so that the two become indistinguishable.<sup>8</sup>

One additional concept needs to be considered in the “going” section of this paper. Historically there have been three professions: ministry, medicine and law. Those in the profession of medicine and law have codes of ethical conduct which prohibit them from accepting an engagement that is beyond their capacity. A podiatrist will not accept a patient for heart surgery. A tax lawyer will not accept a client with a labor law problem. Likewise a minister should not permit his name to be considered for a position for which he does not have the competence, training or experience to fulfill the expectations of the position. Unfortunately candidates for positions several steps up the ladder of success do not recognize this particular ethic and end up in positions in which they have little capacity for success because of the lack of experience, knowledge or skills necessary for the position.

The ethics of “going,” being of such great importance, cannot be minimized or sloughed over. Both the candidate and the committee must be totally transparent about all facts which might have an impact on the other’s decision. To do less would be unethical.<sup>9</sup> The deliberate deception by or of either the candidate or the committee, to the detriment of the other, must be considered unethical.

The ethics of staying are just as complicated as the initial call. Some pastors stay forever and others start looking for their next pastorate the week after they move their library into their new place of service. The principal test of staying should be whether God is blessing the ministry—an indicator of God’s will. This does not necessarily mean growth. Mother Nature sometimes grows tall oak trees from which large overhanging boughs grow beyond the center of gravity which the root system can support. When this happens the tree will fall of its own weight. There are times when growth is not the congregation’s *summum bonum* nor the appropri-

ate measure of God’s blessing. But whatever the appropriate yardstick in a particular ministry, if God is not blessing the work, it most probably is time for a change in pastoral leadership. In this regard it should be noted that all changes in pastoral leadership do not necessarily mean a change in the individual holding the position. Sometimes it means a change of outlook which must be wrought within the minister himself. Some examples illustrate this postulation.

Example 1. The church is experiencing a significant and substantial drop in preaching attendance while the Sunday school attendance and number of congregants at other functions remains the same as it has been. It is obvious that many church members do not desire to hear the pastor’s sermons.

Example 2. The pastor finds his interaction with both the community and his flock to be a distasteful part of his job. He no longer finds any joy in visiting the lost, the sick or the shut-ins. With no joy in his heart he has a difficult time interacting on a positive wave length with the more aggressive members of this flock. This condition, when combined with the situation in Example 1, is called, at least in West Texas, “hoof and mouth disease” and describes a pastor who cannot preach and will not visit.

Example 3. The church vision is stagnant. The same programs continue with no new revelation from senior leadership for any change to increase the impact of the church for the kingdom of God. The pastor surveys the flock and his field and has no visualization of any change or program which would better either. This pastor possibly has “burned out” in the present location.

Example 4. There is conflict between the pastor and members of his staff over the direction in which the church is being led. If this conflict is with multiple members of the staff, and particularly if such staff members have sufficient longevity and longer tenure in the church than the pastor, there is the making of a church split.

Example 5. Various factions of members are beginning to battle over some aspect of either worship or theology. When the “praise team” crowd wants to take over the traditional 11:00 service and the “traditionalists” rebel at even a “blended” service because they cannot stand the sound of the guitar or drums, there is the making of a church fight in which the pastor will not be permitted to sit on the sidelines. He will have to give leadership and he may be incapable of promoting peace in such a situation.

Example 6. A theological debate breaks out between members concerning a “liquid” point of theology about which there is sufficient lack of unanimity that Baptists ought not to part company over it, such as “post/pre millennial” views or “Armenianism vs. Calvinism.” If the pastor has strong views and will have to take a stand, his alienation of a significant part of the membership may well signal the need for his departure prior to an eruption of the conflict which would be flamed by his theological stance.

Example 7. The pastor desires to make a significant change in church polity. This might entail reducing the power of the Board of Deacons to being a Fellowship of Deacons and installing a committee system to “run the church.” It might be the other way by installing a Board of Elders thereby reducing the traditional Baptist congregational polity.

Example 8. The prior pastor (and/or his wife), who has retired but not left the congregation, continually creates an atmosphere that makes it impossible for the new pastor to function in a leadership role. A new pastor who is second guessed and criticized at every turn will have little option but to enter into major conflict with his predecessor or leave.

In each of the examples the pastor must in all candor pray for God’s guidance in leaving or staying. The pastor is in a fiduciary relationship to the flock. Candor is the full disclosure of all material facts. The flock has a right to know the pastor’s position and the pastor has the right to

know the position of various members of his flock on any matter that might cause conflict. Failure to disclose is called 'concealment' and is a breach of fiduciary responsibility. To be totally ethical and to protect God's church, the pastor must in all honesty bring the areas of conflict to the forefront with the appropriate members of the congregation. Depending on the congregation and the type of conflict this may mean sitting down with the Sunday school leadership or with the Missions or Evangelism Committee or the Deacons, etc., to reach an agreement on whether the church would be served better if the minister left or whether the matter can be solved without such drastic action.

If God's man determines it is God's will that he leave, what are his ethical and fiduciary responsibilities toward the congregation that he is leaving and to the man who will follow him? Does the congregation, either in whole or in some specific grouping (such as the Deacons or a particular committee) have the right to know the actual reason?

Would it be ethically correct for the departing pastor to leave some sage personal advice on specific problems and specific trouble makers to make the new man's transition easier? Certainly in the business world there are exit interviews in which the reasons for departure are examined in detail so the business can learn and correct challenges. Also in the business world it is not unusual for a departing employee to be asked to prepare a detailed job description, which would go far beyond the type of description prepared by an Employee Relations Department which just lists duties, but contains a full description of pitfalls and challenges the replacement employee will face both in physical assets and interfacing employee relationships. Consider the following examples and determine the departing minister's ethical response to each.

Example 1. Mrs. Hotbod, who continually is in need of marital counseling about a dysfunctional marriage, always tries to set her appointments

for times when there be few, if any, other staff in the office. Then she is quite suggestive in her attire and provocative language. Would some prior preparation for her need be advisable for the new man to receive from his predecessor?

Example 2. The Youth Minister continually requested some "Praise Worship" which he felt necessary if the youth were to feel any relevance from the worship services. A compromise had been reached with two of the senior members of the church who were against the idea but capitulated if the intrusion on their traditional worship was limited to not more than four minutes of such "relevancy." These two senior members are now deceased and few if any of the other members know of the compromise. Should the departing pastor leave it to the new man to fight this battle again, or leave him a short history of the conflict and its settlement.

Example 3. The financial administration of the church lacks a lot to be desired. Over the years members, who have had no confidence in the way the church has spent God's money, have taken it on themselves to determine the church's ministries by designating their contributions and tithes. Personal counseling has been somewhat successful in getting these contributors to see the wisdom of letting the church, through its committees, make the decisions instead of having the church's mission determined by contributors who understands the meaning of the golden rule, i.e., those who have the gold make the rules. Should the departing man of God outline the challenge and the movement toward solution which has occurred during his watch?

Example 4. One of the founders of the church had been the church treasurer since its inception. Previously some "irregularities" were discovered in the church's books and after a private consultation with the pastor the treasurer resigned and made a significant contribution to the building fund in an amount equivalent to the "irregularities." The individual has continued

in the church and recently was elected to a new position of leadership. It could be anticipated that a new pastor, unknowledgeable of such individual's history, might take no action if the church were to elect such person again as the church treasurer. What, if any responsibility does a departing pastor have toward the church, the kingdom and the next pastor in this type of situation?

Example 5. One particular two-faced member of the congregation is very regular in attendance, although contributing little or nothing financially or in service. This member takes a broad brush and butters the minister up and down every Sunday about the wonderful sermon which he has preached—and then this member goes home and writes some of the most vicious dribble imaginable about the horrible sermon and theological mistakes made. This member's blog never has considered honesty or truthfulness a virtue and the material published on the blog is both libelous and actionable. The departing minister wishes he had taken a firm stand the first week of his ministry and counseled such person with a firm commitment to take the matter first before the church and then to court if it continued. Should this matter be brought to whoever follows him before such individual preaches his first sermon?

Example 6. The church's education building is fifteen years old. The original paint, carpet, etc. lasted about ten years after which the church decided to update and renovate it. One of the church's active members was a contractor. He gave the church a very low bid and the entire congregation thought he was doing God a great service in renovating the building so inexpensively. In reality he renovated it very cheaply. The church is preparing to do another renovation and the same member expects to be the low bidder and do another cheap job for the church. Should the departing minister just leave this to God's hands, knowing the church will again award the bid to a member who in all probability will again do a cheap job?

The foregoing examples should indicate ethical questions which arise on leaving are significantly greater than those on going and staying. Decision made in the going or staying categories concern the minister himself and the body of believers to which he is considering going to or staying with. In moving to the ethics of leaving a third person is being interjected—a future minister, probably unknown at the time the decision must be made. Of course, the decision on making some disclosures can be made after the church calls a new minister.<sup>10</sup>

One solution for the challenge is by having the church adopt a policy requiring a departing minister to prepare written information for the next pastor which the departing minister feels appropriate. Such church policy should require the information to be held in strict confidence between the two ministers and either sealed and delivered by the personnel committee to the new minister or delivered directly from the departing to the arriving minister.

Whether a minister goes, stays or leaves can have long lasting consequences and all actions taken by the minister and the congregation (and

any committee acting as their agent) needs to be beyond ethical reproach. To be otherwise would be a disservice to the Lord and His Kingdom. ■

<sup>1</sup>Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics*, Baker, 2004, 110.

<sup>2</sup>Query about the ethics of a committee, whose intent is to “steal” another church’s pastor, not being upfront with the church which they are raiding by arriving in different cars at different times and sitting in different parts of the sanctuary. Ethically should the committee let the church know of their presence and why they are there? If they do not announce their presence is this not “deceit” which most ethicists would condemn?

<sup>3</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount, Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5-7*, Baker, 2004, analyzes Matthew 5:33-37, concludes this pericope basically deals with deceitfulness (p. 147), and states his conclusion as “God’s intent is that we be truthful persons.” (p. 86).

<sup>4</sup>Said Jewish congregant, so mad he could spit nails, explained to the author in about 1960, that God had called his Rabbi to a larger synagogue with a larger salary. It was explained to him that the

God of the Christians operated in the same vein so perhaps they were the same God.

<sup>5</sup>Trull and Carter, *Ibid.* n. 1, 15.

<sup>6</sup>*Id.*, 47.

<sup>7</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Macmillan, 1955, Simon & Schuster 1995, 358.

<sup>8</sup>*Id.*, 361.

<sup>9</sup>Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, states that character is determined by the choices one makes and cannot be made without a moral state. Once the choice is made action occurs but determining the action requires calculation of the results. Thus anything either the candidate or the committee does which clouds transparency must be considered unethical. [Sir David Ross translation, Oxford Press, 1925, 137-139.]

<sup>10</sup>Talbert, *Ibid.* n 3, 147. Dr. Talbert concludes that Matthew 5:21-26 deals with the ethics breaking relationships and the failure to restore broken relationships. He summarizes this conclusion stating “God’s will is that there be no destruction of relationships that is your doing.” (p. 71) It should be obvious that leaving information about prior relationships could be destructive of those relationships. Thus this is an area in which the leaving minister should be overly cautious.



# An Atheist and a Minister Walked Into a Bar...

By Todd Thomason, Virginia Beach, VA

Actually, I walked into a theater to see Bill Maher's new documentary, *Religulous*, but one theater worker definitely stared at me as if she were waiting for the punch line when she found out I was a pastor who had paid to see this film. No doubt many Baptists will be boycotting *Religulous* if not decrying it. Maher stated in an interview with Larry King in August that he hopes *Religulous* will become "The Passion of the Christ" for the 16% of Americans who are non-religious. Personally, I hope his docu-comedy will serve as a wakeup call to people of faith.

For much of my life I, like Maher, attended church simply because my parents insisted that I go. In my early adolescence I spent many a Sunday morning crouched in the floorboard of the family car to avoid going to Sunday school. Worship was boring and I didn't see the point. As far as I could tell, there wasn't much difference between people I knew who went to church and those who did not. The Christians I saw on TV in the mid 1980's were nothing but big hair and saccharine smiles. If that qualified as "real" Christianity I was prepared to pass.

While watching Maher interview a series of ostentatious preachers, Jesus impersonators, faith-exploiting politicians, and self-proclaimed Messiahs, I cringed as much as laughed—and found myself often siding with Maher. The theme-park musicals, theologically validated homophobia, and kitschy gift shops that are the outgrowths of their "ministries" have nothing to do with why Jesus lives or what He stands for. They certainly have nothing to do with why I have given my life to Him since my floorboard days. Yet, these people and these enterprises form Maher's image of religion in general and Christianity in particular.

It should be emphasized that

Maher is about as fair and balanced in matters of religion as Sean Hannity is in matters of politics. The film is limited strictly to his preconceptions. In his quest to "understand" Christianity, Maher doesn't seek out a single respected theologian to answer his questions. He doesn't ask the Pennsylvania Amish where they found the strength to forgive the man who gunned down their children at school. He doesn't mention the many ecumenical mission teams still volunteering to help rebuild post-Katrina New Orleans. He doesn't visit Baptist AIDS ministries in New York, Catholic orphanages in Central America, or any number of faith-based homeless shelters and soup kitchens around the world. For these (and many other) omissions people of faith can rightfully criticize him.

But we must criticize ourselves as well. As much as we might like to, we cannot blame Maher for the caricatures of religion portrayed in the film. The sad truth is that, by and large, religious people have constructed Maher's myopic image of faith for him. More than twenty-five years of vocal religious activity centered on narrow ideological agendas, partisan political activism, and the merchandising of orthodoxy has come to define broader public perception of what faith is. Maher didn't buy 65 million copies of the *Left Behind* series. Maher didn't raise \$27 million to build a Creation(ist) Museum. Maher hasn't sold his soul to the Republican Party because he believes his Bible tells him Christians can't vote for Democrats—or vice versa. The parody of faith acted out in *Religulous* is staged by people of faith.

Rewriting this parody into something more cogent and Christ-like is the challenge of the twenty-first century Church. Even if we ourselves did not help construe the parody as it exists, we are guilty by association in the minds of Maher and those who

share his image of religion—a segment of society that is growing faster than any congregation out there. We are also guilty in that our passivity has allowed the cartoonish religion featured in *Religulous* to gain center-stage. If we desire to be faithful Christian witnesses in this culture of skepticism, we must move beyond church programs and campaigns. Indeed, we must move beyond the church. The sacrificial, inconvenient, and intentional living of our faith is the only thing that will cut through the negativity now so widely associated with organized religion.

Jesus still has hope, peace, joy, and love to offer this world that science cannot explain, reason cannot fully fathom, and materialism cannot supply. However, people outside the church will not see those things in Christ if they do not see them in Christians. It was a relationship with a smart, articulate, and devout college professor that pulled me out of the floorboard and into the fold. His Christ-like example—not his flashy presentation or self-righteous certitude—showed me who Jesus is. Even Maher recognized the difference. While leaving the Trucker Chapel in Charlotte, NC, he thanks the congregation for "being Christ-like and not just Christian."

*Religulous* concludes with Maher chiding humanity to "grow up." He's right. We need to—all of us. For those of us who are followers of Jesus, that means owning the faith we profess rather than outsourcing it to pastors or lobbies or marketing firms so that when those who are not devoted to Christ think about Christianity they think of profound forgiveness, ministry to "the least of these," and other forms of Christ-likeness rather than theme parks, media genres, or party platforms that have come to be labeled "Christian." ■

# Christian Ethics and the Movies

Reviewed by David A. Thomas, Prof. of Rhetoric, Emeritus, University of Richmond<sup>1</sup>

## Politics, the Church, and Character:

*Frost/Nixon* (2008) and *Doubt* (2008)

Plays and movies are different dramatic media. Plays are meant for the stage, to be mounted before live audiences, preferably small enough to achieve a sense of intimacy between the viewer and the actors. Movies, as visual media, are meant for projection on large screens across a broader range of view.

The audience experience of attending plays and going to the movies is qualitatively different. Plays tend to be focused on character; movies on action. It is difficult to transfer the psychological intensity of a play to the large screen, and equally hard to include cinematic spectacle and vast action on the stage. Once I saw the Tony Award Broadway musical production of *Titanic* in NYC, and I swear they sank that enormous boat right there on the stage. But that was a \$10 million production! There's a reason why Shakespeare's plays located all the sweeping battle scenes off stage, to be talked about by the characters on stage after the fact.

The very *talkiness* of plays is one of the hurdles that screen writers and directors have to deal with when they attempt to adapt a hit drama into a movie, as in the movies, *Frost/Nixon* and *Doubt*. Ticket buying audiences are hard to lure into the Cineplex to see an intense drama.<sup>2</sup> That, among other reasons, is why there are so few commercially successful translations of the best plays. The writer must figure out how to move some of the story outdoors, where visual scenes of crowded city streets, or majestic mountain scenery, can be injected, just for the movie audience. Some of my movie buddies like to rate films by

counting car chases and explosions.

The intimacy of plays invites the viewer to become engaged at deeper psychological levels. A good action movie pumps up the adrenalin level, but a good drama impels you to have to think about it. Indeed, a comment I often hear from people is, "I only go to the movies to be entertained. I don't like movies that *make you think*." Box office results reflect that sentiment.

*Frost/Nixon* was originally a 2006 British play by dramatist Peter Morgan, and moved to Broadway for over 100 performances in 2007. Frank Langella, playing Nixon, won the Tony Award for Best Actor. Ron Howard adapted the play for the screen, with the same two lead actors. Michael Sheen (think of Tony Blair in *Elizabeth*) played the David Frost role. The story is about the TV interviews that Frost conducted with former President Richard Nixon after his pardon in 1977, which culminated in Nixon's reluctant admission that he had indeed abused his power in office and committed wrongdoing.

The script revolves around the actual transcript of the TV interviews, thus the production has a very authentic feel. Before the final credits, there are brief interviews with some of the original advisers who had support roles. The heart of the drama is the conflict between two towering egos working in a sort of talk show boxing match between a nimble lightweight and a plodding ex-heavyweight champion. In their first three out of four interview taping sessions, Frost never lays a glove on Nixon. Only in the final round, about Watergate, does he penetrate Nixon's defenses and score points, with telling effect.

Most critics agree that despite the subject matter, *Frost/Nixon* is oddly non-political, i.e., our partisan attitudes are not a factor in our response

to their intellectual combat. By the time this event aired originally, Nixon's political career was already over. Frost was gambling his TV career (and his own savings) on this one shot at the American TV market. For both men, what was at stake was whether Frost had the interviewing and interrogation skills to force some kind of public admission from the elusive Nixon.

Set in 1977, the story also depicts the dawning of TV's power to influence public opinion, which neither Frost nor Nixon fully understood then, despite Nixon's acute realization of the fact that his image during the TV debates with Kennedy were what did in his 1960 presidential election campaign.

*Doubt*, like *Frost/Nixon*, was first a Broadway play. It ran for 525 performances between 2004 and 2006. It won numerous awards, including the Tony and the Pulitzer Prize. The original playwright, John Patrick Shanley, adapted it for the screen. The movie starred two acting heavyweights, Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman, with strong supporting roles by Amy Adams as the young teaching nun caught in the middle, and Viola Davis as the boy's mother. The story concerns an accusation that the parish priest, Father Flynn, molested an altar boy. The accuser is the parochial school's principal, Sister Aloysius. In the script, the priest delivers two short but penetrating homilies: one on the valuable place of doubt in one's faith, and the other about tolerance.

The play ran as a long one-act drama, with the special feature that the cast remained on stage for an extended Q&A from the audience after each performance. A key gimmick to this drama is that the playwright intentionally does not reveal whether the priest is actually guilty of anything. As in real life, the priest can only deny

the nun's charges, but he cannot prove his innocence. In this case, he will not provide any explanations of his close relationship with the boy. Even at the play's end, you are left in doubt. Sister Aloysius's suspicions are based on no direct evidence whatever, other than her intuition; yet she is absolutely certain of her rectitude. It's all circumstantial and somewhat "thin," but could there be some fire where there is smoke? Playwright Shanley whispers the "true" backstory to the actor-priest, with a vow not to reveal what he knows. He is under seal. Therefore, the facts remain shrouded in doubt, leaving room for argument.

Neither of these movie adaptations of plays has much in the way of typical movie action sequences or background visual effects. Yet in both, the dialogue and character conflicts are riveting from beginning to end. Both movies succeed in "making you think."

**Dramatic Elements and Christian Ethics.** The elements of drama in classical tragedies fall into six basic elements: plot (action), characters (a protagonist and an antagonist in conflict), spectacle (the scene, or setting), diction (language), purpose (of the playwright), and music (the Greek chorus in the classics, the sound track now). The major difference between movies and plays as dramatic forms is in the emphasis they give to these elements. Movies focus on plot or action (what happens next, show don't tell). Plays focus on character, especially, the underlying values in conflict between the characters. When it comes to understanding why the hero and the villain act as they do, characters are always motivated in well-wrought plays. Audiences identify with or against their motives, and judge them as either just and moral, or unjust and to be booed and hissed—and/or fired and/or jailed.

In *Doubt*, readers of this journal will be drawn to the conflicts between Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius on more than one level. First, it is possible that the priest is being unfairly accused of a seriously vile act which, if true, would destroy him as a priest forever.

Anyone who has ever been involved in, or around, a similar situation, even an alleged sexual harassment incident, can become viscerally engaged in Father Flynn's dilemma over how to respond to such a charge.

Second, Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius represent polar opposite values in terms of Vatican II. He is a progressive who strives to move the church and the school forward socially and theologically. She is a traditionalist who sees her duty as being to protect and maintain the conservative status quo. In large part, this secondary conflict provides fuel to Sister Aloysius's motives to want to destroy this charismatic priest who threatens her worldview. In principle, these contending values extend readily to analogous kinds of arguments between conservatives and liberals (or moderates, in some churches).

If you conduct "faith and movie" discussion groups, or use movies as teaching aids, both *Doubt* and *Frost/Nixon* are excellent choices. However, *Frost/Nixon* runs longish at two hours, leaving less time for group participation afterwards. Also, it is rated R for language (Nixon's primarily).

With regard to *Doubt*, it is difficult to imagine any adults seeing this movie and not strongly wanting to discuss it. ■

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## Aging, Family, and Racism:

*Gran Torino* (2009)

**Walt Kowalsky: Get off my lawn!**

*Gran Torino* is a Clint Eastwood parable of peace and redemption, a tale of a certain father who had two sons. It is a Christ-image film. There is even a crucifixion image. To explain in detail would be to spoil the movie, if you haven't seen it. Hopefully, my critique can illuminate the significance of the movie without completely spoiling it. The movie reads like a play. It revolves around a classic conflict raging between an aged, profane, tyrannical patriarch, Walt Kowalsky, and his neighbors. Like King Lear, he cannot understand or accept the changes occurring

within society, his neighborhood, and his grown children who have moved away. Although the story depicts some violence by tough street gangs, Walt's fiercest battles take place within his flinty heart. A failed father of his own sons, he becomes a reluctant father figure to Sue and Thao Lor, the fatherless teenage Hmong girl and boy next door.

Walt despises the reality that his neighborhood has changed. He is the only white person remaining as the result of an influx of ethnic groups moving in around him. He is isolated, surrounded by Blacks, Hispanics, and other minority enclaves. His own nearest neighbors are Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia, whom he lumps in his mind with the Chinese and North Koreans he had to fight against in the Korean War fifty years ago.

Walt is a retired Ford assembly plant worker in Detroit. He has lived in the same modest neighborhood for the past half century. As *Gran Torino* opens, Walt is listening to the baby-faced young priest preaching his wife's funeral sermon before a small congregation of the few remaining family members and friends he has left. His two forty-something sons are present, together with their wives and children, who are obviously there only under duress. The kids are dressed in casual play or school clothes. Their college-aged daughter shows up with a bare midriff, showing her pierced navel. (Later, this spoiled brat asks Walt if he will give her his *Gran Torino* to drive to college!) Walt mutters imprecations against the priest and the attendees under his breath.

Walt spends his days with Daisy, his old golden Labrador, fixing things around the house, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer alone (or sometimes with a few buddies at the local bar), and terrorizing the neighbors. His only friend is a white barber who gives him a monthly \$10 haircut. These two men love to joke and swap racist, profane insults.

To call Walt a crusty old curmudgeon is too kind. He is a sneering, angry, unreconstructed foul-mouthed bigot. He bombs you with the F-word,

but his most profane language consists of the wide-ranging epithets he constantly uses to refer to his neighbors. He says what he thinks about the “slopes, gooks, and zipperheads,” whether you want to hear it or not. He still has his M-1 rifle from Korea, which he readily uses to threaten the teenagers who encroach upon his tidy postage-stamp lawn.

His house is the only one on the block that is still well maintained. His push mower still works like the proverbial sewing machine. In his garage is his prize possession, a mint condition 1972 Ford Gran Torino that he helped assemble in the factory, along with his workshop stocked with all of the tools he ever owned. In his basement he keeps his footlocker with a few old snapshots, along with the Silver Star he earned in combat.

Emotionally, Walt is tightly wrapped within the thick scars of his lifelong deep pain. He curses anyone who attempts to reach out to him, including his own children and grandchildren, who, naturally enough, despise him in return. The young priest persistently tries to persuade Walt to honor his late wife’s last request that he drop by the church to make his confession. Walt summarily rebuffs the young Irish priest: “I confess that I have no desire to confess to a 27-year old virgin just out of seminary who fools superstitious old women with promises of eternity.” Eventually, though, the priest manages to engage Walt in a serious conversation. They share their ideas of the meaning of life and death. Walt has a lot clearer grasp of the meaning of death than he does of how best to live his life. He hints that ever since the Korean War, he has carried guilt over more sins than just the enemy soldiers he killed in face-to-face combat.

The plot is driven by the neighborhood conflicts generated by the Hmong, Hispanic, and Black gangs. The Lor family next door tries to keep their own teenagers, Sue and Thao Vang Lor, free of the gangs. Their no-good cousins won’t leave them alone. The gang keeps hectoring these two

good kids to join their delinquent activities. Walt tries to stay out of it. His only involvement is to try to keep their noisy rowdiness from spilling over onto his property.

The story advances when Walt catches the hapless neighbor boy, Thao, in his garage late one night trying to steal his treasured Gran Torino as his initiation into the gang.

Humiliated, the Lor family makes Thao apologize to Walt, and insists that Walt give Thao a lot of chores to make up for his crime against him. Initially, Walt wants nothing to do with the boy. Little by little, he shows the boy how to use his tools to fix things around the neighbors’ dilapidated houses. Meanwhile, the precocious, pretty Sue manages to lure Walt to a backyard barbecue with the offer of beer. To his surprise, Walt learns to like the taste of their chicken and dumplings prepared with the traditional Hmong recipe.

At this party, Walt is asked if he would like for the Hmong elder to “read” him. When he agrees, the old man gives him an earful, including his opinion that Walt’s main problem is that he has no peace within, and that is the reason he cannot find any peace in others. Walt muses, this old man knows me better than my own kids do. This moment is the first sign of honest self-awareness he displays.

Soon events escalate, and things get a lot worse for the Lor family. The Hmong gang drives by their home one night and sprays it with a fusillade of bullets. Thao is slightly hurt. Sue is abducted and brutalized. The family asks Walt to help protect them from the violent gang that is now targeting them. Nearly eighty, even with his antique rifle, Walt realizes that he is outmatched by a carload of doped-up gangbangers with automatic pistols. In the story’s climax, Walt has to decide how best to respond to the threat. What he does is truly surprising, resulting in a tragic *denouement* of personal sacrifice and redemption. In the process, Walt must become the protector and the mentor to Thao and Sue Lor that he was never able

to accomplish with his own sons. At the same time, justice is served. Even the priest admits that Walt, despite his philippics, had taught him some valuable lessons in an unexpected final act of great courage.

**Critique of the Movie.** Clint Eastwood, at first glance, plays a parody of himself from his earlier Dirty Harry and the Gunslinger in his early spaghetti Westerns like *Hang ‘Em High*. Apparently, he is woefully out of place in this small drama. Be patient: Clint Eastwood, the producer, director, and star of this perfect little gem, knows exactly what he is doing by using his image to draw in the viewer. Eastwood is surrounded by an anonymous and mostly amateur cast, so you think you know what is going to happen in the end. Then wham! You’re dead wrong.

Like all great plays, *Gran Torino* is a character study. The main protagonist is locked in a mortal conflict over some major core values. It is an ethical study because the conflicting values require the main character to choose which path of life to follow in one climactic gesture. Walt chooses an act that affects his neighbors, his family, and his own faith and philosophy of life, knowing his decision has major consequences for all concerned. Surprising as it seems, Walt’s decision is true to his character.

Does Eastwood pull it off? Can he convince you that, in the end, in this, his valedictory acting job in *Gran Torino*, Clint Eastwood is really Walt Kowalsky, a neighborhood jerk who happens to strongly resemble a *persona* known around the world? Can we suspend our disbelief, and recognize that Walt is just as human as the rest of us? Just as human as bashful Thao and saucy Sue Lor, played as they are by kids who have never acted in the movies before, struggling with very real and dangerous issues that they cannot possibly cope with alone, but who never give up? Could it be that salty old Walt, supremely certain in his cynical views of life, realizes way down in his soul that he does not have all the answers either, but must go through the same character arc as everyone else?



Above all, can we accept that even such a man can be redeemed, and through his transformation, become an instrument of redemption for others? You be the judge.

**Ethical Implications.** This movie is about changing demographics, suburban decline and racial shifts across boundaries, foreigners, and violent gangs. It is also about family dysfunctions, aging, parenting issues, and the nature and significance of a religious faith, among one's resources for coping. *Gran Torino* revolves around the central metaphors of gang violence and racial conflicts that come with unwelcome assimilation.

The families in the movie, both Walt's and the Lorscheidts next door, are microcosms of the impact of those inexorable forces moving through the world today. Walt cannot fathom the vital dynamics beneath the surface of things. His defense mechanism is to cling to his past, even though not much has worked out the way he want-

ed. Just as he once heroically fought the North Koreans, he thinks he must now fight the ethnic Hmongs and the other punks who make up what he sees as the inferior races that constitute the immediate world he now lives in. As a father, Walt rejected his sons because they opted to live their lives according to their own view of a successful life in society and rejected his view, because they drive foreign cars, and permit their kids to have body piercings. Being Boomers, they telegraph a sense of *entitlement* that Walt refuses to grant to them.

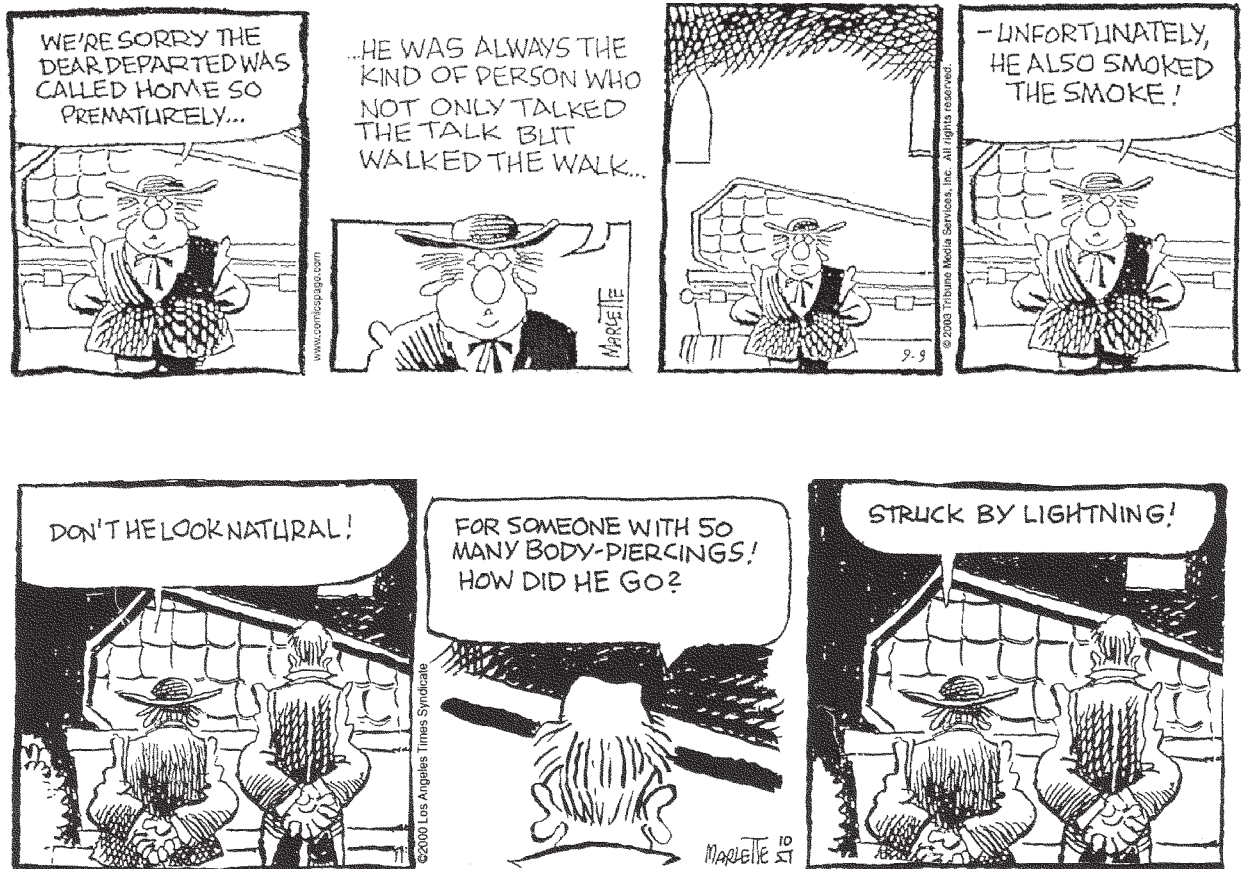
His beautiful Gran Torino, lovingly washed and polished every week, symbolizes what Walt Kowalsky most prizes in life, hanging on to good quality old things, and trying to preserve the stability of the old ways, now gone for good. The Lorscheidts, and all the Hmongs, represent the inevitable incursion of the Other into one's personal space, the foreign, the unfamiliar, the potential for danger, and in

general, the need to adjust.

*Gran Torino* is a movie about peace and redemption. There are divisions, spiritual pollution, and evil that must be dealt with. The church, embodied in the role of the young priest, also has to adapt its abstract, Pollyannaish message of death as "bittersweet—bitter because we mourn the loss, but sweet because it brings heaven," to embrace a new form of faith that offers peace through reconciliation in this present life, with one's neighbors as well as with one's family, and especially, within oneself. ■

<sup>1</sup>David A. Thomas retired in 2004 and now resides in Sarasota, FL. He invites your comments at davidthomas1572@comcast.net.

<sup>2</sup>*Doubt* cost \$25 million to make, and as of a month after its Christmas release, it had broken even. *Frost/Nixon* had a budget of \$35 million, but had earned back less than \$10 million in that same period.



## Book Reviews

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

### The Faith of Barack Obama

Stephan Mansfield  
Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2008, \$20.

Reviewed by Darold Morgan,  
Richardson, TX

What we have in Mansfield's excellent, well-written book on Barack Obama's spiritual pilgrimage are pages of current and relevant information all American citizens need to know. It was published before Obama's election as the first African-American president of the United States.

Regardless of one's political identity, this is an important book, brimming with incisive insights about an extraordinary man. It should be widely circulated, not only because of its subject matter, but also because of the insidious rumors still hovering about Obama's religious background, colored by a very unusual set of family influences.

The new president appears in these pages as a man who has chosen positively to be identified as a Christian through a genuine experience of commitment to Christ. . . a choice made in his mature years. Many come to this decision in childhood through parental influence or church guidance. Obama's mother was a secularist and atheist. His father was a Muslim from Kenya. They met at the University of Hawaii.

Influential in his early years was his step-father, an Indonesian with "a broad, syncretistic form of Islam." Obama's childhood was not a normal one by any stretch of imagination. Born in Hawaii, transported in his early years to Indonesia, and then back to Hawaii with foundational guidance from his maternal Caucasian grandparents, these were all seminal influences in his teen years. The family was not active in church, but they did share a Methodist heritage. Obama's Christian

commitment came after college, graduate school, marriage and parenthood, assisted by a creative, controversial pastor on Chicago's turbulent south side.

During the almost classic political campaign of 2008 as Obama sought the office of the president, there was an inordinate amount of virulent and misinformed e-mails about Obama's Islamic background, especially from his Indonesian years. This book is worth reading because of its analysis of those distant years and experiences. A major question is raised and not answered about Obama, who evidently leaves Islam, even as a child, for a Christian commitment. No American president has ever had such a background.

Mansfield also provides serious and provocative research about Obama's now former pastor, Jeremiah Wright. One concludes quickly that he is both fair and objective about this serious controversy which resulted in Obama leaving this church in Chicago. The sad circumstances led to one of Obama's most quoted speeches about religion and its personal importance, an action that to some degree closed this painful and dramatic chapter.

Another plus of the book is the surprise chapter, "Four Faces of Faith." Here in contrast to Obama's pilgrimage is a truly fascinating set of contrasts from his challengers. The author categorizes the faces of faith of three major politicians who are Christians: John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and George W. Bush. Unity and diversity here make for fascinating reading and comparisons.

This volume will not change opinions held deeply by Obama's detractors, but it will give some helpful insights to those who genuinely want to know more about this new president of the United States. ■

### Does Ethics Have A Chance in a World of Consumers?

Zygmunt Bauman  
Boston, Harvard University Press, 2008,  
\$26.

Reviewed by Monty M. Self,  
Little Rock, AR

As I walked down the isles arms filled with Thomas the train, children's books, and a leather journal for my wife; it caught my eye, *Does Ethics have a Chance in a World of Consumers*. How dare he lecture me about my spending habits, I thought as I picked up Zygmunt Bauman's new book. What could a Polish born Marxist professor have to say that he has not already said in his first fifty plus books? I smirked at the irony as I sank into one of those big comfy chairs, setting my cardboard cup filled with a double shot of espresso on the arm rest. I am here in Barnes and Nobles during the Christmas season and I am reading a book about the evils of consumerism and the free market that was written by a man who has written too many books and is selling this one for \$26. As I set my capitalistic biases aside, I discovered that Bauman had far more to share than tired, worn out remarks about Adam Smith and the evil of capitalism.

Bauman goes beyond the comments that many Marxist make about the downfall of society as it transitions from a producer economy to a consumer economy. Bauman takes the time to look at how the liquidity of postmodernism has eroded our sense of ethical stability. The winds of individual subjectivism have quickly chiseled away at our bedrock principles and left each of us isolated in a vacuum void of cultural or family tradition. Without a tradition, community, or objective standard to fall back on, each individual is forced to become his or her moral compass and the traditional concept

of responsibility is forced to change. Bauman argues that “The concepts of responsibility and responsible choice, which used to reside in the semantic field of ethical duty and moral concern for Others, have moved or have been shifted to the realm of self-fulfillment and calculation of risks” (52).

The lack of moral foundations coupled with a global consumer based economy leaves us with nothing more than a hurried, ill-content lifestyle that never stops. Bauman argues, “The consuming life is not about acquiring and possessing. It is not even about getting rid of what had been acquired the day before yesterday and was proudly paraded a day later. It is, first and foremost, about being on the move” (147). Consumption does not bring happiness or contentment, just a desire to be on the move, even if without direction.

Bauman’s work is to be praised for its challenge. Even a far-right conservative would be hard pressed to reject Bauman’s description of our consumerist society. Bauman masterfully forces his reader to evaluate the western lifestyle for its eternal value. While Bauman does not propose a clear solution for our declining culture, he does understand what kind of solution is needed. He writes, “Global problems have only global solutions. On a globalizing planet, human problems can be tackled and resolved only by solitary humanity” (109).

While the text has great values for its ability to cause the reader to rethink his or her consumer tendencies, it falls short in several categories. First, Bauman fails to give a clear definition of consumerism and frequently uses the term to imply capitalistic economics. In this case Bauman has cheapened the moral enterprise by making a non-sentient being (the market) a moral agent. Next, Bauman lays too much blame on the market place and the economy and not enough on individual moral agents. The book is in need of a clear anthropology which outlines human needs and the state of nature. Bauman simply lays the blame for human greed and ill content upon the market with-

out explaining why so many are driven by this consumer economy.

Finally, Bauman lamentation about the enlightenment’s effect upon bedrock human values and the family are misguided being that his own Marxist tendency is based upon those same enlightenment ideals which lead us down this postmodern road.

While political liberals will love Bauman’s work, it is a must read for even the most traditional capitalistic thinker. Whatever the cause of our current lust for consumption, it is in desperate need of a solution. We buy without knowing why. We look for something new without knowing why we need it and most of all we are still not happy or content. Bauman’s work is a wonderful starting place for a discussion of how the global economy must change, but this dialog must go beyond Bauman. It must be a global dialog.

With that thought, I left my coffee half-drunk; returned the trains, books, and the journal; but I still just had to buy this book! ■

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## Hot, Flat, and Crowded

Thomas S. Friedman

New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008.

*Reviewed by Darold Morgan*

Thomas Friedman has authored another block-buster! This New York Times columnist who has garnered multiple Pulitzer Prizes for previous volumes has come up again with a book that demands we read it, share it, and argue about it.

The intriguing title capsules the core of the book and the author identifies three major overwhelming problems the world is facing. These problems are not going away and we must deal with them. According to his premise, it is absolutely crucial that the major players in the current world scene face these massive responsibilities, and ACT! Global warming (Hot) is for real. Globalization (Flat) has given rise to dramatic increases in middle classes and their insatiable demands for better living conditions all over the world.

There is an undeniable rapid population growth (Crowded), and the planet Earth is facing numbers soon beyond the ten billion level with ramifications of which are almost beyond prediction!

This volume is typical Friedman in that it is eminently readable. It is brimming with research material and interviews from experts in the field across the globe. A major point in his writings is found with his hope that a wave of new jobs will result from American entrepreneurship in these areas. How this will come about is perhaps the distinct weakness of the book. But one comes away from this writing genuinely aware of the seriousness of the issues. One hears the muffled roar from the days of Malthus and his premise that one day the population will outrun the production of food.

Though these are world-wide problems with universal implication, Friedman’s posture is that America must lead the way toward solutions and action in these areas. His evaluation of the Bush years of political dominance in world affairs is distinctly less than complimentary. He concludes that each of these problem areas have suffered accelerated complexities because of inaction, convoluted opinions as to the seriousness of the issues, and even a sense of victimization by the heavy-handed influence of powerful Washington lobbyists. He has a separate chapter on China and its position in these matters and the conclusions he draws from this massive concentration of population and industry makes it imperative that somehow progress and cooperation are so important with the rest of the world that comparisons here are beyond essentiality. It is indeed a problem for the entire universe; and with American, Chinese, European, Japanese cooperation involved, the problems can be addressed. But the bottom line is—America must lead wisely and China, in particular, must genuinely assist!

Friedman’s book has the ability to convince most people who will read and study it with an open mind which

*(continued on page 30)*

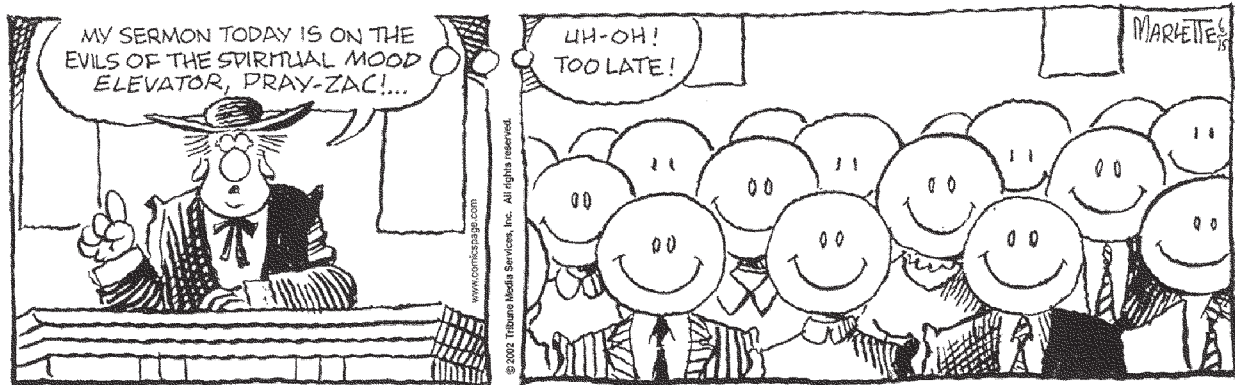
# A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you with discomfort  
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships  
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger  
At injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people,  
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those  
Who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,  
So that you may reach out your hand to  
Comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness  
To believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do  
What others claim cannot be done to bring justice and kindness  
To all our children and the poor.”—*Unknown* ■



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# Discomforting Worship

By Al Staggs, *Performing Artist*, Santa Fe, NM

Sitting in a church pew  
Sunday by Sunday  
Has become painful.  
No, the cushions are comfortable enough,  
It's just that the ritual, prayers, songs and sermons  
Seem so ahistorical.  
It's all about then  
And little about now.  
"Nothing is controversial"  
I think to myself  
As I gaze upon that most controversial Cross  
Which hangs conspicuously at the  
Center of our place of worship.

Have our songs and words of prayer  
Avoided the present crises  
And thus become hollow, shallow shibboleths  
Which provide personal, individual consolation  
To our private lives and concerns?

The Announcement time indicates that  
The windows of the church are tightly shut  
For we appear to be obsessed with  
Our hubbub of activities and churchly matters  
While an earthly Hell  
Has erupted all around us.

Yes, the services provide us an opportunity  
To remember the eternal perspective,  
That this life is but a small part  
Of what awaits us as we reflect upon the promise of Heaven.  
But is this an avoidance of the place of the here and now,  
The present,  
This life, the life of our Jesus  
Whose 33 years were a pivotal time in human history?

Uttering the words of the Lord's Prayer makes me squirm,  
'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.'  
And I wonder to what degree am I, to what degree we  
Believe this and work to make this a reality here on earth,  
In our own time?

Receiving Communion gives me cause to ponder,  
"Am I really willing to take this cup of suffering with Jesus?"  
Or is this another numbing ritual that has little relevance  
To the need to work for justice?

So this is a confession of guilt  
And also an expression of a desire  
That our worship, my worship, become  
Not only an expression of our adoration of God,  
But that it would provoke us all  
To remember this present world  
For whom Jesus lived and died. ■

## Reflections on the Presidential Election

(continued from page 8)

say “no problem” about many of his teachings and about him—in context.

No matter what is said in public, what do the inhabitants of the previous three paragraphs hear? First, they hear: “We belong, and you don’t.” They hear assertions of majority privilege in the religious realm, where such privilege often has taken form in power against others. Second, they hear: “We have things figured out, and you don’t,” and find such claims insulting, since issues of truth based in scriptural revelations cannot be settled in civil discourse and civic debate.

Christians are taught to pray in the name of Jesus, and I join the two billion Christians around the world in doing so. It is theologically correct, liturgically appropriate, and personally, as in matters of piety, clarifying and warm. But such beliefs and practices do not license privilege, assertions of power, or exclusivity in public settings. Because of our confusion on this, we Americans spend more energy debating inaugural and other prayers than praying them, to the point that their point is obscured.

We should devise some signal by which those who pray particular prayers (as I believe all are) let everyone know that while praying in their own integral style and form, they are aware and will at least implicitly assure their audiences that they are not speaking for everyone. They can then encourage others to translate what is being said into contexts they find congenial, and still share a communal experience.

*These two articles originally appeared in Sightings (1/05/09 and 1/26/09),*

## Book Reviews

(continued from page 27)

means, of course, that the preconceived positions most of us hold should be shelved at least temporarily. The major issue is global warming and what to do about it and/or what will happen if the problem continues to be ignored. Friedman’s book should be mandatory reading to the movers and shakers all over the globe because it is balanced, timely, erudite, reasonable, alarming, and controversial. It is ultimately optimistic if America and China could move intelligently and cooperatively to Friedman’s concept of Code Green. Whether or not this will happen is currently beyond prediction. ■

### A Pilgrim in Rome

Al Staggs  
Charlotte, NC, Baptist Peace  
Fellowship, 2008.

Reviewed by Robert Flynn

For twenty-four years Al Staggs was a Baptist pastor, armed with a BA degree from Hardin-Simmons University, MRE from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, ThM from Harvard Divinity School, and a Doctor of Ministry from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. But a Baptist pulpit did not allow time for all of Staggs’s messages or space for all his talents.

His social consciousness honed

as a Fellow at Harvard in Applied Theology under the direction of Harvey Cox, Staggs presented one man performances of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison. Later he expanded the programs to characterizations of Clarence Jordan and Archbishop Oscar Romero presented at churches, synagogues, universities across North America and Europe.

Their voices can be heard in his book of poetry, *A Pilgrim in Rome: Cries of Dissent*, published by Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, grief at what their country had become, sorrow that rich Christians robbed the poor, rage that death squads kept the powerless cowering in silence. Staggs aims his pen at peace and poverty, and the power that denies one and drives the other. “We are the oppressors,” he writes, “the children of the one who came to bring peace on earth.”

Fearing a national descent into barbarity he writes of the idle in Zion who fatten themselves on the produce of oppression. As an army veteran and father of a career soldier, Staggs has a soldier’s abhorrence of torture and of American Christians who are unable to see the crucified Christ in the faces of helpless prisoners. “How can you be a Christian and not be transformed?” he asks.

Difficult to accept, impossible to deny, these are prophetic poems for meditation, teaching and preaching. ■

## God and Politics

(continued from page 9)

attained my majority by the turn of the century, I was infatuated with the optimism of the day and seriously considered Christian Socialism. Then came the Revolution, that ended that sort of talk. Dr. Truett and I considered ourselves Christian Humanists.”

Dr. Maston and I had many talks about the relative merits of being an independent rather than a party member. He just could not identify

with a party. Might have done more good if he had.

The message of HOPE, abstract, biblical, theological, Heaven-sent is clearly not the same as political optimism treated so snidely by the hopeless wretches who know everything but do little.

Gotta have hope. That’s about all I have to say about God and politics. ■

# FINANCIAL REPORT FOR 2008

The year 2008, as everyone knows, was the beginning of a severe economic depression in our country and in the world. Yet, *Christian Ethics Today* has much for which to give thanks. A record number of over 5600 subscribe to CET and more than 200 additional copies are distributed five times each year to churches, colleges, seminaries, and groups (some foreign). Last September 16-17 CET sponsored a conference at Truett Seminary on “Red Letter Christians,” through funding from the CIO/Piper Foundation, featuring such notables as Jimmy Allen, Tony Campolo, James Dunn, David Gushee, and dramatic monologist Al Staggs.

From our inception in 1995, our founder Foy Valentine envisioned the Journal would be sent, free of charge, to anyone requesting it, “as long as finances and energy allows” he added. To date we have published seventy-three issues without missing a one, or charging for a subscription.

In 2008, 827 individuals (898 in 2007) gave \$82,602—although this was a decrease from the record amount of \$106,046 given in 2007 (plus a \$10,000 one-time gift from a foundation through CBF for Journals to mentoring groups), this support was commendable, given the economic times.

**We deeply appreciate every contribution, no matter the size.** Most gifts range from \$10 to \$500. A few significant gifts of \$1000 or more came from foundations, churches, and individuals, including one long-time supporter who gave \$10,000. These larger gifts do make a big difference, especially in a year like 2008.

The cost for producing and mailing the Journal for many years has remained between \$80,000 and \$90,000. In 2008, significant increases in printing, postage, and especially non-profit mailing have increased costs to around \$100,000. We are blessed with a capable staff of workers in Des Moines, Dallas, Lewisville, and Beeville, as well as a supportive Board of Directors.

## Special Thanks To Major Supporters of the Journal

A special word of gratitude is due to these supporters who have kept Foy Valentine’s dream alive through their major contributions of \$1000 or more in 2008:

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## CIO/Piper Fund Grant

For the last four years the Journal has been blessed with a special grant of \$25,000 each year, a total of \$100,000, from the CIO/Piper Fund of Waco, Texas, for special conferences and projects. As noted above, the major event in 2008 was the two-day conference at Truett Seminary, which included the distribution of Tony Campolo’s new book *Red Letter Christians* (Regal Books, 2008). The Fund also assisted in the distribution of T. B. Maston’s classic text, *Why Live the Christian Life?*, providing book/video resources to international seminaries/churches/colleges, and participating in CBF and state conferences and conventions.

Our gratitude to the Piper Family for their generosity is exceeded only by the hundreds of lives that have been blessed through these special events.

## SUMMARY OF FINANCIAL STATEMENT 2008

Balance	12/31/07	\$ 66,748
Gifts/Income 2008		\$ 82,602
Expenditures 2008		\$100,824
BALANCE:	12/31/08	\$ 48,526*

\*The balance is actually \$48,749 due to a bookkeeping surplus.

# Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics

"We need now to recover the prophethood of all believers, matching our zeal for the priesthood of all believers with a passion for the prophethood of all believers."

—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

## MISSION

The Christian Ethics Today Foundation publishes *Christian Ethics Today* in order 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.

## PURPOSES

- Maintain an independent prophetic voice for Christian social ethics
- Interpret and apply Christian experience, biblical truth, theological insights, historical understanding, and current research to contemporary moral issues
- Support Christian ecumenism by seeking contributors and readers from various denominations and churches
- Work from the deep, broad center of the Christian church
- Address readers at the personal and emotional as well as the intellectual level by including in the Journal narratives, poetry, and cartoons as well as essays
- Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics

*Christian Ethics Today* was born in the mind and heart of Foy Valentine in 1995, as an integral part of his dream for a Center for Christian Ethics. In his words, the purpose of the Journal was "to inform, inspire, and unify a lively company of individuals and organizations interested in working for personal morality and public righteousness."

When the Center was transferred to Baylor University in June 2000, the disbanding Board voted to continue the publication of *Christian Ethics Today*, appointing a new editor and a new Board. The Journal will continue to be published five times annually.

From the beginning *Christian Ethics Today* has been sent without charge to anyone requesting it, "as money and energy permit." More than ever before, your financial support is "greatly needed, urgently solicited, and genuinely appreciated."

The Christian Ethics Today Foundation is a non-profit organization and has received a 501 (c) (3) status from the Internal Revenue Service. Gifts are tax deductible.

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