

# Christian Ethics Today

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

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# Seeking to Stand Where Jesus Would Stand: The Price for Accepting Gay Couples into the Church

by Tony Campolo

My life changed dramatically on June 8, 2015, when I declared, in a very public way, that I no longer opposed welcoming into the Church gay and lesbian couples who were in monogamous lifetime relationships. Previously, my identity had been wrapped up in being a high profile evangelical speaker. The previous year, I had spoken more than 200 times for churches and conferences across America and around the world. However, since declaring myself supportive of gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships being part of the Church, I have become *persona non grata* in evangelical circles.

The fact that I affirm the doctrines delineated in the Apostle's Creed, that I preach having a personal relationship with Jesus as the basis for salvation, and that I declare the Bible to have been written by persons imbued by the Holy Spirit, making it a book with transcendent origins, is not enough. Within days of putting my changed position over the internet, cancellations of my scheduled engagements came pouring in. As I look at my calendar for the year ahead, I see week- after-week with few opportunities for preaching and teaching the Gospel.

I anticipated these cancellations, but what I had not expected was how I would feel about all of this. I had to start asking myself about my personal identity. Who was I apart from what I did as a speaker? I began to ask myself how to handle being alienated from so many fellow Christians who had been my friends.

For more than 50 years I have served as a professor at Eastern University, a Christian school firmly fixed in the evangelical community. Though I am now "professor emeritus," it is easy to understand that I

might fear how former colleagues would treat me, and the possibility that the school would sense a need to distance itself from me.

There is seldom a night when I do not wake up from a sound sleep with deep concerns over all that has happened since that fateful day in June. I think of all those deeply committed Christians who now are disappointed in me. But I also remember each of those students I have taught over the years who have walked away from the Church, and even from Christ, because they believed that there was no place for them in the household of faith. Then there is the peace that comes as I consider the good news that there is now a network of 600 mothers of gay and lesbian children who have promised to pray for me daily, knowing the emotional turmoil I am going through as I try to deal with my sense of estrangement.

Recently I heard a young man preach a sermon in which he said, "Whenever you draw a line and put some people who are being rejected by the religious establishment on the other side of that line, you can be sure that Jesus is on the other side of the line with them." I have thought about that sermon many times of late, and I wonder if the stand that I have taken on behalf of my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters allows me to stand where Jesus would stand.

As I reflected on the history of Christianity since its earliest days, I realize there have always been defining and divisive issues for the Church that seemed at the time to be monumental but, in retrospect, are viewed as undeserving of the upset and schisms they created. Consider the divisive concerns with which St. Paul had to deal in the first century, such as whether Christians could eat meat that had

been offered to idols (I Cor. 8) or whether Gentiles had to first be circumcised and become proselyted Jews before becoming Christians. Then there was the fact that during the days of the Protestant Reformation, some Christians put other Christians to death because they differed on modes of baptism. In the 19th century, beliefs about slavery were extremely divisive issues. When I was a boy, I remember church members being excommunicated from my American Baptist Church because they were divorced and remarried. Today these matters have become non-issues in most churches, and I hope that this also will be so when it comes to gay marriage.

When I am asked why I risked my speaking career and my relationships with fellow evangelicals by making my statement on gay couples in the Church, I answer that it was listening to those gays and lesbians who were in emotional turmoil and even despair because they could not reconcile what they were hearing from Christian pulpits with their sexual orientations which they never chose. Empathizing with these brothers and sisters in Christ drove me to say something I have come to believe is true, and that hopefully might lessen their pain.

I miss my former role on the evangelical speaking circuit, even though I am heartened by new opportunities from progressive congregations that will enable me to go on preaching the Jesus whom I love, and who loves gays and lesbians even more than any of us do. ■

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# Reconciling Spirit of Will Campbell Raised as Flag Lowered at Ole Miss

By David Waters

The pole from which the Confederate-shadowed Mississippi state flag was lowered Monday is near two chapels on the Ole Miss campus. The old Fulton Chapel, opened in 1927 and now an auditorium, sits about 100 yards north of the flagpole. Paris-Yates Chapel, which opened in 2001, stands a few hundred yards west of the campus flagpole.

The two chapels stand as testaments to the South's ongoing struggles between race and grace, and to the reconciling ministry of former Ole Miss Chaplain Will D. Campbell. Campbell, a white Southern Baptist preacher from Amite County, came to Ole Miss in 1954. He left two years later amid death threats for his integrationist views.

Last month, the plaza outside Paris-Yates Chapel was named in his honor. But Fulton Chapel was where Campbell sat for several days in 1956 in silent protest, "meditating upon the things that had brought us to such a sad day."

That "sad day" was the one in which the Ole Miss chancellor made the decision to rescind a speaking invitation to a white Episcopal priest from Ohio named Alvin Kershaw. Rev. Kershaw, a college professor and jazz musician, had gained attention for winning \$32,000 on a TV game show. He had said he would donate the money to various organizations, one of which was the NAACP. Campbell had invited Kershaw, as well as sev-

eral others involved in the fledgling civil rights movement, to speak at the 1956 Religious Emphasis Week program at Fulton Chapel.

"Everyone at the university understood that race was not to be discussed," Campbell wrote years later in his memoir, *Brother to a Dragonfly*. "If racial justice could not be discussed in the classroom, then it would be proclaimed from the podium of the religious forum," Campbell wrote.

It was not. After Kershaw's invitation was withdrawn, the other speakers, including a Jesuit professor from New Orleans, declined to participate. Several hundred students, faculty and local citizens joined Campbell in his silent daily protests.

Campbell kept pushing. While at Ole Miss, he visited an integrated farm in Holmes County. He also got into trouble for playing ping-pong with a local black minister who wanted to enroll in an Ole Miss correspondence course. A few days later, Campbell found his lawn covered with ping-pong balls painted half-white and half-black. After receiving numerous death threats, Campbell left Ole Miss and took a race relations job in Nashville with the National Council of Churches.

He was the only white person invited to the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. A few months later, he helped escort black students through angry crowds at Central High School in Little Rock. He counseled and accom-

panied Freedom Riders; he joined the boycotts, sit-ins and marches in Birmingham during the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. era.

But, as Campbell said and demonstrated over the decades, his ministry wasn't about racial integration. It was about Christian reconciliation. He sang and prayed with racists. He befriended Ku Klux Klan members who disagreed with us," Jones said during September's dedication ceremony.

Before he died, Campbell had a stroke that took away his ability to speak or write, but he did sing at his funeral. His family recessed from the church to the recorded sound of Campbell performing "Mississippi Magic," the song he sang to his dying brother, Joe, in *Brother to a Dragonfly*. "That Mississippi madness, be Mississippi magic again," he sang. "Fore we was born we was all kin. When we dead we'll be kinfolks again."

For a few moments on Monday, as a flag was lowered near two chapels on the Ole Miss campus, we caught a glimpse of Will Campbell's Mississippi magic. ■

*David Waters is a local news columnist for The Commercial Appeal. He writes about people, places and issues that have an impact on the community. This article first appeared in The Commercial Appeal on October 26, 2015 and is used here with permission of the author.*

# Fleeing from Herod: Reassessing the “Christmas Story” for Displaced Children

By Laura Rector

Christmas is a deeply significant event in the Christian life, and yet some of our Christmas worship and traditions may not be grounded accurately in the biblical events. For instance, the inhospitable innkeeper who makes it into most Christmas dramas probably did not exist. In reality, Jesus likely was born in a humble, ordinary home rather than in a stable behind an inn as Christian churches usually depict (Luke 2:7). The word for inn should be more accurately translated “guest room.”<sup>1</sup> Some say the room where Jesus was born was actually a cave.<sup>2</sup> It was likely the lower room of relatives’ homes. It helps interpreters’ case that Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem for a few years<sup>3</sup> and, after their time in Egypt, they planned to go back to Bethlehem until God intervened (Matt. 2:21-23).<sup>4</sup>

This does not mean that Jesus’ birth narratives do not contain the theme of inhospitality. However, it was political instead of personal (Matt. 2:1-23). Unfortunately, our nativity plays usually gloss over political readings of the Christmas story. It does not make for a feel-good Sunday morning to ponder an innocent toddler fleeing a political threat or the slaughter of other innocent children by that same political authority (Matt. 2:1-23). Old Testament scholar Danna Nolan Fewell tells of a child who asked church leaders if she could be Herod’s “hit man” in their Christmas drama. That child pulled out an aspect of the text that we often gloss over in our excitement over baby Jesus.<sup>5</sup> How do we understand what Fewell calls, “Texts where children have fallen between the cracks, where their fate is not considered, erased as easily by the biblical writers as by the modern news media”?<sup>6</sup>

By glossing over children’s cruel circumstances in Scripture, we also lose the significance of the text for tragic conditions that contemporary children experience. For example, the United Nations reports that more than half of the world’s refugees are children.<sup>7</sup> In an earlier report they said, “Whether they are refugees, internally displaced, asylum-seekers or stateless, children are at a greater risk of abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, trafficking or forced military recruitment.”<sup>8</sup> This very brief paper will look at some of the implications of Jesus’ birth and early childhood narratives for children who like Jesus are displaced by violence. What should it mean for the church that Jesus was a refugee child? How can Jesus’ early life help Christians shape a public theology for contemporary children fleeing violence?

## Herod

First, let me give a brief look at the political climate facing Jesus in his early childhood. Matthew’s text reveals that Jesus entered this world during the last few years of Herod the Great’s life (Matt. 2:19). Herod attempted to kill Jesus, and he did in fact kill other children in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:13-16). There is a great deal of tragedy in this text that never makes its way into our Christmas worship. For example, when Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15, he is painting a picture of great mourning (Matt. 2:18). Despite saying a prophecy was fulfilled, Matthew makes it clear that there is no commendation for what happens to the children.<sup>9</sup> A special reference is made to the location’s historic ties to Rachel, illustrating how tragic the situation is. One scholar says, “Here the assumption is that Rachel is buried in the vicinity of Bethlehem (cf. Gen. 35:19; 48:7),

making her a witness to the slaughter carried out by Herod’s officers. Weeping over the loss of her latter-day children, she cries out with a voice that is heard as far away as Ramah!”<sup>10</sup>

Matthew has no positive words about Herod. Even without this event, Herod was not likely a favorite amongst the majority of Jews. For starters, Herod was only half Jewish.<sup>11</sup> The king’s mixed lineage would have been distasteful to Jews.<sup>12</sup> Also, he won the throne through violence and by killing “large sections of the Judean nobility.”<sup>13</sup> Rome made him the local ruler of Israel in 37 B.C.<sup>14</sup> In history, Herod was known as “a great builder of public works.”<sup>15</sup> However, as New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg points out, “he laid oppressive taxes on and conscripted labor from the Israelites.”<sup>16</sup>

Some contemporary scholars try to communicate a more mixed picture of Herod than the Gospel writer does. For instance, one writer said: The real Herod is all that Scripture intimates. Still, there is more which has no place in the sacred annals. Rarely has history recorded the story of an abler, more gifted, more ruthless, more misunderstood ruler. A zealous builder, a consummate diplomat, an eloquent orator, a brilliant general, a violent, unbridled despot—this man, a non-Jew, sat on the throne of David. He ruled a land far more extensive than that of Solomon and a people who attained under him their peak of material prosperity... He married ten times; divorced, dismissed, or simply ignored the wives he grew tired of, and never ceased loving the wife he murdered. He killed his uncle, his brother, his son-in-law, his mother-in-law, and the three sons he loved best; he slaughtered infants and graybeards, and died

an old man, of natural causes—miserably.<sup>17</sup>

Near the end of his life, he had some citizens arrested on false charges with the sole purpose of ordering them to be killed upon his death. As William Barclay notes, Herod “was well aware that no one would mourn for his death, and that he was determined that some tears should be shed when he died.”<sup>18</sup>

What we are seeing in Matthew’s text is more of this man’s cruelty. To be fair, there are some historians who question the veracity of the Bethlehem event. However, that actually says more about the scope of Herod’s cruelty than it does about Matthew’s accuracy. Robert Mounce points out, “That Josephus the historian (or an other early writer) neglects to mention the slaughter tells us more about the cruelty of that day than it does about any lack of historicity of the event. Such purges were simply not noteworthy.”<sup>19</sup> Certainly, what we do know from other multi-attested events is that what happened in Bethlehem was in sync with the violence of the man. Bethlehem was a small community, so the number of children slaughtered may have been around twenty.<sup>20</sup>

From the text, we also see that although Herod ordered the violence, the unhealthy political environment extended beyond one man. Scripture tells us that upon hearing of Jesus’ birth, Herod became acutely distressed, but so did “all Jerusalem” (Matt. 2:3). William Barclay notes that Herod “was almost insanely suspicious. He had always been suspicious, and the older he became the more suspicious he grew, until, in his old age, he was, as someone said, a ‘murderous old man.’”<sup>21</sup> In this case, Herod’s emotions extend to those under his influence. If something threatened Herod’s power, then it also threatened those around him. As Blomberg explains, “All Jerusalem” probably refers primarily to the religious leaders of Israel who dominated the city, many of whom were also personally installed by Herod.”<sup>22</sup>

When Herod meets with the Jewish leaders, Matthew uses the same verb (call together) that he later “uses to describe the sinister gatherings of Jewish leaders in his account of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion (cf. 26:3, 57; 27:17, 27, 62; 28:12) . . . Using a vocabulary with associations such as these, Matthew makes it clear that this gathering is no innocent theological consultation.”<sup>23</sup> Systemic sin in the community contributed to the children’s risk factors.

### **Implications**

By understanding Herod’s cruelty, we see that Jesus was born into a political climate that put children at risk—particularly a child who threatened a leader’s authority. Likewise, displaced children often face cruelty from adult authorities and systemic sin in their lives.

In recent years, although all are not technically refugees, unaccompanied and separated children have arrived in the United States in record numbers, particularly children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. The UN reports the number of children from the first three countries went from 4,059 reported in 2011 to 21,537 in 2013.<sup>24</sup> These numbers do not include the additional 18,734 Mexican children sent back over the border “after no more than a day or two in the custody of the U.S. authorities, making it even more difficult to obtain a full picture of who these children were and why they were coming to the U.S.”<sup>25</sup> In a U.N. study of children from these countries, researchers found that at least 58 percent of the children were displaced for reasons that merited international protection.<sup>26</sup> Although there are multiple circumstances that put such children at risk, the overwhelmingly main factor in the U.N. study was “augmented violence in the region by organized criminal actors, including drug cartels and gangs or by State actors.”<sup>27</sup> The Center for American Progress notes that El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras “were three of the five most dangerous countries in the world in 2013.”<sup>28</sup> In recent years, U.S. immi-

gration policy has been to hold many children in detention centers, which goes against international protection standards. A federal judge ordered the children’s release by October 23, 2015, but the decision awaits appeal. As of October 20, 2015, more than 2,000 minors were still detained in such centers.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, in many other cases, the United States sends the children back to their personal Herods.<sup>30</sup>

The world saw a record 59.5 million forcibly displaced people in 2014. The UN reports that “over half the world’s refugees are children.”<sup>31</sup> Globally, approximately 30 million children have been displaced by violence and hardships. Syria is the largest source of refugees. Displaced Syrians have poured into Europe and other Middle Eastern countries. Europe currently faces “tens of thousands” refugee and migrant children displaced from their homes. Some are accompanied by parents; some are not. All of them face loss and challenges. One UNICEF writer described things this way: “The common thread running through each and every story here is that of loss and the dawn of a new reality in which cherished homes, communities, friends and even family members are gone. The new reality of seemingly endless travel in a foreign continent and chaotic queues at border checkpoints is a far cry from familiar surroundings left behind . . .”<sup>32</sup> Most flee violence and conflict, only to face dangerous sea journeys, the loss of their possessions to smugglers, overcrowded conditions, and some governments that turn them away. In Africa and Asia, conditions are no better. In Nigeria and the surrounding area, for example, 1.4 million children have been displaced because of the violent Boko Haram. Around 2.2 million people have been displaced in South Sudan.<sup>33</sup> In Asia, the number of internally displaced people and refugees increased by 31 percent in 2014.<sup>34</sup> Like Jesus, these children flee violence and hardships caused by adult sin.

### **The Wise Men**

However, Herod was not the only

player in this story. In the text, God has the last word on Herod's cruelty by protecting Jesus, and he does so through a divine intervention that invited human participation.<sup>35</sup> Over and over again, Matthew emphasizes the fulfillment of prophecies (Matt. 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23). Commentators also point out that the text has parallels with the Exodus.<sup>36</sup> The message that God is working on behalf of his people in these tragic circumstances cannot be underscored enough. Specific people play a role in that divine deliverance.

The first such people are the famous "wise men." Commentators believe Jesus was a young toddler, between ages one and two, when the so-called "wise men" came to him.<sup>37</sup> The unknown number of magi were the "teachers and instructors of the Persian kings," comparable to the Levites in Israel.<sup>38</sup> Our Christian hymns and other traditions also get the Christmas story wrong when they call them kings. The magi were prominent, religious-political community leaders interested in astronomy and astrology.<sup>39</sup>

In the celebration of our Savior, we also sometimes ignore the political undertones in the magi's actions. Indeed, these prominent men may have helped fuel Herod's distress, drawing his attention towards Jesus. Blomberg said their question had a political inference: "The grammatical construction makes it clear that they ask about who the child is who has a legitimate claim to Israel's throne by virtue of his birth. Herod is thus viewed as a usurper to the throne."<sup>40</sup>

When the magi visit Jesus, the visit also has political implications. For example, "The gifts used to honor the new king were typically associated with royalty."<sup>41</sup> What becomes of the gifts is, of course, not part of Matthew's story. In the text, their purpose is to bring honor to the Savior—to show that there is something special about this particular child. We can only speculate that such valuable gifts later proved helpful in Jesus' displacement to Egypt.

The magi's role in the narrative ends with their disobedience of Herod's order (Matt. 2:12). Given the cruelty of the regime, this is significant. In their own way, the magi contributed to God's intervention in the young toddler's life. Scripture says that they "outwitted" Herod. This, in turn, instigates his fury (Matt. 2:16).

### **Implications**

In this passage, the Persian magi function as a confrontation of Herod's sin—through their disobedience of harmful human authorities, through their gifts and love for the child, and even through their very leading question directed at Herod himself. They also symbolize international support for the child. Today, nongovernmental organizations such as Save the Children and UNICEF meet the immediate needs of these children in crisis.<sup>42</sup> Amnesty International sharply rebukes the United States for holding children in detention centers, failing to provide adequate health, psychological, and education services, and repatriating children into dangerous situations.<sup>43</sup> They have also rebuked European countries for their response to the refugee crisis.<sup>44</sup> Understanding that the Jesus we worship also fled violence as a child, Christians should have a deep motivation to join their efforts—as some churches already have—and care for refugees directly, as well as confront policies and governments that harm such children.

### **Mary and Joseph**

More important than even the magi's participation in divine deliverance is the role that Mary and Joseph played. The text says that in obedience to God, the couple took their child to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15).

Geography plays a significant role in Mary and Joseph's actions. Egypt is a place of refuge for the young family.<sup>45</sup> It is also a place where they can still be with people who share their cultural identity. Scholars share that "every city in Egypt of any size had a colony of Jews (in Alexandria, over 2 million)."<sup>46</sup> Certainly, as the gospel points out, the choice of Egypt

shows the fulfillment of a prophecy and significant symbolism (Matt. 2:15).<sup>47</sup> However, it is important to understand that this was also a deeply practical decision. One scholar writes, "The Hellenistic Jews in Egypt were indeed important, both on account of their numbers and their learning (*Acts* 9:6). It would have been among the Jewish colonists in Egypt that the Holy Family would have dwelt during their stay in this land."<sup>48</sup>

When God told the family to leave Egypt, the choice of Galilee is also significant (Matt. 2:19-23). Joseph took his family to a strategic location: "Nestled in the hills in the south of Galilee, it looked down on two of the most important caravan routes in the ancient world: one leading from Damascus to Egypt and the other from the seacoast to the lands to the east."<sup>49</sup> The family does not return to their previous home to avoid danger to Jesus—even after Herod's death. The kingdom had been divided amongst Herod's sons.<sup>50</sup> New Testament scholar Richard B. Gardner explains:

As the text indicates, Judea was one of the areas that came under the rule of Archelaus. Archelaus apparently inherited his father's violent tendencies, for he was reputed to have murdered 3,000 people at the beginning of his reign. His brutality and dictatorial ways finally became so intolerable that he was desposed by Rome in A.D. 6 and exiled to Gaul. All this helps to explain why Joseph is afraid to go back to Judea and heads instead for Galilee. Although Galilee was also ruled by a son of Herod, Herod Antipas, the circumstances there were relatively less threatening.<sup>51</sup>

### **Implications**

Studies show that children's resilience depends on multiple factors—character traits, secure relationships with caretakers, the model of their parents or other family members, community support, and ideological factors like political engagement.<sup>52</sup> Above, we saw how the magi showed community support. The actions of

Jesus' caretakers—his earthly parents, Mary and Joseph—also played a key role in his survival.

The United Nations says, "Under normal circumstances, parents provide the primary role model for their children, contributing significantly to the development of their identities and to their acquisition of skills and values. Separation from one or other parent, very often the father in circumstances of flight, can deprive children of an important role model."<sup>53</sup> The international community also recognizes the significance in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which the U.S. has never ratified.<sup>54</sup>

Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child gives individual rights to children, the CRC also emphasizes relationships. The well-being of children and the enjoyment of their rights are dependent upon their families and their community. The CRC recognizes that the family is 'the fundamental group of society'

and places children's rights in the context of parental rights and duties (arts. 5, 14, 18, etc.). The importance of the community is constantly recognized (arts. 5, 13, 14, 15, 20, 29, 30).<sup>55</sup>

Ratification of the CRC could be a helpful tool for shaping U.S. policies that protect children seeking refuge and strengthen their families.<sup>56</sup> As Christians, we must support policies that treat the underlying causes of child displacement, so that children may live safely with their parents.<sup>57</sup> When that is inappropriate, such as when children have been abused in their homes or lost their parents, we must lead the way to provide models of care that put children in safe home situations and keep them out of detention centers.<sup>58</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

The stability of Jesus' toddler years was disrupted by violence (Matt. 2:1-23). Matthew's Gospel tells us that God's gift to the world came with great cost. The meaning of the cross

should never be denigrated, but the cost of Christ's sacrifice started far before Calvary's hill. It started when a small toddler had to flee with his parents to a foreign land, leaving his family home. It started when the other infants and toddlers in Bethlehem were killed by a leader protecting his political power. For Christians, this should be a call to justice—a call to acknowledge this great cost even as we celebrate God's gift and the greater cost of the cross. One way we can do this is by reading Scripture with children in mind, then implementing its message of justice through "deeds of deliverance" on behalf of other children displaced by violence.<sup>59</sup> ■

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## **aporia**

These days I punctuate my afternoons with prayer, invoking  
The God of years gone  
But hardly forgotten. Far-off times when candles were lit,  
Entreaties made, and love beseeched  
Before the altar rail: Oxford Cathedral, hily term, 1991.  
You were closer to me then, I guess, and more than any time since.  
So today I kneel, clasp my hands, and keen heavenward.  
Praying, thinking, hoping  
To bring you nearer still.

— Darren J. N. Middleton

# What's Love Got to Do with It? Confronting Ethical and Discipleship Issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

By Wendell Griffen

Jesus declared in the lesson of the Good Samaritan that the greatest commandment is to love God with one's entire being and to love others as oneself.<sup>1</sup> Today, I will address theological, hermeneutical and ethical deficiencies which contribute to our inability or refusal, as followers of Jesus,<sup>2</sup> to better understand religious liberty as a value that must co-exist alongside and be recognized as integral to commitment to equality because of the love mandate in the Gospel of Jesus.

My fundamental premise is that evangelical followers of Jesus have not theologically, hermeneutically, and ethically considered religious liberty to be part of the deep and wide justice imperative that appears throughout Scripture. This shortcoming is because the Hebrew and New Testaments are not studied, preached or understood as valuable religious liberty source material, in much the same way evangelicals have refused to understand that those sacred writings declare salvation to be a social justice imperative.

Consequently, most evangelical followers of Jesus affirm faith without a Biblical appreciation about the relationship between religious liberty, discipleship and social justice. Failure to include religious liberty as part of the way followers of Jesus understand discipleship hinders the ability of evangelical followers of Jesus to develop and live out a robust social ethic consistent with the teachings of Jesus and the social justice imperative found in the Torah.

## **The Traditional Approach to Religious Freedom**

The freedom of a person or community to publicly or privately manifest religious beliefs or teach, practice, worship and otherwise observe reli-

gious traditions—including the freedom to not follow any religion—has long been considered a fundamental human right in various societies across the ages. In a country with a state religion, religious liberty contemplates that the government permits other sects aside from the state religion, and does not persecute believers of other faiths.

Many, if not most, evangelical followers of Jesus view religious liberty in the United States from the perspectives of Western European and U.S. history. Protestants will trace their views on religious liberty to 1517, when Martin Luther published his famous 95 Theses in Wittenberg in an effort to reform Catholicism. Luther was given an opportunity to recant at the Diet of Worms before Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. Luther refused to recant, was declared a heretic, and was then sequestered on the Wartburg, where he translated the New Testament into German. After Luther was excommunicated by Papal Bull in 1521, the reformation movement gained ground, spread to Switzerland, and then grew to England, France and elsewhere in Europe.

The French Revolution abolished state religion in France. However, all property of the Catholic Church was confiscated, and intolerance against Catholics ensued. Under Calvinist leadership, the Netherlands became the most religiously tolerant country in Europe by granting asylum to persecuted religious minorities (French Huguenots, English Dissenters, and Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal).<sup>3</sup>

Religious freedom began in the Netherlands and New Amsterdam (now New York) during the Dutch Republic. When New Amsterdam

surrendered to the English in 1664, freedom of religion was guaranteed in the Articles of Capitulation. That freedom also benefited Jews who arrived on Manhattan Island in 1654 after fleeing Portuguese persecution in Brazil. Other Jewish communities were eventually established during the 18<sup>th</sup> century at Newport, Rhode Island, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Charleston, South Carolina, Savannah, Georgia, and Richmond, Virginia.<sup>4</sup>

Efforts to escape religious intolerance are part of the national heritage of our society. Recall that the Pilgrims first sought refuge from religious persecution in the Netherlands, and later founded Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts in 1620.

However, most of the early colonies were not generally tolerant of religious pluralism, with the notable exception of Maryland. The colony of Maryland, founded by Lord Baltimore, a Catholic, was the first government in what eventually became the United States to formally recognize freedom of religion, in 1634.<sup>5</sup>

Roger Williams was forced to establish the new colony of Rhode Island to escape religious persecution driven by the Puritan theocracy in Massachusetts. Massachusetts Bay Colony Puritans were active persecutors of Quakers, along with Puritans in Plymouth Colony and other colonies along the Connecticut River.<sup>6</sup>

In 1660, an English Quaker named Mary Dyer was hanged in Boston, Massachusetts, for repeatedly defying a Puritan law that banned Quakers from the colony. Her hanging marked the beginning of the end of the Puritan theocracy and New England independence from English rule, as King Charles II in 1661 prohibited

Massachusetts from executing anyone for professing Quakerism.<sup>7</sup>

Students of U.S. history, and particularly religious liberty, are no doubt familiar with William Penn. Chief Justice Earl Warren summed up Penn's courageous commitment to religious liberty in his book, *A Republic, If You Can Keep It*. William Penn was a Quaker leader in London. The Quakers were not recognized by the government and were forbidden to meet in any building for worship. In 1681, King Charles II of England gave the Pennsylvania region (Pennsylvania means "Penn's Woods") to William Penn, a Quaker, who established the Pennsylvania colony so Quakers and other faiths could have religious freedom.<sup>8</sup>

These and other historical events, along with the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, form the foundation for what many people, including followers of Jesus, understand about religious liberty. The First Amendment to the federal Constitution, ratified in 1791, reads, in pertinent part, that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."<sup>9</sup>

That constitutional guarantee was later made applicable to the States through the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>10</sup> The Fourteenth Amendment states that "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."<sup>11</sup> Together, the First and Fourteenth Amendments guarantee that government will not establish a religion, prefer one religion over another, become entangled in disputes involving religious doctrine, practices and officials, nor interfere with the "free exercise" of religion.

However, the religious liberty ideal has Biblical antecedents in the

Hebrew Testament, the Gospels of Jesus, and the rest of the New Testament.

### **Religious Liberty Antecedents in Hebrew Testament**

We read in Genesis 41 that Joseph, a great grandson of Abraham, became prominent in Egypt when his spiritual discernment was recognized because he interpreted an Egyptian pharaoh's dreams as an omen of approaching years of agricultural prosperity followed by years of famine.<sup>12</sup> The dramatic narrative about Joseph recognizing his brother Benjamin, in Genesis 43, becomes even more meaningful when we read that the Egyptians who dined with Joseph "ate with him by themselves"—apart from Joseph their prime minister and apart from Joseph's brothers—"because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians."<sup>13</sup>

Joseph rose to political prominence in Egyptian society due to his spiritual discernment. Nevertheless, the social separation described in that dining narrative indicates that Joseph had something resembling a "separate but equal" co-existence with his fellow Egyptian political operatives. Joseph is recognized in the final chapters of Genesis as a man whose religious values and ethnic identity set him apart in Egyptian society.

Exodus, the second book in the Hebrew canon, opens with the dramatic story about how the Hebrew people were socially, economically and politically oppressed by the Egyptian majority. We traditionally have understood the Exodus as the salvation narrative of the Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage

However, the Exodus narrative also exposes a struggle for religious, social and physical liberty in the collision between the religious, political, social and ethical framework of the Egyptian empire and the liberating design of God presented through the agency of Moses and his brother Aaron. As the editors of New Oxford Annotated Bible note:

The predictability, the timing of

both beginning and ending, the intensity, the contest between Aaron and the [Egyptian] magicians, the distinction between Egyptians and Israelites, and the emphasis on Pharaoh's knowing (acknowledging) God all point to combat on two interrelated levels: between Israel's God and Egypt's gods (12.12), including the deified Pharaoh, and between their human representatives, Moses and Aaron, and Pharaoh, his officials, and his magicians.<sup>14</sup>

Exodus is also a vivid illustration about the quest for religious liberty and the collision of divergent systems of religious belief. Moses was sent to Egypt to present a divine demand to the Pharaoh that the Israelites be freed so they could worship God.<sup>15</sup> During the series of plagues, Pharaoh's courtiers appealed on one occasion for their leader to allow the Israelites to go, saying: "How long shall this fellow [Moses] be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the LORD their God..."<sup>16</sup>

Deuteronomy should also be understood for its relevance to our understanding of religious liberty. The Israelites entered Canaan bent on genocide of the indigenous population based on the view that nothing short of that would allow them to be a holy people.<sup>17</sup>

From Judges onward, the Hebrew canon presents numerous accounts of political, military and social collisions between followers of the religion of Moses and neighboring societies known for different religious beliefs and practices. And the writings concerning the Hebrew prophets from Elijah forward contain vivid accounts of competing, and often violent, religious claims, ranging from the standoff between Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel,<sup>18</sup> to the threats and dangers suffered by Jeremiah from other, politically favored, religious figures of his time.<sup>19</sup>

Religious liberty is a theme dramatically presented in the post-exilic writings of the Hebrew canon. Like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah preserved their

ethnic and religious identity after they were taken to Babylon.<sup>20</sup> The fiery furnace experience of Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego) we read about in Daniel 3 and the lion's den experience of Daniel about which we read in Daniel 6 are plainly lessons about civil disobedience based on religious devotion. Some commentators view the historical novella of Esther, and particularly the title character, as representative of "the marginal and sometimes precarious status of Diaspora Jews who were obliged to accommodate their lives to an alien environment" in a way that "differs markedly from the outlook of Diaspora Jews like Ezra and Nehemiah."<sup>21</sup>

### **Religious Liberty Antecedents in the Gospels**

The Gospels of Jesus present numerous illustrations of divergent religious systems engaged in a more or less uneasy co-existence. The Jewish people of Palestine lived under Roman political and military control, but retained the freedom to follow their religious traditions.

Yet, the Gospels also demonstrate the challenges that ensue when a minority religious movement (the religion of Jesus) attempts to co-exist alongside a dominant religious tradition (that of the Sanhedrin Council orthodoxy). The contrast between how Jesus understood and applied the moral, social, and ethical imperatives of Torah and how Torah was understood and applied by established and recognized religious leaders of his time and place runs throughout the Gospels.

The sharp difference between the religion of Jesus and the religious perspective of the scribes and Pharisees resulted in clashes between Jesus, followers of Jesus and unnamed critics. In Mark 9, we read that Jesus found his disciples and "some scribes" arguing in the same passage where Jesus healed a boy afflicted by what the text terms "an unclean spirit."<sup>22</sup>

Religious liberty is a recurring theme in the Gospels. We read in Luke's Gospel that when disciples

of Jesus tried to stop an anonymous exorcist from casting out demons, Jesus contradicted their intolerance, saying, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."<sup>23</sup> The night-time meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus vividly demonstrates an attempt at intra-faith dialogue.<sup>24</sup> When we read about the encounter between Jesus and the woman of Samaria at Jacob's Well, we are learning how the social justice impetus within Jesus included a religious liberty aspect that impelled him to push aside longstanding sectarian and ethnic animosities in pursuit of redemptive fellowship.<sup>25</sup>

The Johannine community to which we owe the Fourth Gospel appears to have understood the religion of Jesus as a minority movement that threatened the religious, political, cultural, and social hegemony of the Sanhedrin Council, especially after the raising of Lazarus.<sup>26</sup> When we read about the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin Council and his subsequent indictment by the Sanhedrin before Pontus Pilate, the Roman governor, we are reading how religious figures in a dominant religion fabricated a national security accusation to stamp out the emerging religion of Jesus.

According to John's Gospel, Pilate was not interested in refereeing a religious dispute between rival Palestinian Jewish factions, so Pilate tried to release Jesus. However, when Sanhedrin leaders associated Jesus with insurrection, Pilate lost interest in achieving liberty for Jesus, and ordered him crucified.<sup>27</sup> We rarely, if ever, hear the crucifixion of Jesus interpreted for its religious liberty significance alongside the traditional salvation perspective.

### **Religious Liberty Challenges from Acts to Revelation**

We do not proceed far in Acts before the religion of Jesus collides again with the dominant religious movement in Jerusalem. Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin Council after they healed a lame man and proclaimed that the man was healed "in the name

of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified..."<sup>28</sup> As the religion of Jesus began attracting more followers, the threats Peter and John received turned into sectarian persecution, as shown by the trial and stoning of Stephen.<sup>29</sup>

We read about the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, and are accustomed to that passage being highlighted for its evangelism and missionary significance. Yet, the passage is equally instructive concerning religious liberty.

Philip fled Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen and went to the city of Samaria. His presence was not merely tolerated. His ministry effort there was so well-received that Peter and John, dispatched from Jerusalem to investigate it, were also welcomed and well-received. These are clear examples of religious liberty and inclusion taking root among early followers of Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

We do not gain a complete perspective about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus if we disregard that Saul was a leading force in the effort to root out and exterminate followers of Jesus. Saul's opposition to religious liberty deserves to be highlighted.

After Saul was converted, he was accepted by the Damascus community.<sup>31</sup> When we read in Acts 9 that "the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace," "was built up," and "increased in numbers,"<sup>32</sup> we may reasonably argue that the religion of Jesus traces its early ascendance to conflicts, challenges and victories surrounding the exercise of religious liberty.

Beginning in Acts 10, we read how early followers of Jesus began to struggle among themselves with divergent viewpoints. Peter's rooftop vision and later baptism of Cornelius<sup>33</sup> eventually forced the young religious movement to become ethnically inclusive.

By the time we reach Act 15, that inclusivity was being challenged by traditionalists who insisted that Gentile followers of Jesus become circumcised. The council we read about

at Antioch in Acts 15 shows how the young movement wrestled with divergent religious views among its own adherents, struggled to co-exist alongside the religious teachings and practices of the Sanhedrin Council, all while living as colonized people under Roman political and military occupation.

When we read about Paul and Silas being jailed and later in Philippi in Acts 16, we are reading about a religious liberty struggle.<sup>34</sup> When we read that Paul and Silas were accused of “turning the world upside down” during their brief ministry in Thessalonica,<sup>35</sup> and when we read elsewhere in Acts and other New Testament epistles about the imprisonment, trials, and other experiences of Paul during his missionary efforts, we are reading how the religion of Jesus was threatened and oppressed by the dominant religious faction. The New Testament closes with the Revelation of John who wrote that he was exiled on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”<sup>36</sup>

### **The Cost of Ignoring Biblical Religious Liberty Antecedents**

Evangelical followers of Jesus are not nurtured to recognize these and other religious liberty illustrations in our sacred writings. This demonstrates a glaring shortcoming in the traditional ways evangelicals engage theology, hermeneutics and ethics.

I agree with proponents of liberation theology who argue that the Bible presents God as suffering alongside oppressed people. When God confronts Moses for the first time in Exodus, God identified with enslaved people, not the empire that oppressed them, as shown by the following memorable passage:

Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey,

to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’<sup>37</sup>

Theodore Walker, Jr. has observed that black liberation theology “understands that liberating answers to questions pertaining to the circumstance of oppression and the struggle for freedom are essential to the Christian witness,” resulting in “a particular vision of God that has been summarily formulated by James Cone and others under the conception of God as ‘God of the oppressed.’” Walker explains that vision of God and contrasts it against what he termed “the prevailing Western theological tradition” as follows.

When black theologians speak of God as God of the oppressed, we do not mean merely that God is present with, related to, worshiped by, or somehow involved with those who are oppressed. This would be to understate the matter. From the perspective of black theology, to speak of God as God of the oppressed is to affirm that God actually experiences the suffering of those who are oppressed. Moreover, black theology knows, from the data of human experience, that the experience of suffering from oppression entails a desire to be liberated from such oppression. Hence, it follows that the God who experiences the suffering of the oppressed also desires their liberation.

Black theology has its deepest rootage in the experience of enslaved and oppressed Africans, and in their appropriation of the witness of scripture, but not in the philosophical and theological traditions of the Western academy and its medieval and Greek forbears. The essentially non-Western rootage of black theology is often concealed by the fact that most African-American communities of worship wear the labels of European-American Protestant denominations. It must be remembered, however,

that African-American denominations are not “Protestant” in the sense of having been born in protest to alleged Catholic abuses; instead, African-American denominations are protestant in the very different sense of having been born in protest against oppression by European-American Protestant denominations...

...To be sure, black theology is defined in considerable measure by its protest against the prevailing Western theological tradition. History has taught us that classical Western theism is quite capable of abiding peaceably with, and even of being very supportive of, such oppressive activities as the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of Native Americans. It is characteristic of black theology to be unforgivingly critical of any theology that fails to affirm that God favors the struggle for liberation. If God is conceived so as not to favor this struggle, then God is thereby conceived so as not to experience fully our pain and suffering. Such a conception of God is contrary to the Christian witness to God’s suffering as indicated by the cross, and it is contrary to the vision of God as that utterly unsurpassable *Friend* whose love is perfect and all-inclusive...

...Because we know that God actually experiences our oppression, we know that God favors our struggle for liberation. This is removed as far as can be from such classical attributes of God as immutable, totally impassible, wholly other, and unmoved mover. From the perspective of black theology, the prevailing classical Western (white) theism is logically, existentially, and religiously anathema. Insofar as classical theism aids and abets the structures of oppression, James Cone would describe it as the theology of the Antichrist.<sup>38</sup>

One’s perspective on theology affects hermeneutics. The evangelical hermeneutic is bottomed on what Theodore Walker, Jr. terms “the prevailing classical Western (white) theism,” which has traditionally resulted in emphasis on piety and personal salvation, global evangelism and mis-

sions.

Evangelicals frequently cite the Great Commission passage at Matthew 28:19-20 as authority for that emphasis. Sadly, the theological and hermeneutical perspectives of evangelicals have been also allied with maintaining oppressive order, not achieving liberation from oppression.

This tendency is, to some extent, responsible for cognitive dissonance—morally and ethically—among evangelicals concerning religious liberty and other Biblical imperatives regarding justice. Because they have not interpreted the Bible in terms of its relevance to social justice in general and liberty, including (but by no means limited to) religious liberty, evangelicals primarily consider religious liberty an essential attribute for a well-ordered society, not a moral and ethical imperative arising from the divine passion for liberation from all forms of oppression.

Martin Luther King, Jr. reflected on the ethical and social consequences of Western theism to some extent in his famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Ponder this excerpt from King's letter to white Birmingham clerics who criticized him for becoming involved in nonviolent civil disobedience efforts to protest racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. ...I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen. ...When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too

many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and 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 many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? ... Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church... Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into

outright disgust.<sup>39</sup>

More than half a century has passed since King's April 16, 1963 letter. However, his observations are, sadly, true today. Last week, I and others received an email message from Rev. Daniel Buford, minister of justice at Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, California, that echoed King's assessment. In pertinent part, it reads as follows:

This morning I had an "Aha!" moment of epiphany when I saw that the cop who pushed the Indian man to the ground down south was the beneficiary of two hung juries and will not be punished for what he did.<sup>40</sup> The cop saw the brown skin of the elder from India and treated him like a Black man. The Muslim boy who was kicked out of school for making a clock experienced [what] has happened to thousands of African Americans whose White teachers are threatened by the brilliance of dark skinned people who are young, gifted, and Black.<sup>41</sup> In my research on these human rights violations at the hands of police I have come upon the surprising cases of people treated so badly that [I] automatically assumed that they were Black until I dug a little deeper and saw a picture of the victim. Native Americans activists die in jail in 2015 under circumstances like Sandra Bland.<sup>42</sup> An unarmed White teenager on his first date was killed recently for not obeying police orders in a satisfactory manner just like many of the teenagers on the list I have compiled.<sup>43</sup> A White Policewoman in Florida dumped a White man in a wheel chair onto the floor because he was not moving as fast as she thought he should without protesting her treatment of him.<sup>44</sup> Cops sexually molest White women as well as women of color with little outcry about the systemic molestation experienced by all women. The absence of records kept about rogue police treatment of Black People also means that no records are kept for anybody.

My "Aha!" is confirming an old trope; Black people are the canaries

in the mineshafts of institutional racism; what kills us mostly and firstly will kill everyone eventually regardless of race. Our problem is compounded by the fact that we are also trapped in a labyrinth with the Minotaur of white supremacist state sponsored terrorism. Police Brutality is seen as a "Black problem" just as Sickle Cell disease is seen [as a] disease that only affects people of African descent resulting in many swarthy Mediterranean-Caucasians ending up sick, misdiagnosed, and dead. Environmental Racism kills us first because of where we live and work but everyone must eat, drink, and breathe in the same environment; wind patterns aren't limited by zip codes. The pollution in our areas always radiates outward. People ...don't give a damn about stopping rogue police as long as Blacks and Mexicans are mainly being hunted and the White community is secure in that knowledge. This [is] precisely where empathy with Human rights concerns comes into play. Haile Selassie said it this way when the League of Nations ignored his warnings about the implications of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to Justice everywhere!"<sup>45</sup>

Although theologians and evangelical leaders profess belief in religious liberty, they somehow have consistently lacked the theological and ethical capacity to relate religious liberty to the wider struggle for freedom from oppression. As Rev. Buford shared in his email message, this demonstrates a basic deficiency in human empathy. I call it moral and ethical dwarfism.

I see no evidence evangelicals recognize, respect, support and have joined the Black Lives Matter movement and struggle for freedom from the oppression of state-sanctioned abuse and homicide of black people by law enforcement officials. Likewise, immigrants facing xenophobic rhetoric from talk show commentators and self-serving politicians see little evidence, if any, that evangelical scholars, congregational leaders, and rank-and-file evangelicals consider their plight

in the face of blatant oppression to be relevant. Workers struggling for living wages see little evidence that evangelicals who are adamant about religious liberty consider income inequality to be morally and ethically relevant to the evangelical notion of justice.

The defect in human empathy arising from theological, hermeneutical, and ethical parochialism explains how evangelicals can be alarmed that photographers, bakers, florists and a Kentucky county clerk must serve all persons, while U.S. evangelical pastors support oppression of LGBT persons in Uganda.<sup>46</sup> Moral and ethical dwarfism accounts for the incongruity between evangelical complaints about religious persecution of Christians in China,<sup>47</sup> contrasted by their appalling silence, if not open endorsement, of Israeli-government sanctioned persecution of and discrimination against Arabs and followers of Jesus in Israel.<sup>48</sup>

I attribute moral and ethical dwarfism of evangelicals about religious liberty and the deeper and wider issue of justice to the theological, hermeneutical and ethical failure of evangelical scholars, denominational leaders and pastors. Evangelical scholars, denominational leaders and pastors study, preach and teach the Hebrew Testament account of Naomi returning to Judah from Moab after the deaths of her husband and sons.<sup>49</sup> Somehow, they are unable or unwilling to recognize and affirm the theological, hermeneutical and ethical relevance of that text to demands by Palestinians to return to land from which they have been displaced.

Evangelical scholars, denominational leaders and pastors study, preach and teach the Hebrew Testament account of how Queen Jezebel of Samaria orchestrated a state-sponsored land grab of the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite.<sup>50</sup> Somehow, that scholarship, preaching and teaching fails to illuminate and affirm the theological, moral and ethical relevance of this Biblical passage to Israeli-government displacement of Palestinians from their homes, and destruction of

Palestinian crops and farm land, to permit construction of illegal Jewish settlements.<sup>51</sup>

These and numerous other examples are why people struggling against oppressive power view claims of evangelicals about religious liberty with disappointment, mounting distrust and disgust. People struggling against oppression have good reason for that disappointment, distrust and disgust. They understand that their struggle for liberation from oppression is grounded in belief that God is, to use the words of Theodore Walker, Jr., “that utterly unsurpassable *Friend* whose love is perfect and all-inclusive.”

Although evangelicals are viewed as the dominant sect among followers of Jesus, evangelicals not only appear intolerant toward other religions; evangelicals appear insensitive, if not unsympathetic and disdainful, about oppression faced by others. There is scant evidence from the course offerings I read on the websites of evangelical seminaries that many of the evangelical scholars who teach and write about religious liberty care about people suffering from mass incarceration, terrorism due to racial profiling, race-based abusive and homicidal police conduct, xenophobia, homophobia, economic oppression caused by classism and capitalism, and other kinds of oppression. Instead, it seems that evangelical scholars, pastors, and other leaders care about religious liberty because they want to be free to proselytize their version of the religion of Jesus, not because they believe God cares about liberating all people who suffer from any oppression.

This shortcoming matters more than one might think. Recall that the early followers of Jesus were a minority sect. When Constantine became the first Roman emperor to claim conversion to Christianity, the religion of Jesus entered the mainstream. The Inquisition and Protestant Reformation show that followers of Jesus struggled across time to demonstrate tolerance for divergent

views within our own belief system. However, the Bible shows that God is not only concerned that people are free to proselytize. Our sacred writings illuminate God’s concern that people be free to live, work and be accepted where they lived as persons of dignity and worth, not deviants, threats or commodities for private and social exploitation.

Earlier this year, President Marvin McMickle of Colgate-Rochester Divinity School concluded a stirring address at the Baptist Joint Committee’s luncheon during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s General Assembly with the following statement.

I believe in the First Amendment, in the separation of church and state, in religious liberty, and in the right to worship God as one chooses or not to worship God at all. However, I believe in something else just as strongly; maybe more so. I believe that American history and its economic foundation was largely written in the blood of African slaves and their descendants; a story that a great many people do not want to hear. Of course I am mindful that if time allowed we could tell a similarly chilling story about the blood and suffering of Native Americans and how the appropriation of so much of their land is the real story of how the west was won...

... I believe that our nation has not yet resolved all of the lingering effects of nearly 400 years of slavery, segregation and second-class status for millions of its citizens. All of this was done and continues to be done by the activity of many who represent the power of the state. Sadly, it could not have lasted as long as it has if it had not been for the silence of so many of those who represent the message of the church, the synagogue, and the mosque.

Borrowing a line from the 1960s song by Simon and Garfunkel, I hope the day will come when the church in America will break the “Sound of Silence” in the face of injustice and inequality! I believe in religious lib-

erty, and I hope that all who labor for the separation of church and state as a valid principle in American society will also labor for the civil and human rights of those whose quest for physical freedom has lasted just as long as the fight for freedom of conscience.<sup>52</sup>

I join Dr. McMickle in urging evangelical followers of Jesus to break from the morally and ethically indefensible practice of supporting “soul liberty,” while actively opposing the demands from others for life, liberty and equality. The love of God about which we preach, study, sing, write, teach and pray demands that followers of Jesus love God enough to protect our neighbors, including our neighbors with divergent lives, beliefs, behaviors and struggles, as much as we cherish our own religious liberty.

### **Conclusion**

Evangelical seminaries, denominational leaders, other religious educators and pastors have refused to embrace a theological vision that inspires a hermeneutic affirming robust respect for and advocacy of religious freedom as part of a deeper and wider reverence for God’s involvement in and support for the human struggle for liberation. That shortcoming blinds evangelicals morally; it also hinders evangelicals ethically from recognizing and affirming that others must be protected from any persecution, mistreatment, bigotry and other oppression, not merely religious-based persecution, mistreatment, bigotry and oppression.

Consequently, we should not be surprised when evangelical followers of Jesus misunderstand, and misrepresent, the social justice imperative enshrined in the First and Fourteenth Amendments, the equality guarantee of the Fourteenth Amendment, and the “love of neighbor” ethic taught and lived by Jesus. And, as Martin King pointedly observed to religious leaders considered “moderates” more than fifty years ago from a Birmingham jail, we should not be surprised by people “whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.”

The people who teach theology, hermeneutics and ethics must call followers of Jesus to participate with God in the divine struggle for human dignity and equality concerning matters beyond the freedom to proselytize, pray, preach and erect monuments to those efforts. Religious liberty is a fundamental social justice imperative bottomed in a deeper and wider understanding about who God is and what God is about, not merely a tool used to achieve national pluralism based on tolerance of divergent sectarian beliefs and practices.

Hence, evangelicals must re-think theology, hermeneutics and ethics. If evangelical followers of Jesus are to develop and live a mature and robust faith, a faith not defined by moral

and ethical dwarfism, then the people who teach theology, hermeneutics and ethics, the people who lead religious denominations, and the people who lead congregations must hold, and affirm, a vision that God participates in the human struggle for liberation from oppression in all its forms.

Respect for religious liberty must be understood, affirmed and be bottomed in the deeper and wider love of God, the love that inspires one to recognize and respect the inherent dignity and equality of all persons. Until evangelicals ground our notions of religious liberty in the deeper and wider love of God, our religious liberty advocacy and rhetoric will be correctly recognized, and ultimately dismissed, as sectarian chauvinism.

God deserves much better than that from us.<sup>53</sup> ■

*Wendell Griffen is Circuit Judge, Sixth Judicial District of Arkansas (Fifth Division), and Pastor, New Millennium Church, Little Rock, Arkansas. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of Christian Ethics Today. This address was sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee Lecture Series and presented at the Fuller Theological Seminary (Travis Auditorium) Pasadena, California on Friday, November 13, 2015, 2 PM.*

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# What Can We Learn From Kentucky's County Clerk?

By K. Hollyn Hollman

For good or bad, a Kentucky clerk became the public face, complete with “Eye of the Tiger” soundtrack, for religious freedom claims relating to same-sex marriage. Following the Supreme Court’s marriage decision, the elected Clerk of Rowan County, Kentucky, refused to issue marriage licenses and prevented her deputies from doing so. That led to a variety of court filings and legal maneuvers, a brief stint in jail, a raucous rally celebrating her release, commentary from presidential candidates, and, finally, marriage licenses but still not a completely clear resolution. The story has received an exhausting amount of attention. What lessons can we take away from it?

## **Conscience-based refusals arise in a variety of settings.**

Most of the religious objections to same-sex marriage have been very different from the highly publicized standoff in Kentucky. In all cases, sincere claims of religious objection should be heard respectfully. The context is critical to evaluate and respond to religious accommodation needs. Purchasing a wedding cake at a bakery, obtaining emergency contraception at a local pharmacy, or applying building codes uniformly are different scenarios where objections have arisen, and they carry different stakes. The right approach to resolving the conflict in a county clerk’s office is not necessarily the right approach to other conflicts, even though they are all rooted in sincere religious objections to government regulations.

## **Elected officials have special responsibilities to serve the public and enforce the law.**

Elected officials take an oath to uphold the law and act on behalf of

the citizens they serve. When government agents act in their official capacity, the law views them as extensions of the state, and rightly so. We should look with special scrutiny whenever an individual, acting on behalf of the government, acts in a way that the law prohibits the government from acting. Of course, officials are also individuals with the right to freedom of belief and conscience. When possible, the law should protect their right to act in accordance with those individual beliefs, especially when that conduct would not impede their governmental duties or imply an official endorsement of religion.

## **Solutions that accommodate religious objectors and protect the rights of others may require hard work and should be applauded.**

The eventual resolution of the events in Rowan County — full and equal access to marriage rights for all residents, without the clerk’s participation — has largely resolved the controversy. One source of the conflict in Kentucky may have been the state’s marriage license procedures themselves. Other states have found ways to navigate this conflict.

In Utah, for example, the process of solemnizing a marriage has been “outsourced to any willing celebrant in the community,” according to law professor [Robin Fretwell Wilson](#), “avoiding the need to decide whether someone like Kim Davis must resign or be fired . . . .” Revisiting the processes by which states issue marriage licenses would be an entirely appropriate response to this controversy.

## **There are limits to religious freedom.**

In Kentucky, the clerk’s claim of religious freedom not to issue mar-

riage licenses and to keep others from doing so interfered with a constitutionally protected right to marry. That presents a particularly difficult religious accommodation claim.

Davis has said that same-sex marriages are not valid in God’s eyes. Expression of that religious belief is protected. But her religious belief is an insufficient basis for her actions given her job. A marriage license from Kentucky, or any other state, certifies that the couple has met all of the state’s qualifications to be married. If a county clerk is required to issue licenses in violation of her conscience, it is not a signal that Due Process and Equal Protection rights outweigh Free Exercise rights. Instead, it is recognition that as a government agency, the clerk’s office is not reducible to the individual that holds the office. The office is an extension of the public, charged with upholding the rights of all.

Some advocates on both sides have framed disputes like Rowan County’s as a contest between First Amendment rights of religious freedom and Fourteenth Amendment rights of liberty. We should avoid the divisive call to pick sides among our constitutional liberties, and instead work together to correct widespread and fundamental misunderstandings about religious liberty that can help avoid such conflicts. ■

*K. Hollyn Hollman* is General Counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. This essay was first published in the September/October 2015 of *Report from the Capital* and is printed here with permission.

# Real Baptists Respect Separation of Church and State

By Randall Balmer

I never thought I would hear myself saying this, but America needs more Baptists. Real Baptists.

This point was brought resoundingly and hilariously to life for me when my mentor from college sent me a link to a recent meeting of the Okaloosa County School Board in Florida. As nearly as I can determine, some members of the community sought to open the board meetings with prayer. The school board attorney counseled against it, citing a small technicality called the First Amendment to the Constitution and its proscription against religious establishment. Undeterred, the pious Christians of Okaloosa County decided that public prayer could be offered before the school board meeting was gavelled to order.

The stage was set. One citizen opened this revival/board meeting by quoting verses of scripture: Matthew 6:24 (no one can serve two masters), Galatians 2:20 (crucified with Christ), Matthew 22:37 (love God with all your heart, soul and mind), Ephesians 4:27 (give no opportunity to the devil), Matthew 4:10 (worship the Lord your God). Had the reader quoted Matthew 6:6 – “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” — the ensuing donnybrook might have been averted.

After the scripture recitations, the man turned the meeting over to several pastors to lead the prayers (Apparently religion is a tag-team sport in Okaloosa County.), who were greeted with applause. As the first pastor started praying, “Father God, we just come before you. . . .” a middle-aged man began his prayer: “Mother, Father God of all peoples, we come today in our humble way to shape a small part of your creation.” He pro-

ceeded to invoke every deity imaginable, from Yahweh and Dionysus and Isis to Krishna, Ekankar and Buddha. “May we be imbued by the wisdom of all gods,” he continued.

The good Christian folks of Okaloosa County were not amused. If there was to be prayer in advance of the school board meeting, it would be Christian prayer, dammit.

After their initial shock at this interloper’s effrontery, the good citizens of Okaloosa County tried to shout him down, offering their prayers more loudly and insistently, arms raised. Some were speaking in tongues. Soon the school board meeting sounded like a cacophony, each voice seeking to drown out the others.

The lone dissenter persisted, at one point sitting in the lotus position in an apparent attempt to meditate. He invited someone nearby to join him, but the citizens of Okaloosa County by then had segued into congregational singing: Amazing Grace, What a Friend We Have in Jesus, Nothing but the Blood of Jesus.

Mayhem! A video clip closes with one of the citizens shouting over and over, “In the name of Jesus! In the name of Jesus!” He tried to perform an exorcism on the poor, misguided soul who dared to offer prayers to a deity other than one approved by the majority. “We cast you out in Jesus’ name,” the exorcist shouted. It wasn’t clear if he was casting out the demon or the interloper.

What does all this have to do with Baptists? Roger Williams, founder of the Baptist tradition in America, was a Puritan minister in Salem, having arrived in Massachusetts in 1631. Very quickly, however, Williams ran afoul of the Puritan authorities because of his suspicions of too close an association between church and state, religion and politics. The Puritans convicted Williams of

“diverse and dangerous new opinions” and expelled him from the colony. He left, and eventually founded Rhode Island.

In 1644, Williams wrote that the “garden of the church” should be separated from the “wilderness of the world” by means of a “wall of separation.” Thomas Jefferson repeated those metaphors in his famous 1802 letter to a group of Baptists in Connecticut as a way of explaining the establishment clause of the First Amendment. “I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people,” the president assured the Danbury Baptists, “which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.”

Clearly, Jefferson wanted to protect the workings of the new nation from religious factionalism; but Williams’ original use of the metaphor had a different valence, one that generally goes unnoticed. Williams sought to protect the “garden” of the church from the “wilderness” of the world. And here it’s important to remember that Williams and his contemporaries were not members of the Sierra Club — that is, they didn’t share our post-Thoreauian romance with wilderness. For them, wilderness was darkness, a place of danger where evil lurked. So when Williams sought to protect the garden of the church from too close an association with the wilderness of the world, he was anxious about the integrity of the faith, lest it be compromised by cozying up to the state. Williams worried that the faith would be trivialized and fetishized when conflated with the state.

Williams acted on his principles when he left Massachusetts. The colony that became Rhode Island

would be a place of religious toleration, where liberty of conscience and the rights of minorities would be respected. Because Baptists were once a minority themselves, they eschewed majoritarianism, the notion that whatever faith or ideology claims the allegiance of a majority should prevail.

All of these — liberty of conscience, separation of church and state, respect for the rights of minorities — were bedrock Baptist principles, jealously guarded by generations of Baptists — until 1979. With the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in June 1979, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States abandoned its historic role as watchman on the wall of separation between church and state. The denomination's new leaders, adopting a majoritarian ethic, began to silence dissenting voices — on doctrinal matters, especially the ordination of women — but on political issues as well. Working hand-in-hand with the newly emergent Religious Right, these folks who called themselves Baptists began to level the wall of separation between church and state, calling for state support of religious schools, the enactment of legislation narrowly informed by religious interests and the display of religious symbols in public spaces.

In one of the more famous examples, Roy S. Moore, chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court and a putative Baptist, installed a 2.5-ton granite monument emblazoned with the Ten Commandments in the lobby of the judicial building in Montgomery. He steadfastly refused any other religious representations in that space; he wanted only the Ten Commandments.

I suspect that many of the citizens attending the school board melee in Okaloosa County would call themselves Baptists; they live in a region of the country where, as Bill Moyers once remarked, there are more Baptists than people. But they are not *real* Baptists. A real Baptist, true to her convictions, honors and defends the separation of church and state. A real Baptist abhors majoritarianism and upholds liberty of conscience. A real Baptist, following Roger Williams, recognizes that when faith and politics are conflated, it is the faith that suffers. It becomes trivialized and fetishized.

Let me provide an example. As it happens, I was one of the expert witnesses in the so-called Ten Commandments case. My testimony was that the First Amendment and the separation of church and state was the best thing that ever happened to

religion in the U.S. The state has (for the most part, at least) stayed out of religious matters, thereby allowing religion to flourish. Any attempt to blur the line of separation diminishes the integrity of the faith.

Judge Myron Thompson ruled — correctly — that “Roy’s Rock” violated the First Amendment and must be removed. As the workers were preparing to relocate the monument, one of the protesters screamed, “Get your hands off my God!”

Unless I miss my guess, one of the Commandments etched into the side of that monument said something about graven images. And that was precisely Roger Williams’ point about protecting the faith from trivialization by too close an association with politics and the state. And I suspect Williams would also have something to say to those believers screeching their piety at a school board meeting in Florida.

America needs more Baptists. ■

*Randall Balmer is chair of the Religion Department and director of the Society of Fellows at Dartmouth College. This essay first appeared in the Valley News newspaper on Sunday, November 1, 2015 and is used with permission of the author.*

## Accra, Ghana

Little more than wooden tables, informal stalls cluster around the tro-tro stations on the northwest side of nkrumah circle, worked by women and pre-pubescent girls, their quiet grace protesting life’s inelegance, God’s silence amid poverty’s deafening noise.

— Darren J. N. Middleton

# A Really Bad Day in Church

By Marion Aldridge

My brother Edmund and I went to the mountains this Veterans Day weekend to watch a football game and to enjoy the fall weather. I walked six miles. I fished and caught a couple of two-pound bass. We ate well. We slept well. We won the game.

Since going to church is in our family DNA, we crossed the highway from the cabin where we stayed and went to the local Baptist church on Sunday morning. The experience was a case study in what is wrong with some factions of the Christian faith in America.

The first part of the service was patriotic, acknowledging the Veterans Day weekend. We pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. We sang *America the Beautiful* and *My Country 'Tis of Thee*. I'm a patriotic American and I'm glad to participate in such demonstrations of loyalty to my country.

When I was a pastor, I almost always paid attention to the secular calendar as well as the sacred calendar. We not only celebrated Christmas and Easter, but also acknowledged New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, Independence Day, Mother's Day and Father's Day. I've even written a book (*The Pastor's Guidebook: A Manual for Special Occasions*) about these special times. In that volume I warn that, when we are in church, we have to be careful about letting the secular overwhelm the sacred. We are, after all, a Christian church gathered to worship God.

On this weekend, the preacher used the sacred hour to deliver a racist, anti-Obama tirade instead of a sermon. For one hour, on a Sunday morning, in a Christian church, Jesus was never mentioned. Never. Not once.

What was I to do? Do I challenge the ill-informed preacher who doesn't understand the difference in God and country? Should I interrupt him with an old fashioned prophetic rant? Do I walk out? I did none of these. My brother, who is a veteran and a good-hearted fundamentalist Christian, far more conservative than I am, later said, "Whatever that was, it was not worship."

Amen, brother.

For his text, the preacher read a single verse from the Psalms, then never referred to it again in the course of a 30-minute diatribe. He would probably tell you he "preaches the Word of God." Not on this Sunday morning.

When the preacher said, "We have the power," he was not referring to the Holy Spirit. He was speaking very specifically about the weaponry of the United States. He was emphatic that we should use military muscle against our enemies. God's sovereignty was not a part of his sermon.

At the beginning of the church service, the preacher indicated a desire to grow the congregation numerically, but apparently it wasn't working. The congregation was smaller than on my previous visits over the past decade. I'm positive he didn't want any blacks in the congregation since he told two stories that were openly hostile to the NAACP in particular and people of color in general. I'm absolutely sure he wanted no gays as part of his faith community. He made that explicitly clear. My brother and I also observed that anyone who leaned left politically would not be welcome. God help any feminist who showed up. I'm not convinced that people who want to follow the literal words of Jesus would be beloved by this guardian of civil religion. He would view them as

troublemakers in the temple, irritants to an already aggravated preacher. If he knew anything about the Jesus movement of the past 20 centuries, it was not evident.

Maybe we were experiencing a bit of a Bible story after all.

Compassionate theological or political disagreement is different than hateful belligerence. I value people who are compassionate and fair, who make good sense, who inspire me and/or who stretch me about matters of faith. This angry proclaimer of Bad News did none of that. His enemies were Muslims and democrats. I'm sure there are others who infuriate this man, but the sermon wasn't long enough to denigrate everyone with whom he disagrees. Because he was loud and emphatic, I wondered if his congregation thought he was a good preacher.

The preacher kept reminding us that he was giving his own opinions. When I lead a worship service, I am guided by the notion that the Sunday morning sermon is not the forum for opinions. It is good for me to have people in the congregation I know will differ with almost anything I say. That forces me to think carefully about my utterances. I try to eliminate the chaff. This man made no such effort.

Oh, well, I know I've preached bad sermons, so I need to find grace for this angry, sad soul. In fairness to him, men and women who actually preach about Jesus might find their churches shrinking as well. ■

*Marion Aldridge is a former Pastor and Former Coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of SC. Freelance Writer.*

# Prayer Offered on Sunday, June 27, 2015, after the Shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC

By Ronald Williams

O God, it is us again. We bow our heads and lift our hearts to you, who affirms that we are all somebody because we are all your children.

Forgive us our sins and help us to move forward in life. We are thankful for your son Jesus, we are thankful for all the many blessings you have bestowed upon us, and in the midst of our thankfulness and blessing...we do have some complaints:

We do not have domestic peace; we do not have world peace; everybody does not have access to clean drinking water; we cannot seem to do enough for the poor, homeless, hungry and disenfranchised people of this nation and the world at large.

Help us not to become weary of these never-ending concerns that we must be involved in. We turn to you, O God, to help remember our brothers' and sisters' concerns and needs here and beyond and we pray for them and hopefully they will pray for us.

We are mindful of our ever-changing

nation. This past week, the Supreme Court made rulings that affirm equal treatment in housing, upheld Obamacare, and marital rights for same-sex couples in all states. We have seen the confederate flag taken down from some state buildings across the nation.

We are thankful for these recent rulings and events because they appear to benefit the greater good of our nation.

Nonetheless, we ask that you remember and be a comfort for those who feel betrayed, troubled and hurt by these recent rulings and turn of events.

God, we ask that you remember Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina, which tragedies have shocked the consciousness of America because its pastor and eight other members were murdered during mid-week prayer services because of their race. And now, their sanctuary has become a tomb and also a place of grace and forgiveness; we

pray for their children who are terrified; we stand with them; we cry with them; we are outraged for them. We pray for them and the beloved dead of Emanuel AME church, because the hate and bigotry is not over.

Be with our sick, bereaved and shut-in members. Remember our staff as they seek to minister to us. Be with Brittany Krebs, our pastor, as she brings us the sermon.

These and other blessings we ask in your son Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray to say:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. ■

*Pastoral prayer offered by Ronald Williams at Baptist Church of the Covenant on June 27, 2015.*

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# Doing Right without Knowing It

By Bill Bruster

*Editor's Note: I had a conversation with the pastor of First Baptist Church in Spartanburg, SC, near Furman University where I was a student in the 1963. He shared with me the "major issue" facing him and his church: What to do when (not if) some black folks showed up on a Sunday morning wanting to attend their church. The deacons decided to welcome those persons in, have the ushers prepped to seat them politely, and carry on with the service...something considered to be a liberal solution. As trivial as this may seem to a college-aged person today, it was a big deal in the South in the 1960s. Many Southern Baptist churches did not resolve the question as this church did. I recently asked my friend, Bill Bruster, to help me find some other stories about how Baptist pastors and churches in the South dealt with Jim Crow, what deacons' meetings were like when these things were discussed, what we had to be proud of and what we had to be ashamed of. Bill shared the following personal stories. I hope others from that era will do the same. Pat Anderson, editor.*

While a seminary student, I served the First Baptist Church of Hennepin, Oklahoma. The church was a strong village church with an average attendance of just over 100. I was a part-time pastor during the school year and full-time during the summer. The church conducted Sunday school and worship services on Sunday mornings and Baptist Training Union on Sunday night. A wonderful layman led the Wednesday evening prayer meetings during the school year. We had three deacons who were serving "life sentences."

There was a strong rural black Baptist church just a few miles north of Hennepin. One cold January afternoon, the black pastor came to the parsonage and explained that he had 13 people awaiting baptism. Since they had no baptistery, they normally baptized in a local creek, but the winter had been too cold. Could they use our baptistery? Without thinking about the consequences, I answered, "Of course. When would you like to use it?"

We set a date for a Saturday night and I announced the good news to our congregation the next morning. That very morning, a teenaged boy made a profession of faith in our church. After talking with him and his parents, we set the date for his baptism, which would occur on Sunday after the black church used the baptistery on Saturday night.

Then I got the phone call. The

teen's grandfather was on the other end of the line. "What do you mean letting them black folks use our baptistery? I don't want my grandson being baptized in water used by a bunch of (and here he used the N word)." I was young, inexperienced, and replied, "Well, it seems you are the one who needs to be baptized." He became irate and promised to report me to the deacons. It then dawned on me: I should have consulted the deacons before granting permission for the black church to use the baptistery. I had granted them permission because it was the right thing to do. I don't know if he reported me to the deacons or not. They never said a word to me about it and both baptisms proceeded on schedule.

Later, in reflection, I might have done the right thing without knowing it. The Hennepin Church saw as its mission to "help educate young preacher boys." They expected their seminary pastors to serve three or four years and then to move on. But those deacons were serving for their lifetimes. They were going to live there forever. Maybe it was best that I did not bring them into the decision. They did not have to face their friends, "having granted black folks the right to use the baptistery." And it turned out all right. After I had moved on to another church, that teenaged boy's grandfather died. The boy's mom (the grandfather's daughter), called me and asked me to preach

her dad's funeral. She said, "He always respected you for doing what you thought was right." Maybe I did what was right without even knowing it. ■

## Privileged to Be a Witness

I became pastor of the Central Baptist Church of Bearden, in Knoxville, Tennessee, in February of 1974. After a few months, a wonderful black family began attending our church. After three or four visits, we chatted at the back door after a morning service. John, who was the Air Force recruiter at the University of Tennessee, explained how much they were enjoying the church, and that they would like to join when I felt it would be appropriate. He explained that they did not want to cause any problems for me, as there were no other black folks attending our church. I urged them to join, and assured them they would be welcomed. The church had an after-school tutoring program and there were some black children who had attended in the past.

A few Sundays passed and the black family joined. I normally went to the vestibule during the benediction to greet folks. I decided to stay down front that Sunday, to stand in solidarity with our new members. I had never lived in the South before and was unsure as to how our new members would be received. After all, they were the first to integrate an all-white church.

I was excited to see the large number of people who were standing in line to greet our new members. I stood there proudly observing it all when I felt someone standing at my shoulder. I turned to him, our oldest member at age 94, and greeted him warmly. He said, "Pastor, we made a mistake this morning. God never intended the races to mix." As we talked, our new member, John, had finished being greeted and came over to me, sticking out his hand toward our oldest member, and introducing himself. The stunned elder did not know what to do. He reluctantly shook hands and walked away. To his credit, he never mentioned "the mistake" to me again, nor did I hear that he had talked to others about it.

A couple of years later this elder member was in the hospital for his final stay. I went by to visit with him. He was weak, but still in full control of his mind. After a good visit, he said, "Pastor, would you pray with me and my roommate before you go. He is one of the finest Christians I have ever known and I am sure he would like for you to pray for him as well. Just pull back the curtain so he can pray with us."

As I pulled the curtain, I noticed that his roommate was a black man. We had a wonderful time of prayer with both men praying after I did. I left the hospital on cloud nine. I was so proud of how far my friend had come at his age. I thanked God for the opportunity to be a witness at how God's grace can help us grow, no matter our age. ■

## A Salute to a Church

The First Baptist Church of Abilene, Texas, is an historic church. It helped birth Hardin-Simmons University, Hendrick Baptist Hospital, and Hendrick Home for Children. The church was among the first, if not the first, church in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) to call a woman to serve on the staff,

in 1948. When Dr. James Sullivan was pastor, he was asked to lead a committee for the SBC to find a place in the west to establish a Baptist encampment, which became Glorieta Baptist Assembly. First Abilene was among the first churches to build a cabin at Glorieta. This church was first in a great many things, including perhaps being the first to have an elevator in its educational building. In 1967, under the leadership of Dr. Elwin Skiles, the church changed its constitution to include "welcoming all people into membership, regardless of color." But no black folks joined.

In the early 1980's, under the leadership of Jim Flamming, the church voted to stay downtown, instead of relocating to the burbs. They built a Family Life Center for the community to use which was a first-class facility with skating rink, bowling alley, gym, running track, handball courts, cafe, etc. When I became pastor in 1985, the community indeed did use the building. More than 90% of the usage was by non-church members, primarily black and Hispanic people. Yet there was only one Hispanic man and no black people who were members of the church.

And then a black man began attending. He had a Master's degree as an electrical engineer and was an executive with a utility company. One day, he called and made an appointment to see me. He arrived at my office with a Caucasian woman, explaining they had been dating and were talking marriage; but he did not want to marry her until she became a Christian. She was now ready to convert and wanted to talk with me about that decision. She committed her life to Christ in my office and they left planning to join the church the following Sunday morning. I was confident the church was ready to be integrated, but I was not sure it was ready for an interracial couple. I spent a restless few days waiting for Sunday. When the day arrived, down

the aisle they came. I went to the vestibule during the benediction and the first man out the back door was a 92-year-old retired plumber. When he approached me, he began, "Pastor..." and paused. I thought to myself, "Go on and get out of here; don't say anything else to me." He began again, "Pastor, come with me." He took me by the hand and led me back to the sanctuary. As he opened the door, he said, "Look at that." He pointed to the crowd waiting in line to welcome our new members. There must have been 300 or 400 people standing in the aisle. Then he said, "Today, we became a real church."

That's the way it ought to be. I salute First Baptist Church Abilene for doing it right. ■

## A Major Regret

For six years, from 1968-1974, I served the First Baptist Church of Siloam Springs, Arkansas. It is a wonderful church and I loved being their pastor. The population was about 5,000 when we lived there and is now over 15,000. It was a sleepy little town located in Benton County, Arkansas, whose primary claim to fame was being the home of John Brown University. If I heard it once, I heard it a 100 times: "There are no blacks in Benton County." While I never heard it said, I am sure there were no Hispanics either. Because the issue of racial injustice seemed so far removed from us, I seldom mentioned the issue. I did nothing to prepare the church for the future. Because of the dynamic growth in the poultry industry, Benton County, Arkansas, is now home to thousands of Hispanic people. There is very little emphasis being given to reaching these wonderful people and I did nothing to prepare our church to do so. I repent of that. ■

*Bill Bruster*

“Of making many books there is no end. . .” Ecclesiastes 12:12 NRSV

## Rough Country: How Texas Became America’s Most Powerful Bible-Belt State

by Robert Wuthnow

Reviewed by Rick McClatchy

Robert Wuthnow’s *Rough Country: How Texas Became America’s Most Powerful Bible-Belt State* surveys the interaction between politics and religion in Texas from the Reconstruction to the present. This book is not a casual read and has enough substance to engage any historical scholar, with the text covering 484 pages and the end notes another 106 pages. Wuthnow’s scholarship has done a great service to the understanding of religion and politics in Texas, which will be of great interest to religious leaders, historians, sociologists and political junkies.

As one would expect on the Texas religious scene, Baptists play a significant role in Wuthnow’s book. One will find mention of many key Baptist leaders, e.g. R. E. B. Baylor, B. H. Carroll, S. A. Haden, J. B. Cranfill, J. Frank Norris, George W. Truett, J. M. Dawson, Jimmy Allen, W. A. Criswell, Billy Graham, Jimmy Carter, Bill Moyers and others. Attention is given to Baptist denominational bodies as well as to Baptist institutions and publications. Wuthnow’s thoroughness also covers other major denominations, such as the Methodists, and even smaller denominations, like the Quakers. The reader is provided a broad general feel of what was happening among various religious groups in Texas.

On the political front, Wuthnow was equally thorough, covering the actions of national, state and local

political leaders. Demographic analysis of political elections is provided and he goes into the underside of politics that can be quite ugly at times. Perhaps one of the most disappointing aspects was the way in which race was used by politicians to get votes. Wuthnow tells of a 1981 interview with Lee Atwater, a political consultant for the 1980 Reagan campaign, who explained the race and politics issue this way:

“You start out in 1954 by saying ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, state’s rights and all that stuff.” But by the 1980s that language was also becoming unacceptable. “You’re getting so abstract now [that] you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that was part of it,” Atwater acknowledged. “I’m not saying that. But I’m saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, ‘We want to cut this’ is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than ‘Nigger, nigger.’” (p. 378)

Most readers will not be convinced by Atwater’s logic any more than Wuthnow was. He states, “Atwater was correct in arguing that it was unacceptable in mainstream political campaigns to engage explicitly in racially prejudiced language. Race nevertheless remained an important part of the cultural and political landscape” (p. 378).

In the introduction, Wuthnow lays out his scholarly goals and, in the last chapter, uses a sociological study of religion to assess various theories to interpret the events that he has discussed in the rest of the book. While these beginning and ending chapters probably will not be of interest to the average reader, the rest of the book has a wealth of information that even the general reader will find interesting.

One of the interesting themes in the book is the strength of the conservative political and religious establishment throughout the history of Texas. Yet, when the conservatives would rise up on a number of historical issues—e.g. segregation, race, temperance, women’s roles, evolution, labor reform, abortion, poverty, immigration—they could not maintain the status quo over the long haul. The things that progressives advocated, while publicly maligned and belittled by conservative religious leaders and political leaders, ultimately changed the culture. This, of course, raises serious questions about how societies work. Apparently, conservatives are always placed in the inevitable position of trying to stop something that society is moving toward. This social momentum cannot be stopped—delayed, yes—stopped, no. Conservatives are capable of slowing down the social efforts of progressives, but it appears that they are not able to stop them permanently. This observation is this reviewer’s major take-away from the material in the book. There is much more to digest and speculate about Wuthnow’s findings in this rich book. ■

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## ***Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates** Reviewed by Chris Caldwell

I just finished reading *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. It would surprise few who have read it that, upon putting the book down, I was compelled to pick my pen up.

The book, written as a letter to the author's son, is intimate—so intimate that a pastor such as I instinctively worries a bit about the wellbeing of any author so intently circling such a painful flame. The book is intimate, but not inviting, which is a unique combination of traits. Most intimate books invite the reader to have a seat beside the author. Coates' book doesn't feel that way to me and, although it may be because I am white, I think not. Coates is many things as an author: eloquent, to be sure, probing and strong. But he is not charming and does not pretend to be. Some will say the book is "in your face;" but I would say it simply bears the straightforward manner of its author.

At one point, Coates speaks fondly of a phrase spoken by one black man to another: "We straight." One senses, from beginning to end, that the relationship between author and

reader is "straight," not in the sense of "We're square" as "We straight" conveys, but more in the sense of "Straight up," as in, "Let's be straight up with one another." The genius of the book, it seems to me, stems from a soul-bearing text written by an author who keeps everyone—especially white readers—at arm's length, and at an arm's length maintained by a strong arm. Coates invites us in, but he also keeps us out.

I don't totally "get" this book. And if Coates would give me credit for anything as a white reader, it might be that. Coates consistently—or, perhaps I should say insistently—uses James Baldwin's damning phrase for whites: "The people who think they are white." Fair enough. And if fellow white readers don't like the phrase, I'm sure Coates doesn't care. The book wasn't written for whites, although we're the lurking presence throughout. I certainly think Coates would be glad to see his book prompting whites to think, and maybe even to think differently. But we are not his concern. As he says to his son about us near the end of the book, "Hope for them. Pray for them, if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion."

Coates is not a person of faith, and

it would be inaccurate to say he is a respector of people of faith. He is, however, a respector of the role faith plays in others' lives, and one gathers that he would not be too terribly disappointed if his son—who is about the same age as my younger son—should choose the way of faith. My faith makes me more hopeful (or, perhaps naïve—your choice) than Coates; but I try to maintain a faith that squares with the realities of the real world we live in, not the neurotic version of the world many preachers want us to live in. Coates' book helps me do that.

Coates paints a necessarily unbalanced picture of our pervasively imbalanced world. For those like myself, still trying to make it more balanced—and clearly Coates, despite his cynicism, is in that number—his book offers frank observations that are a necessary part of any real conversation about race in 2015 America. I hope and pray his son and mine will write and read less painful books someday. But someday ain't today. ■

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# “Drone Dreaming Along the Border: Trump, Immigration, and Rhetorics of Nostalgia”

By Jonathan Tran

I would like this evening to step into the crowded intersection of politics (narrowly and broadly defined), immigration, race and war. At this intersection, or flying high above it rather, are drones, hundreds and hundreds of government drones. What are these drones doing? Some are searching. Some are targeting. Some are delivering. Some of them are guarding. Some are just letting people know they, or we, are there. Many of them are weaponized or are able to be weaponized. Fueling these drones is a metadiscourse about America's present determined by America's past. And the drones, in turn, fuel the discourse, provoking dreams of a mechanized global future. US government drones, whether in some faraway country or along our national borders, raise ethical questions about appropriation dollars and government contracts, civil liberties and due process, relations between bordering nation states, and environmental and economic injustice. Ultimately, however, drones and what I will call “drone dreams” are about how we imagine our world—what we take to be its good, whether we believe it to be good at all, and what it means for us humans as the particular kinds of creatures we are to inhabit it, to receive it, to hold it, as either gift or possession. Much else that rightly concerns us, from government contracts to economic injustice, falls under a broader and deeper question about our humanity amidst late capitalism, and whether or not our humanity is still salvageable amidst those powers.

In the following, I analyze one drone dream, one invoked as a rhetoric of nostalgia, where certain politicized habits of speech bring together politics, immigration, race and war. I do so by first examining the “Make America Great Again” logic of Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump.

Second, I try to show how such discursive rhetoric inspires drone dreams along the US border. I analyze what these dreams look like, what they dream of, as it were. Third, I show that the goals of the dream are not achievable because of certain perpetual features of human life and that, because of this, a brinkmanship mentality will result in escalating suffering; it is here that I will trace out the presence of God in Christ, who is both wretched of the earth and most powerful being. Following and concluding, I will offer something of an alternative in the quiet, gentle and careful work of my Baylor colleague, Lori Baker; Dr. Baker's work of recovering, identifying, and returning bodies along the US border will be shown as receiving the dispossessed and persecuted body of Christ.

It is, of course, easy to ridicule Donald Trump. One might even say that it is fun to make fun of “The Donald.” Yet, the ease of ridicule is exactly what makes ridiculing him not fun, but rather serious; and seriousness is something we are in need of at this moment in our public life. So, rather than poke fun at him, I want to attempt to examine his thought on issues related to immigration, and how they might inspire drone dreams. This will require me to get inside the mindset of the rhetoric and follow its logic. The point in doing so has less to do with Donald Trump and more to do with the millions of people who find something there worthwhile, attractive, even salutary and inspiring. What do we do with the people behind Trump, and the fact that the more troubling the things he says, the more some seem to support him? These are good people, we need to remember. I may think them not good just because they support policies I take to be morally prob-

lematic; but that is only to overestimate the goodness of my own judgments and underestimate what is good in what sometimes comes off as villainous. Through Trump, I want to think about these people and think through their seeming enthrallment with his words on immigration.

Just to qualify what I am about to say: I am not a Democrat or a Republican. I am not against Trump because I am for some other political candidate, say, Ben Carson, co-Republican leader, and someone I discuss briefly below. Three years ago, I gave a public lecture on the Obama administration's massive expansion of the UAV drone program, a program that will, going forward, be viewed as the tip of the spear of American military power and probably American political diplomacy. I argued then that President Obama's program is as ethically problematic as it is strategically expedient, and problematic because expedient. On theological grounds I characterized the program as morally disastrous and emblematic of the need for non-violent Christian witness in the face of global terrorism and America's war on terror.<sup>1</sup> And so, while I take issue with Trump today, it is not because of some political agenda, at least none of the usual sort.<sup>2</sup>

When speaking of nostalgic rhetorics, I have in mind Trump's big statement on immigration that came forward this previous summer, the one that simultaneously incensed a lot of people while also bringing him millions of new supporters. This comes from a statement Donald Trump penned; and the fact that it was reiterated as a statement, rather than a throw-away comment or just a speech where anyone can be egged on, is important. Also remember that the broader theme of the statement, and the motto of his entire campaign, is “Make America Great Again.”

The motto offers a lens through which to understand not only his summer immigration statement, but also much of the Trump presidential campaign.

The motto is something about America's greatness, and pictures America as a place that used to be great, but no longer is. Notice the claim isn't "make America greater," but rather the notion that we were once great and no longer are. Both of those aspects is crucial—that we once were great, and that prior greatness is what we are trying to recover; we are trying here to recover America, which has been lost. It leaves undefined at this point what led either to the loss of greatness and what reclaiming greatness entails, but it does set up a formula that tightly relates the two. America used to be great because of X, but the loss of X means the loss of greatness (where the possession of X just is what makes us great), and therefore the recovery of X is what a Trump presidency enables.

Hence, the motto and the vision and aims of the Trump campaign are nostalgic in structure; it looks back to a prior good, and it laments, depending on and creating an empathic sense of loss in the voting populace. Moreover, and this is critical, the slogan is activist in nature; it is, after all, an imperative "Make America Great Again" with the implied, "You, make America great again", "you" fellow-Americans, "you" fellow-lamenters of a lost greatness, "you" who remember that greatness, and "you" of course the voter. Once the infrastructure of the rhetoric is set up, it allows one to plug anything in. The formula, I would argue, is more important than whatever content Mr. Trump adds. It is the rhetorical structure of loss, lament, empathy and active recovery that is most important here. The plugged-in content, whatever it might be, plays a secondary role. And while Trump has taken up different issues, and here I specifically deal with his approach to immigration, any number of things can complete this formula. He could, for example, bring up honeybees. He could say, "America used to be great because of honeybees; but the rapidly declining numbers of

honeybees means the loss of America's greatness, and therefore we need to, in order to be great again, get honeybees to have more honeybee babies; we need to genetically engineer honeybee Viagra." Of course, Trump isn't talking about honeybees (which by the way is a very serious issue, but one not much talked about, like other important issues (for example, education), in this current campaign).

So immigration plugged into Trump's formula about loss, lament, empathy and active recovery issues in what? Let me quote from that summer immigration statement: "When Mexico (meaning the Mexican government) sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems to us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people! But I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. They're sending us not the right people. It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America, and it's coming probably from the Middle East. But we don't know. Because we have no protection and we have no competence, we don't know what's happening. And it's got to stop and it's got to stop fast.... I have great respect for Mexico and love their people and their people's great spirit. The problem is, however, that their leaders are far smarter, more cunning, and better negotiators than ours. To the citizens of the United States, who I will represent far better than anyone else as president, the Mexican government is not our friend...and why should they be when the relationship is totally one-sided in their favor on both illegal immigration and trade?"<sup>3</sup>

In another speech discussing his proposed border wall, Trump says, "I will make Mexico pay for it. Believe me. They will pay for it because they have really ripped this country off. They have really ripped this country off. They have really taken advantage of us both economically and at the border.

They will pay for that fence."<sup>4</sup>

Immigration plugged into Mr. Trump's plug-and-play formula might be restated along these lines: I know a lot of you feel like your world is giving way, that the ground is coming out from under you, that the walls are closing in, that your world is getting smaller and smaller. Your kids' futures are uncertain and the promise of jobs and employment has given out. You don't have land like you once used to; you don't feel safe like you once did; you aren't free to say what you want, including all this. Well, let me explain it. This is our country. And it is, or has been, a great country. We and those who look like us are what make it great. Except now others are trying to take it away from us, and in the process we are losing what is great about America. They are, these usurpers and criminals, and they look like all the other criminals we have come to know as criminals. Worse still, we aren't even allowed to speak truthfully about what is happening. And so not only are we violated, but we are silenced. Well, I will not be silenced. I will not be silent. I will stop this. And I will return to you all that is rightfully yours: your jobs, your lands, your futures, our greatness. And I will do so by keeping them out. I will make America great again." The ethical sticking point here isn't so much the xenophobia or the nativism but the nostalgic use of the xenophobia and nativism. Remember that Trump could say the same for our honeybee problem. I don't know what Trump actually thinks about immigration; I'm willing to guess that his views on immigration largely follow the standard things we Americans tend to think about immigrants: When we need them, let them in; when we don't, blame them for why we don't. But his view on immigration, or honeybees, matters less than the nostalgic tenor of the whole discourse. A few weeks ago, Trump made a comment about Christmas. He had nothing really to say about Christmas, such as that it marks the incarnation of the second person of the trinity or that it is a time of tremendous economic pressure, but only that he misses how we used to

say “Merry Christmas” and we no longer do.<sup>5</sup> Trump’s campaign is one built around a vanishing horizon of the past, which then can be secured, as promised, by whatever means necessary.

For many in the US government, the means to that promised end is unmanned aerial systems, UAS’s, UAV’s, or, simply, drones. And, while Trump hasn’t talked about drones, it is easy to imagine his use of this technology as a virtual version of that wall he proposes to build. What drones afford us is constant surveillance. When that summer immigration statement of his talks about rapists and criminals and terrorists, saying, “we don’t know what’s happening,” he is gesturing to greater surveillance—surveillance that is uninterrupted, mobile, actionable and efficient, what is called in the UAS community “the lidless eye.” In the same way that UAV’s proved the game-changer in America’s war on terror, so might their success, it is claimed, be brought to this other pressing problem, which at least rhetorically relates to the war on terror.

You’ll notice that there is no causal relationship between our nostalgia of a lost American greatness and the use of drones. Technology, I submit, doesn’t quite work that way; it is rather that technology creates and encourages our dreams. The dream begins by seeing the technology used effectively in other places, and then spurs the imagination to its new application. Recall the strategic benefits of military drone use: They take non-American life without risking American life; they are financially viable; they are largely politically unaccountable; their presence is untraceable; so on and so forth. Notice how possibility quickly turns into responsibility, availability to normativity. The presence of the technology demands its use: Why would you risk American life when you could accomplish the same thing without that risk? If drones along our borders can keep us safe, how could we in good conscience not make use of them? No matter that the main people advocating for drones are also the very people selling them; but that is always the case with modern

technology, which simultaneously identifies both a problem and its solution, where the problem often did not exist prior to its solution. Writ large onto the broader landscape of nostalgia, drones are inscribed as both diagnosing our ills and proscribing their cures. The existence of a highly effective drone system gives the impression that the dream of America can be had again. It cannot. But the drones make it seem like it can, and the seemingness of the dream, its utter possibility, is enough for some people to pursue its use. The presence of drone technology and the possibility of a recovered greatness go together; greatness is the content and drones are the form.

America has been using drones for border control since the early 2000s. Drone technology was active there by the 1990s but it was 9/11 that really precipitated drone research and development, especially at California-based General Atomics, which happens to be the primary and, some say, exclusive supplier of US drones, and coincidentally the chief lobbyist for the expansion of their use. It was originally the Department of Homeland Security, not Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—the governmental organ charged with border control—that initiated drone use along the border. Not until 2005 did CBP, under the auspices of its Office of Air and Marine (OAM) division, begin using drones for border control. According to CPB at the time, “The UAV program focuses operations on the CBP priority mission of anti-terrorism by helping to identify and intercept potential terrorists and illegal cross-border activity.”<sup>6</sup> The initiative is one transplanted from the war on terror, where tools of that war are redeployed for similar strategic outcomes, albeit upon a different theater of engagement. So the original rationale for government drone use in America had to do with the war on terror, with immigration politics really only along for the ride.

What is interesting is how the script has now been flipped, 10 years later, where the war on terror no longer provides the rationale for drone use.

These days, it is not about terrorism, which now takes the backseat, but illegal immigration as its own threat. Before, the rationale went something like, “Among those 100 illegals, there might be one terrorist sneaking across the border” so we need to stop the whole lot of them; now it is, “there are 100 illegals sneaking across the border”—full stop. What has changed to flip the script? One can speculate, with the largest economic recession since the Great Depression proving the usual suspect, and the way rhetorics of nostalgia blame our economic woes on undocumented workers. This would demonstrate not an efficient but a material causal relationship between nostalgia and drones; but in some ways that is neither here nor there. What is important is that drones and immigration now go together like drones and terrorism used to go together.

The *Guardian* recently offered this report of America’s current use of drones for border control: “The government has operated about 10,000 drone flights under the strategy, known internally as ‘change detection,’ since it began in March 2013. The flights currently cover about 900 miles, much of it in Texas, and are expected to expand to the Canadian border by the end of 2015. Border missions fly out of Sierra Vista, home of the US Army Intelligence Center at Fort Huachuca, or Corpus Christi, Texas. They patrol at altitudes between 19,000 at 28,000 feet and between 25 and 60 miles of the border.”<sup>7</sup>

Nowhere are these drone dreams more apparent than in the aspirations of the Republican-sponsored “Secure Our Borders First Act”, the proposed H.R. 399 authored by Texas Congressman Michael McCaul, chair of the congressional Committee on Homeland Security. The bill’s rationale is as it sounds—that before we can reform immigration, we need to secure US borders. The bill has as one of its chief determinative acts the redeployment of “Department of Defense assets from warzones to borders.”<sup>8</sup> Drones are specifically mentioned and imagined by the bill, and will continue to be so

even though a recent Inspector General report rigorously questioned the effectiveness of drones for border control.<sup>9</sup> The main thing to be noticed is how the script is flipped; terrorism plays only a secondary role, namely identifying the theater from which available technologies can be drawn toward what is now the primary objective, US border control, which instructively now goes by the name “border security,” bringing full-circle the issues of terrorism and immigration. Currently a majority of Americans support the use of drones for the securing of American borders and other domestic applications and, since 2010, we have increasingly seen government encouragement toward weaponization, usually to the tune of non-lethal force.<sup>10</sup>

No current presidential candidate has made a case for the weaponized use of drones along US borders. Most mention drones in terms of surveillance, but no one is pitching armed drones for bombing missions. Well, no one except Ben Carson, Trump’s co-front runner for the Republican nomination. Recently Dr. Carson, while speaking of government drones, said, “Along that border we have miles and miles of fences. I went there last week and didn’t see any Border Patrol people. And those fences are so easy to scale, it’s almost like not having them there. There are caves that they utilize. Those caves can be eliminated.” Carson qualified himself in the days that followed, “I’m not talking about killing people. No people with drones.”<sup>11</sup> But given the reality of how drones work, much more like the proverbial machete than the purported scalpel, the qualifications may prove rather hollow. Also consider that weaponized US military drones are already being used in conjunction with the Mexican government in its all-out war on what is called “narcoterrorism.”<sup>12</sup>

Part of the problem with our attempts at border control is they seek to impede a most basic tendency of humans, that is, to move toward sustenance, security and shelter. Humans, like all animals, adapt and move to places where they feel safe. They will settle there for as long as they can until

they need to move again. And then they will move on. The people currently coming to America feel as if they need to come here. They might be right or wrong about that, but still, they desperately want to come here. And nothing seemingly will keep them from it. The people currently in America also came and moved and adapted to this place for sustenance, security and shelter. We now feel safe here. Our feeling safe here makes it unlikely that we will see these others now wanting to come here as anything but competitors. The conceptualizations of capitalism further this sense under notions of scarcity and their zero-sum rationales upon which the mechanisms of supply and demand and their predications of private property find traction. So what you have is dynamic between immigrants who find themselves in search of a home and we who do not feel as if we can accommodate them—that our home is not sharable; the immigrants can’t stop moving and we will not let them in; the more the immigrants move in the more we fight them. Any number of things can contribute to one’s need to move; whatever it is, we will militate against it. This is called brinkmanship and it is an intractable situation. We are seeing this right now in real time in Europe as people flee Africa and the Middle East, just as we are seeing it in America as people flee Central America and Mexico for the United States. We are also seeing the protest put up against the Syrian refugees, and again the parallel here in America.

The brilliance of Trump’s “Make America Great Again” strategy is its ability to tap into this most intractable of realities, to lay at its feet the many ills that plague us, the things that have robbed us of our greatness, and to promise that Trump can fix it. The brilliance of the campaign slogan as related to immigration issues is that it detracts from the truth that this is not a problem that can be fixed, not at least by border policy and control; further militarization of the US border will only increase the stakes for us, since for the immigrants the stakes could not be any higher; that is why they are willing to

leave home and family and risk death and worse to get to America. Trump taps into a perennial and even a Biblical problem and stakes America’s future on his ability to solve it, even though it cannot be solved. What a brilliant strategy. This is what is meant by an empty campaign promise, a promise that is empty of any ability to fulfill it.

In their book *Empire*, critical theorists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt argue that globalization is now outstripping a modern political imagination that conceptualizes the world as individual nation-states demarcated by national borders. It has always been the tendency of capitalism to envision the earth as smooth, where capital flows fluidly upon its surface, going in any and every direction, settling at each crevice, irrespective of borders, nationalities, sovereignty and the like. They argue that we are already seeing, and have been seeing for some time now, the end of political arrangements based on discrete nation-states as bordered entities. Indeed, it is not even so much that that arrangement is ending, but that it was always only temporary, something that could hold only for so long simply because it, and its artificial fixations, cannot forever hold back the masses, masses who move. Negri and Hardt call these masses “the multitude” and inscribe them as “postcolonial heroes” of a “coming civilization;” I quote Negri and Hardt here at length: “The postcolonial hero is the one who continually transgresses territorial and racial boundaries, who destroys particularism and points toward a coming civilization. Imperial command, by contrast, isolates populations in poverty and allows them to act only in the straightjackets of subordinated postcolonial nations. The exodus from localism, the transgression of customs and boundaries, and the desertion from sovereignty ... mean the destruction of boundaries and patterns of forced migration, the reappropriation of space, and the power of the multitude to determine the global circulation and mixture of individuals and populations. The Third World, which was constructed by the colonialism and imperi-

alism of nation-states (and its attendant mechanism of geographical and ethnic regulation of populations) is smashed. It is destroyed when throughout the ontological terrain of globalization, the most wretched of the earth becomes the most powerful being, because its nomad singularity is the most creative force and the omnilateral movement of its desire is itself the coming liberation. The movements of the multitude designate new spaces, and its journeys establish new residencies. Autonomous movement is what defines the place proper to the multitude. Increasingly less will passports or legal documents be able to regulate our movements across borders. A new geography is established by the multitude as the productive flows of bodies define new rivers and ports. The cities of the earth will become at once great deposits of cooperating humanity and locomotives for circulation, temporary residencies and networks of the mass distribution of living humanity.”<sup>13</sup>

I imagine Negri and Hardt’s use of “exodus” imagery as intentional, as well as their paschal invocation of the “wretched of the earth.” Those who refuse the bordered terms of the nation-state force an apocalyptic reimagining of the future. By immigrating on their own terms, they put tremendous pressure upon political orderings that for them and their kind are not sustainable. The state’s response of course is to garrison their walls so as to withstand these pressures, which from *their* perspective are equally unsustainable. And so the back and forth between pressure and counter-pressure, each side ratcheting up not only what it is willing to do, but also the rhetoric, as instantiated tonight by Trump’s summer statement. Those of us in countries like the United States can hope that conditions in southern nations might improve so that the movement is precluded at its source. But I don’t think it is too controversial to say that such hopes will prove fallow for the foreseeable future. What we will be left with, what we *are* left with, is lots and lots of people trying to get into California, Arizona, and Texas because they want

to live, and we Americans putting up lots and lots of barriers to keep them out. Increasingly, the only way to keep these people at bay, the thinking goes, is to make it so difficult for them, so dangerous, so nightmarish, that they will turn back. Since 1994, US border control has been directed by a strategy called “prevention through deterrence” which has the goal of forcing migrants into “more hostile terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement.”<sup>14</sup> But these immigrants have not stopped coming and will not turn back; they have not, and they won’t for the simple reason that no difficulty, danger, and nightmare they face at the border is worse than those from which they flee. Between these difficulties, the ones from which they come and the ones we put in their way, between the dangers, the ones from which they come and the ones we create, and the nightmares, the ones from which they come and the ones we dream up for them, will be a whole lot of death and suffering. According to a 2014 report by the International Organization for Migration, since the new millennium, about 40,000 people have died trying to reach more prosperous countries, a rate of about eight deaths per day. While the majority of those occur in Europe, usually along the Mediterranean, still, approximately 6,200 of those deaths have taken place along the US border with Mexico. Most experts agree that these numbers are conservative, and that the actual number is significantly higher, such that some refer to “prevention through deterrence” as “death as deterrence.”<sup>15</sup> And if we add the number of non-fatal casualties of this journey to the north, including extortion, kidnappings, robbery, rape, forced trafficking, violences suffered disproportionately by women, the numbers rise exponentially.<sup>16</sup> Include the reality that women suffer violence. This is what I mean by brinksmanship.

The multitude’s forced rethinking of borders and migration we can describe as apocalyptic. The suffering resulting from the brinksmanship can be described as Christological. These

are Christological realities that gesture not simply toward a dim apocalyptic future, but a salvific one, where the great exodus of peoples and the mixture of identities bring about an “ontological” creation of new spatial and temporal realities in the form of the earth’s new Jerusalems. This is the new humanity, one that refuses to understand humanness in terms of nationality and property. I want to say: To claim this new humanity is to reclaim our own humanity in it, to renew how we think of others beyond the zero-sum games. And to participate in this new humanity is to participate in the one who gathers the multitude to himself as given to it, and the multitude as given and participant in God’s own story of exodus and liberation.

Last month, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, of which my church, Calvary Baptist, is a part, offered the following litany in prayer for the Syrian refugees. “Lord God, who fled his home with his family on a wave of violence and death, guard and protect the refugees of the Syrian Civil War in order that the whole world might know you are the God of the dispossessed and persecuted. We pray this in the name of our crucified Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.”<sup>17</sup> Notice how the litany relates the Syrian refugees to the story of Christ, and notice the two arcs of that emplotment, first the story of the dispossessed and persecuted Christ in exodus from imperial command and, second, the arc of the Son’s movement in the Spirit from the bosom of the Father into a wave of violence and death, only to return, again in the Spirit, to that life a recapitulated humanity. God in Christ doing so has the effect of both showing the world what it means to be God, the crucified Lord as the fullness of God, and what it means to be human, the dispossessed and persecuted as the fullness of humanity. To participate then with the multitude is to participate in most powerful being, breaking down dividing walls and transgressing customs and boundaries. To participate is also to participate in the dispossession of immigrants, to receive and to indeed

carry their burdens and to serve their needs, to be counted with these border transgressors and to forgive them their transgressions, as they forgive us ours, and so then to identify ourselves with their dispossession and persecution.

I said at the beginning that the question of drones and drone dreams is a question of whether we might still recover our humanity in an age of globalization. Well, now I say that our road to recovery travels the path taken by the multitude in exodus. To find ourselves there with them is to find ourselves pressed up against a new humanity, which in late capitalism might be a last chance. To receive them is to receive not simply their burdens and their needs, but also to receive the great gift of their refusal of the terms of the old world, to receive the apocalyptic and the Christological. This is where Christ is to be found—with the wretched of the earth, for he, having counted himself with them, is nothing more and nothing less than the wretched of the earth. To take in these strangers, as Christ himself said in Matthew 25, is to take him in. To feed and clothe and to visit in detention centers is then also to feed and clothe and visit him who now and for all time counts himself among them, that the whole world would know that he is God.

Often and increasingly as conditions worsen in places like Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico, Baylor anthropologist Dr. Lori Baker will get a call from some small Texas town too poor to have its own medical examiner and therefore too under-resourced to know what to do about a body found somewhere along its back roads. Dr. Baker will make the hours-long journey south and will get on her hands and knees digging in the dirt, carefully looking for the corpses of immigrants who died along the way to sustenance, security and shelter. Sometimes Dr. Baker finds one body; often she finds many more. And then it is left to Lori Baker to unearth and tell their stories. Doing so usually entails taking the bodies, in whatever state of decomposition, and assessing forensic evidence in order to identify through documentation,

DNA, dental or whatever means, if any, can be found. Hers is a different kind of looking than those drone dreams of ours. Baker too is looking for bodies, desperate bodies in the desert, but toward entirely different ends. And Baker's longings for recovered stories are of another kind than Donald Trump's nostalgia. The visibility she offers is how someone lived their last moments, such as Rosa Cano Dominguez whose recovered body revealed a broken ankle, suggesting that Ms. Dominguez broke her ankle and so had to be left behind by her equally desperate companions to die alone in the desert.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes forensic evidence will tell a different kind of story, perhaps a gunshot wound on the skull, hinting at some of the profiteering that takes place between the desperation of the immigrants to get in and our militarized efforts to keep them out.<sup>19</sup>

In some cases, Dr. Baker gets lucky and DNA evidence will match a body with government databases kept by Mexico or other nations, and it is part of her Reuniting Families Project to return these bodies to their families who can go years and decades with no idea what happened to their children or parents or spouses or siblings.<sup>20</sup> In recent years, Baker estimates that around 70 such matches have been made. She says of reuniting families, "Every mother I speak to says, 'Now I have a place to go and pray, or now I have a place to lay flowers.'" In most cases, no matches are made, and hundreds of bodies remain stored in Baker's lab. Dr. Baker sees her role as keeping faith with the dead, carrying their burdens, taking them in. Dr. Baker tells of "a young boy in the lab, probably somewhere around 15-years old, who carried this backpack with a soccer ball in it. And we have no idea who he is, and it's just devastating. And I probably think about him at least once a day, if not more, and have no idea what else we can do. It overwhelms me quite a bit. But I realize in public that this is the grief of the families; it's not my grief and it's not my place to feel as I do. So I usually save it until I'm in the laboratory by myself, and at night

when I'm with my husband. And I hold my boys close, and I cry for all of these families."

Baker, a molecular scientist by training, finds little joy in her work, and explicitly wonders how she ended up in an occupation where every case means something has gone terribly wrong. She is also not unaware of how government policies create conditions that make for immigrant death. With minimal institutional support—Baker's research doesn't exactly fit the "basic science" label and so hardly qualifies for standard funding—for a job that can raise government and institutional suspicion, vocation drives Baker's work: "I can't imagine if my family were tasked with finding me in a foreign nation. And so I can imagine what these families must be going through in trying to find information and being so desperate, and so little being done on our side of our border. I'm also driven by my faith. I'm a Catholic and I believe all life is sacred, and it seems my duty to give dignity to these individuals by giving them a name."<sup>21</sup> Given all of that, Baker can imagine a good use for border patrolling drones, namely search and rescue, though no government literature I've come across dreams of drones for those purposes. I think it safe to say that Baker is possessed of different kinds of dreams. She is, like she says, Christian, and so imagines her life as receiving these lost ones, the most wretched, literally *of the earth*. And if that CBF litany is right, then it is not simply her duty but her great privilege to receive these ones, for in doing so she receives the one who goes with them—a perpetual *dia de muertos*, the welcoming in of God's marching saints. ■

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# Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics

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—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

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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.

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- Support Christian ecumenism by seeking contributors and readers from various denominations and churches
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- 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.”

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