

# Christian Ethics Today

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

<b>No Traffic Lights</b> <i>Patrick R. Anderson, Editor</i> .....	2
<b>EthixBytes</b> .....	3
<b>A Gospel for Hard Times</b> <i>John Killinger</i> .....	4
<b>Why the Religious Right Will Dominate</b> <i>Tony Campolo</i> .....	6
<b>The Advantages of Disadvantages</b> <i>Thomas H. Graves</i> .....	8
<b>Is God Violent?</b> <i>Brian McLaren</i> .....	12
<b>Global Warming and American Christianity</b> <i>Martin E. Marty</i> .....	14
<b>Two Baptist Theological Contributions</b> <i>Fisher Humphreys</i> .....	15
<b>What Counts is the New Creation</b> <i>Mimi Haddad</i> .....	22
<b>There's Something Special About Peacemakers</b> <i>Britt Towery</i> .....	23
<b>Some Baptists Echo "The Lie of the Year"</b> <i>Brian Kaylor</i> .....	24
<b>You Can't Make This Stuff Up!</b> <i>Marion Aldridge</i> .....	25
<b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>	
<b>Church-State Cooperation Without Domination</b> <i>Reviewed by Darold Morgan</i> ...27	
<b>Loving Beyond Your Theology</b> <i>Reviewed by David Sapp</i> .....	27
<b>The Naked Anabaptist:</b> <i>Reviewed by Charles Kiker</i> .....	29
<b>VERSE</b>	
<b>Last Rights</b> <i>Oda Lisa</i> .....	30
<b>A Pastoral Blessing and Benediction</b> <i>Ira H. Peak, Jr.</i> .....	30
<b>Poor Leisure</b> <i>Al Staggs</i> .....	30
<b>Financial Report, 2010</b> .....	31



**KUDZU** by Doug Marlette

# No Traffic Lights

By Patrick R. Anderson Editor, Christian Ethics Today

Carolyn and I split our residence between Cedar Key, Florida and Beech Mountain, North Carolina. Both communities are at the end of the road. No one can knock on our door at either place and say “we were just passing through and decided to drop in to see you.” No. No one passes through Cedar Key or Beech Mountain. You go to either place on purpose and depart on the same road that brought you in.

To get to Cedar Key you turn off of U.S. Hwy 19 at Otter Creek (yes, Otter Creek!) and drive southwest through the Gulf Hammock wilderness on State Road 24 until you finally cross the four bridges that dead end in our island community in the Gulf of Mexico. Ours is the first and oldest settlement on the West Coast of Florida, we say. Of course we do not count the shell mound cities the Calusa Indians built and inhabited around here for centuries prior to the arrival of us European types. About 600 people live in Cedar Key now. We have four churches, two banks, two lawyers, a K-12 school, world-class seafood, and a lot of quiet. Ours is a place of stunning sunrises and sunsets, eagles, ospreys, migratory parakeets and redwing blackbirds and multiple other fine feathered friends, playful porpoises, pelicans, and...no traffic lights. We are in no hurry, we are polite and tolerant and patient. We do not need a traffic light to tell us to stop or go or be cautious.

Somehow the lack of traffic lights has become my standard for measuring the quality of life. Neither Cedar Key nor Beech Mountain is cursed with a McDonalds or WalMart, the presence of either of which would qualify as a sign of a community going down the toilet, in our view. Our world is so peaceful and blessed we do not need a traffic light. I say the more traffic lights a community has the worse the quality of life, with zero being the optimum number. When they put up a traffic light, we're gone I guess. Don't even talk about a McDonalds or WalMart.

So when a 28-year-old son of one of our extended native families committed suicide last week in Cedar Key, I was overwhelmed. How could this be? We live in Paradise! This young man had had a troubled life in the Cedar Key fishbowl, for sure, and when the police came to arrest him this time for some relatively minor misbehavior, he turned his pistol to his own head and pulled the trigger. He just could not be taken away again and locked up. How terribly sad.

My banker told me that 12 people in Cedar Key have taken their own life in the past five years. I think that is a remarkably high number in proportion to our population, but perhaps I am just naïve and all communities, yours included, have this blight. I do not know the full stories of the other eleven, only that no demographic or other identifying factors seem to have

been predictors of their self-inflicted deaths. Some people are so alone, so depressed, so hopeless that life is no longer worth living, even in Cedar Key.

I have also learned that a record number of people have visited our church's food pantry this year, more than 50 families. My pastor told me that he has encountered some people who have built lean-to shelters nearby in the woods and are squatting there. Others have parked their dilapidated car or van in the scrub oak and palmetto hammock and live therein. I think of Grapes of Wrath.

Times are hard, even in a community without traffic lights. Raw statistics about unemployment rates and the cessation of unemployment compensation and home foreclosures do not tell the full stories of human suffering. Nor is an Edenic environment a sufficient balm for lost lives. Maybe we need some traffic lights. Not those that say “Stop” or “Caution” but ones that place caring people smack dab in the human traffic flow where we can say on behalf of Jesus, “Come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden.... and I will give you rest.” Maybe we need a blinking light to divert attention away from self-destructiveness and toward life.

Cedar Key and Beech Mountain are good places to live, but location alone is no guarantee of life itself, certainly not the abundant life spoken of by Jesus. ■



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# EthixBytes

A Collection of Quotes Comments, Statistics, and News Items

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*I don't preach a social gospel; I preach the gospel, period. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned with the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, 'Now is that political or social?' He said, 'I feed you.' Because the good news to a hungry person is bread." ■*

- Desmond Tutu

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*"And now in his cradle somewhere under the flag the future illustrious Commander-in-Chief of the American armies is so little burdened with his approaching grandeur and responsibilities as to be giving his whole strategic mind at this moment to trying to find out some way to get his big toe into his mouth..." ■*

Samuel L. Clemens 1866, in Autobiography of Mark Twain Vol. 1 p. 70 University of California Press 2010.

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*"While women weep, as they do now, I'll fight; while children go hungry, as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they do, I'll fight; while there is one drunkard left, while there is a poor girl upon the streets, while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight — I'll fight to the very end!" ■*

- William Booth In Sojourners' Verse and Voice 12/22/2010

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*1.3 million more mouths to feed each year. Of all the people who have ever lived on earth, ½ are alive today. We are gnawing the planet bare. ■*

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*"The proud man can learn humility, but he will be proud of it."*

Mignon McLaughlin

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## **I Will Trust You Always** *Thomas Merton*

### **My Lord God,**

I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. ■

# A Gospel for Hard Times

by John Killinger

Theologian Karl Barth once said that preachers ought to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. He understood the strange relationship between the Word of God and the word of the day—that they are bound together in such a way that one always interprets the other. That’s certainly true of what we’ve learned about the Bible lately from the headlines about our faltering economy. Suddenly we realize a lot more about the Gospel of Luke in particular because it repeatedly casts human salvation in terms of how we deal with money and property. Again and again, Luke framed his portrait of Jesus in such a way as to illustrate Jesus’ sympathy with the poor and his disgust with wealthy people who didn’t display any concern for them. Look at these well known stories. Five in a row, beginning in the twelfth chapter of Luke. And five, you know, was a sacred number in the Bible.

First, the story of a rich man who had such a bumper crop one year that he decided to pull down his barns and build greater ones to store it in. No thought for the poor. Only for himself and what he had. And God said, “You fool! Tonight you’ll have a coronary. Then who will enjoy your crops?”

Second, the story of the rich man who wore purple—a sign of wealth—and dined sumptuously. I like that, don’t you? He dined *sumptuously*. Meanwhile, there was a poor beggar who sat outside his gate, begging for alms. And every day the rich man rode by and didn’t bother to throw the poor man a bone. Nothing. The rich man died—notice a pattern?—and went to hades, the vague, shadowy underground. If it were shown in a theater, this is where the dry ice would be released and fog would rise over the stage. And who did the man call for when he found himself in this predicament? The beggar! He had seen

him after all. “Send Lazarus,” he said, “and let him bring me some water to slake my thirst.” And what did God say? Sorry, mister, you flubbed your rub. You had your chance to be good to the poor man and you missed it. Too bad!

Third story, the wealthy ruler who came to Jesus and asked how to be saved. Jesus said he surely knew the answer to that. Everybody knew it. It had to do with keeping the law. “Oh,” said the man, “I’ve always done that. But there’s still this ache in my heart, something that isn’t satisfied.” “Oh, that?” said Jesus. “Yes, I know what you mean. Go and sell everything you have and give the money to the poor and come follow me.” But the man couldn’t do it, could he? Luke says he

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went away sad because he had great possessions. He had too much to give it away. So he didn’t become one of Jesus’ disciples. He missed everything because he thought he had everything and the truth was that it had him.

Fourth story, Zacchaeus the tax collector. A little man who climbed a tree to see Jesus when Jesus entered Jericho. Despised by his fellow Jews because he worked for the Romans and handled coins with Caesar’s inscription on them proclaiming Caesar a god. A social pariah, an outcast. But Jesus singled him out and went home to eat

with him. What a big day it was for Zacchaeus! He was so changed by it that he said, “Lord, I’m going to give half of everything I have to the poor. Not a fourth. Not a third. Half. And if I have taken anything from anybody I shouldn’t have, I’ll repay that person four hundred percent.” Wow! What did Jesus say? “This day has salvation come to this man and his house.” Salvation had to do with his attitude toward money and property.

And five, the story of a poor widow who dropped two tiny coins into the temple treasury. They were called lepta. Coins so worthless that they didn’t even have an inscription on them. Nobody bothered to counterfeit them because they weren’t worth it. “I tell you,” said Jesus, “this woman has given more than all the others—all the rich people who like to be seen as heavy donors—because she gave all she had.” And then he said she went down to her house justified—saved—because of how much she loved God. Not the others, but this poor woman.

Do you feel the impact of these stories for the time we’re living in? When the home foreclosure rate is the highest in history. When one in every ten adults can’t find work. When many have to choose between eating and taking their medicine. When a million families a year are forced into bankruptcy because they can’t pay their debts to doctors and hospitals and credit card companies.

What do these stories mean today? What do they say about our salvation as a nation and as individuals?

I’ll tell you what they say. They say your salvation doesn’t depend on which church you attend or how clean a record you have or how many Hail Marys you say in a day. Your salvation—your soul’s wellbeing—depends on what you are doing with what you have, with your income and your bank account and your home and

anything else you have. It depends on how much you love others and are willing to help them when they are in the kind of need many are in today.

Oh, I know you have to keep something back for a rainy day and you don't want to touch your 401(k) and you have to be sure your family has all they need. But if the Bible is true, you might be forfeiting your right to spend eternity with God by sheltering everything you can for yourself and your family when there are others who desperately need your help.

Is that too harsh a thing to say? I didn't say it. The Bible did.

Let me tell you two more stories. Modern stories this time.

One was told by an English theologian, Herbert Farmer, on himself. He had been having a long busy day and came home exhausted. He put on the kettle and made a pot of tea, and had just sat down to enjoy his tea when the doorbell rang. He went to the door, where he found a poor, nearly blind woman with very thick glasses being led about by her son, a thin, pasty-faced boy of about twelve. They were going house to house selling something. Farmer cut short a tale of domestic woe by saying he wasn't interested. The boy said, "Come away, mum," and led her out the sidewalk. As he paused to close the gate, his eyes met Farmer's, and Farmer said he had never seen a look of purer hatred than he saw in that boy's eyes. Turning back into the house, he no longer wanted his tea. Instead, he fell on his knees by

the sofa and cried, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

The other story occurred in recently in New York City. A tall, late-middle-aged gay man named John was on his way to work in the PR office where he was employed. It was Monday

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of need many are  
in today.*

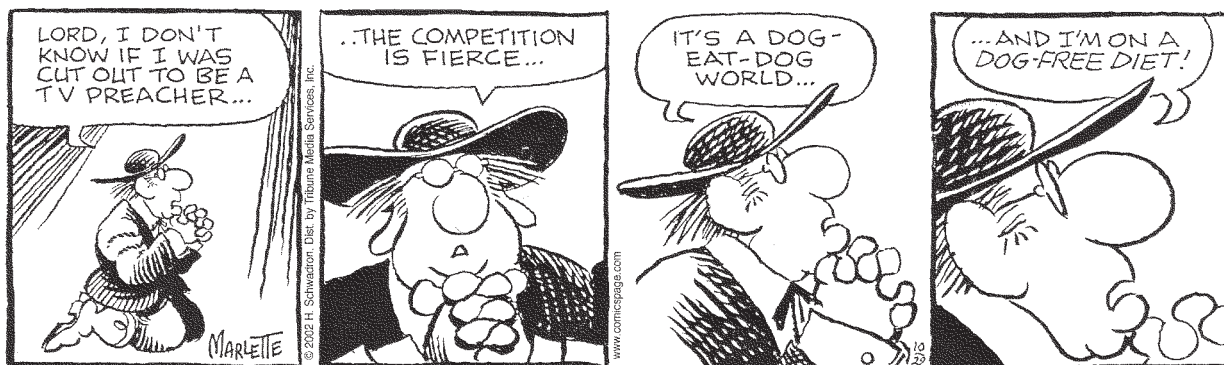
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morning. Having been challenged in the Sunday sermon to remember the poor, he began his day that Monday by going into a McDonald's and buying five breakfasts, each in a colorful sack, and going back out onto the sidewalk. A homeless man came along. John greeted him with a sack of breakfast and said "God bless you." The

man looked in the sack, smelled the hot sausage and eggs and coffee, and instantly threw his arms around John and hugged him. They stood there for a minute, on Fifth Avenue near 34th Street, locked in an embrace. Then the man let go and John wheeled around, feeling better than he had felt in months, and began looking for another homeless person to give a breakfast to.

My question for you is this: Which of those two persons would you rather be? The one who failed to answer somebody else's need and then collapsed in remorse, or John, who went out to find people he could help? I don't have to tell you which one Jesus would have blessed.

John Killinger is retired professor/pastor with well known professorships at Vanderbilt Divinity School and Samford University as Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture. He was pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Lynchburg, Virginia and First Congregational Church of Los Angeles. He served as interim pastor at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. His most recent three books, all published in 2010 are *The Zacchaeus Solution* (Parson's Porch Press), *Hidden Mark* (Mercer University Press), and *What the Blind Man Saw: Sermons based on Hidden Mark* (Parson's Porch Books). This sermon is available on DVD through the Chicago Sunday Evening Club's "30 Good Minutes" television program. ■



# Why The Religious Right Will Dominate

By Tony Campolo Eastern University

There are reasons why Religious Right Evangelicals will continue to dominate religious discourse, not only in their own sector of the Christian community, but also in what transpires in mainline denominations. Moderate voices, for the most part, are being sidelined and those with liberal views will find fewer and fewer means to express their opinions or gain an audience for their convictions.

Of course, there will be side eddies to the dominating flow of the Religious Right's rhetoric and its control of who and what will represent Christianity. We can be sure that there will be dissonant voices and spokespersons just like this publication, *Christian Ethics Today*, who give unashamed voice to the truth, and like Jim Wallis and his allies in his Sojourners community who will march to the beat of another drum. Also, there will be countervailing movements such as the Emergent church, led by the likes of Tony Jones and Brian McLaren; along with those radical countercultural advocates who relate to "the Simple Way" messages of Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, as well as several others.

But such voices increasingly will be marginalized and referred to as irritating malcontents by those Religious Right Evangelicals who will dominate both the image and practices representing Christianity to the general public for the next 50 years.

The first reason for the preponderant influence of those Evangelicals who define themselves as advocates of Religious Right theological and political ideologies is that they have both the financial means and technological know-how to make widespread use of modern electronic forms of communication. Flipping the dial through available radio stations there will blare out to any listener an array of broadcasts, 24/7, propagating Religious Right politics, along with what they deem to be

"old-time gospel preaching."

There are now more than 1500 radio stations operated by owners who have a Religious Right political/theological bias. Such broadcasters are almost all members of the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), an organization that is overtly oriented to very conservative politics. Messages that cast most Democrats in Congress, and certainly President Barack Obama, as dangerous liberals who are leading America towards socialism and secularism are common in their programming. It is easy to discern an anti-feminist, anti-

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gay, anti-environmentalist, pro-militarist, and pro-gun worldview in what is heard on their programs. While not claiming to be religious broadcasters, T.V. commentators the likes of Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Bill O'Reilly lend support to the Religious Right rhetoric.

There are several explanations as to how the Religious Right came into its dominating role. First, those who refer to themselves as political progressives and religious moderates in times past ridiculed these Religious Right broadcasters and declared that few reasonable Christians would take their harangues seriously, but they were wrong. Preachers in mainline denominational churches, along with others who have tried to articulate values and

beliefs that differed from the messages of right-wing talk radio pundits often have lost credibility with those in their pews because their church members put more stock in what they heard on Christian talk radio than what they heard from the pulpit of their churches. Sometimes when preachers in mainline denominational churches bucked the views of the Religious Right's talk shows they found that efforts were underway from disgruntled church members to oust them from their pulpits. In other cases, church members voted against their ministers with their feet by simply walking away and joining other churches where the preachers were more harmonious with what they had heard over the NRB radio stations. Moderate and progressive church leaders woke up too late to the impact that Religious Right television and radio programs were having on those who were in their pews.

Secondly, Religious Right laypersons came to realize that with very little effort just a few of them are able to exercise enormous influence on what happens and who speaks at any kind of religious gathering. If a particular speaker who does not fit their profile of someone they deem politically and theologically "safe," they know that just a half dozen phone calls to the offices of the sponsoring organizations or to a denominational office can lead to the cancellation of that speaker. Sadly, sponsors of such gatherings as youth conventions, denominational rallies, and other popular mass religious gatherings are overly sensitive to such complaints. In cowardly fashion, otherwise reasonable church leaders are easily intimidated and quickly yield to the demands of Religious Right critics. What makes matters worse is that the internet helps cantankerous, disgruntled right-wing Evangelicals to spread far and wide anything about any moderate or progressive Christian lead-

ers they want silenced. Lies and distortions can be spread, via the internet, in an inexpensive way, and the effects are astounding.

As a case in point, more than twenty churches in a west coast city had come together to plan a weekend of evangelistic services, but when two of the pastors of these churches received complaints from parishioners accusing the invited speaker of holding heretical beliefs, and even raising innuendos about his sexual life, the evangelistic services were cancelled. When the uninvited speaker asked where these complaining parishioners got these serious (and what proved to be erroneous) reports, he was told, "Some people read these things on the internet." The reality that none of these accusations could in any way be verified or traced back to who had made them made no difference. The cancellation was a done deed. Through the internet, false rumors about the speaker had been circulated throughout the community and, in addition, the two Christian radio stations reported the false rumors over the airwaves as though they were true.

The pastor who made the call to the cancelled "progressive" speaker apologized profusely and regretfully acknowledged that it was probably a handful of Religious Right zealots who had spread the falsehoods anonymously via the internet. Nevertheless, he went on to say, such upset had been generated in the congregations of the sponsoring churches that holding the meetings had become impossible. Later, this community rescheduled the evangelistic weekend with another speaker that Religious Right Evangelicals pronounced acceptable. Chalk up another victory for the Religious Right. With every such victory, the Religious Right becomes increasingly emboldened so that they know that anyone who does not toe the line with what they have laid down as an acceptable ideology is pushed off the speaking circuit.

This same kind of tyranny has taken over the Christian publishing business. Christian bookstores, nationwide, tend to be owned and operated by well meaning people who want to

propagate their faith through the sale of Christian books. Again, a handful of complaints raised about some authors that Religious Right Evangelicals consider "dangerous" will have the books written by such authors sent back to the distribution houses of the publishers. It doesn't take these publishers long to recognize whose books they should put in print if they want Christian bookstores to put their books on the shelves.

There is some hope, however. The good news is that moderates and progressives, in spite of all the problems caused by the internet for those who do not have the Religious Right's "good housekeeping seal of approval," through the internet have found ways of getting their messages out to any who are open to what they are saying. Their books are now available on amazon.com, which is where people, more and more, are buying books. Thus, the overwhelming control the Religious Right has had on which books Christians can read is being broken. Add to this the reality that in the near future many books simply will be downloaded into Kindles, iPods, or other electronic means for reading books. Sadly, many good people who still run Christian bookstores will be threatened with going out of business. The future isn't any too bright for the printed paper media and those who are trying to sell it.

There is further good news for those who feel threatened by the dominance of the Religious Right. Young people under the age of thirty are more and more circumventing Christian talk radio and getting their news reports off their computers. Add to that, they are less and less likely to pay much attention to the television pundits on Fox News. The Pew Foundation researchers discovered that those in this age group are far more likely to get their news from Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* and from Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*. These so called "comedy" programs not only fail to reflect the views and practices of the Religious Right, they actually make many of them look ridiculous. It is no surprise that Jim Wallis has chosen to be a guest on *The Daily Show* twice, while I have

had two appearances on *The Colbert Report*.

Finally, it is important to note that "below the radar" of most observers of the American religious landscape there are split-offs from traditional Evangelicalism which differentiate themselves from the Right. Knowing that, according to the Barna researchers, Evangelicals convey to the general public an image of being "judgmental, hypocritical, and homophobic," many younger Christians have tried to shun the name "Evangelicals" and have sought other titles, such as "Emergent Christians" or simply "Followers of Jesus." Those in one such split-off movement are now calling themselves "Red Letter Christians" (see <http://www.redletterchristians.org>).

While holding to traditional doctrines as those stated in the Apostles' Creed, having a high view of Scripture, and declaring faith in a personal relationship with a resurrected Christ as essential for salvation, they clearly denounce as idolatry any attempt to make Jesus into either a Democrat or a Republican. With a deep commitment to living out the red letters of the Bible, which in many editions highlight the words of Jesus, these Red Letter Christians espouse what Glenn Beck and other conservative commentators might deride as "progressive social values." But there is nothing that is ideologically identifiable with these Red Letter Christians. Coming from across the political spectrum, they do not want to be pigeonholed. What they do want as their identity is a recognition that they are endeavoring to embrace the radical lifestyle prescribed by Jesus on a personal level, especially as it is set forth in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

Perhaps movements such as these will emerge as dynamic forces contributing to the public face that Christianity will have a few decades from now. But for the immediate present, and for the next several years, the Religious Right will reign supreme. ■

*Tony Campolo is a member of the board of CET and wrote this especially for Christian Ethics Today*

# Living with Multiple Sclerosis: The Advantages of Disadvantages

By Thomas H. Graves

In addressing the topic of learning from adversity let me begin with two basic understandings. First, what I have to say reflects not only on my personal experience of living with multiple sclerosis, for we all share disadvantages of failure, grief, sorrow, sickness, and frustration; it has visited us all. Living with limitations is a universal human experience. Second, though I will speak of spiritual lessons learned, I would not want in any way to identify God as the source of the evil that comes upon us. God does not send pain our way so that we may gain something from our difficulties. When we find ourselves in the midst of sorrow and difficulty; there are some things we can learn. But that is a far different thing than saying God brings evil upon us in order to teach us a lesson.

What I want to address is my experience that there are some advantages for us when we face difficulty and disadvantage. Particularly in the book of Psalms, we hear of the difficulties of life and the importance of facing hardship with honesty. Sensitivity to sorrow belongs at the very heart of biblical religion. It is interesting how often in our worship we focus on Psalms of celebration and order, the kind of Psalms proclaiming “God is in heaven and all is right with the world.” But, the truth is most of the Psalms are not songs of celebration; they are not saying that everything is exactly as God intended it to be. Rather, the largest number of Psalms are songs of lament, psalms of sorrow, psalms of difficulty. It is just that kind of honesty that needs to become more a part of our faith, not less. It is more religious to face our doubts, difficulties, sickness, and failures head-on, taking our anxieties straight to God, rather than trying to picture our faith as saying: if you are truly faithful, nothing bad ever happens to you. What a strange

theology for people who worship a man who died on a cross! Sorrow is at the very heart of our faith. In facing difficulty directly and honestly we will find some important lessons, perhaps of more value than what we might discover if we insist that religious people should always be happy and wear a smile on their face. So let us consider the advantages of disadvantages. Let us begin to see if there are some lessons we can learn.

First, it seems to me, one very clear lesson that weakness teaches us is that we are all part of a very fragile human family. Weakness teaches us that life is fragile through and through. Life is defined by our limits; life is defined by finitude. When we confront the created order we find ourselves living in a world with metaphysical limitations. There is no way that we can have water that will quench our thirst and yet will not at the same time have the capacity to drown us. There is no way that we can have fire that will warm us that will not have the ability to scorch our flesh. There is no way we can have minds attuned to enjoying the intricacies of human relationships and not also have minds that are incapable of insanity and misunderstanding. It is the nature of life. The question is not so much saying when we meet difficulties, “Oh, why me?” but understanding, “Why not me?” I am a part of this entire, finite, fragile structure; that is the nature of life. Often we have an idea that as persons of faith a protective shield has been built around our lives and nothing evil is going to happen to us. You know that is not true! Very good people suffer; sometimes they suffer because they are very good people. There is not a Biblical promise that difficulty will never come to the faithful. There is simply the assurance that even in trouble you will not be left alone. You will not be abandoned.

When we meet those moments at the edges of life, we come to understand what it means to be a fragile human being.

What we mean when we say “life is fragile” is related to the meaning of love. We usually love those things most dearly that are the most fragile. Life will inevitably bring sadness, but as it does so it also has the ability to bring meaning as well. I remember about twenty-five years ago doctors performing several tests attempting to discover the source of some neurological problems I was facing. They were looking for brain tumors, pretty serious possibilities. Suddenly, when as a young adult you are facing the problem of life-threatening disease, you begin to realize how fragile life really is. What interests me most in looking back at those events, is remembering what I was focusing on. I was very centered in my thinking, as I am sure others would be, on those things that were personally most important, that were most fragile. As I was going through the series of medical tests trying to determine if I had a brain tumor (which turned out not to be the case at all), my main fear had to do with my two daughters who were quite young at the time. What concerned me most in that situation was being able to live long enough to teach my children to ride a bicycle. Life is fragile, and its fragility reminds us that we love those things that we are most fearful of losing. We need to understand the precious nature of life that can lead us to care more deeply. In teaching us that life is fragile, weakness leads us to focus on those things that are most precious.

Another lesson of facing disadvantage is that weakness saves us from self-reliance. I have fond memories as a child of making a road trip every summer as our family would drive through the mountains of North Carolina. On



that trip we would always see a number of signs along the sides of the road, "Prepare to meet thy God!" and "Get right with God." Often the crude signs would be painted on the faces of cliffs hundreds of feet about a ravine, and you would wonder -- who would risk life and limb in order to paint high on a rock, "Jesus Saves?" We would laugh at those crazy signs, at how silly and unsophisticated they were. In his work, *The Hungering Dark*, Frederick Buechner talks about the embarrassing message of those same strange roadside signs proclaiming "Jesus saves" and comments that what bothered us most about those signs was that they delivered an inescapable message to self-sufficient Americans: "You will never make it. You have not and you will not, at least not without help. And what could be more presumptuous, more absurd, more pathetic, than for some poor fool with a cut-rate brush and a bucket of white paint to claim that the one to give you that help is Jesus."<sup>1</sup> We are, in fact, in need of help; perhaps there is something else that we need to depend on.

It is interesting to look at the discussion in the New Testament of the "unforgivable sin." It seems to me that the unpardonable sin refers to our refusal to admit our need. The one thing God cannot do is to work with a person who refuses to admit that they need God, that they need to depend on another. In Gary Wills' book of a few years ago, *Certain Trumpets*, the author looked at outstanding examples of leadership in various areas of human endeavor. When he looked to religion, his example of good religious leadership was Pope John XXIII, the one who energized a modern-day reformation, bringing the winds of change to the Roman Catholic Church. Wills reported the secret of religious leadership for the good Pope was found not in independent strength but in leaning on another. "Pope John often meditated on the risen Jesus' words to Peter in the Gospel of St. John (21: 18): '... when you were young you fasten your belt about you and walked where you chose; but when you are

old you will stretch out your arms, and a stranger will bind you fast, and carry you where you have no wish to go.'" John XXIII identified that act of being led and supported by another as the secret of mature religious leadership. We need to learn to lean on another.<sup>2</sup> Disadvantages can lead us to see the failure of self-reliance, recognizing that there are some things we cannot and some things we should not face on our own. It is the most difficult thing, it seems to me, for Americans to grasp with our inbred rugged individualism. What we can learn from facing disability is to recognize the need to lean on others. Weakness teaches us that all of

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*Weakness also helps to place life in proper perspective. Looking at death, for example, really simplifies life.*

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life is fragile and weakness teaches us that we need to learn to lean; it saves us from self-reliance.

Weakness also helps to place life in proper perspective. Looking at death, for example, really simplifies life. In facing death you come to realize what is really important. I recall as a seminary student my very first experience in ministering to a person who was on their deathbed. It was with anxiety that I visited the bedside of old Mr. Emmett, a saintly fellow, who had become a dear friend. I was worried and distraught, but he was very calm. Mr. Emmett began to minister to me by saying, "Tom, you really don't understand, do you?" I'll never forget his words, "You need to know whatever happens to me, I'm going to be alright." He had come to grips with death. The truth is, my anxiety that day was in facing my own death not that of Mr. Emmett.

One of the best examples of how facing our weakness can put our life in proper perspective came from Paul Tillich, the great Protestant theologian,

in his marvelous sermon entitled "Shaking of the Foundations." He talked about the events of World War II, how they shook the world to its foundations, and also how they shook the soldiers to their foundations, making the soldiers to appear much like the prophets we first met in the Hebrew Bible. Here's how he put it:

All the foundations of personal, natural, and cultural life have been shaken. As long as there's been human history that's what has happened, but in our period it's happened on a larger scale than ever before. Not one foundation of the life of our civilization remains unshaken. There are soldiers who have become prophets, and their message is not very different from the message of that ancient Hebrew prophet. It's the message of the shaking of the foundations; and not those of their enemies, but rather, those foundations of their own country. How could the prophets speak as they did? How could they paint those terrible pictures of doom and destruction without cynicism and despair? It was because, beyond the sphere of destruction, they saw the sphere of salvation. Because in the doom of the temporal, they saw the manifestation of the Eternal. Because they were certain they belonged within the two spheres, the changeable and the unchangeable. So may we not turn our eyes away, may we not close our ears and mouths, but may we rather see, through the crumbling of a world, the rock of Eternity and the salvation which has no end.<sup>3</sup>

Disadvantage will shake the very foundations of life, and having been shaken, when the veil is torn away, we understand those things of eternal value as never before. Life is fragile; weakness can save us from self-reliance; and weakness can place life in proper perspective.

Another lesson of disadvantage: suffering and death can teach us to take life and death seriously. Martin Heidegger argued correctly that the

very key to understanding life is coming to grips with the inescapable fact of our death.<sup>4</sup> Death, he wrote, when faced authentically, can become the very best route to understanding what life is about. As we look at our American culture, I think we would be the very best example of what Heidegger talked about in terms of inauthentic ways of facing death. The last thing we want to do, what makes us most uncomfortable, is to look at the limits of life and at the possibility of death. Much of our culture is based on the idea of camouflaging the most universal event of humankind – we are all going to die. It is interesting how much of our life is an attempt to evade facing the issue of dying. There are a lot of inauthentic ways to face death: refusing to admit it is going to happen; refusing to prepare for it; refusing to deal with it. For Heidegger it would also be inauthentic to rush suicidally to death. It was not his idea to brood upon death and to think of dying things only. The authentic way of facing death is to understand it is always a possibility and to be prepared to die. What does that mean to face death authentically and to be prepared to die? I have a very dear friend, an insurance agent, who years ago handed me a long list of things to do in preparation for dying – like drawing up a will, preparing advance medical directives so when we go into a hospital folks will know what our own wishes are, providing directions for funeral services and burial, and preparing a list of the location of valuable things and documents. There are several things that we ought to do for ourselves and particularly for others as we face death. Some of the best times I spent with dying parishioners involved the planning of their funeral services, focusing on how they wanted to be remembered. Preparing authentically for death means to prepare for that eventuality.

In facing the last challenge of our lives, how do we deal with death? Heidegger suggested that death is both the unique and the uttermost possibility of life. It is the uttermost possibil-

ity of life because behind everything we face in life lurks death. By that he meant there is nothing you are going to touch that will not participate in dying. People, institutions, everything is in the process of dying. That was what he meant by saying death is the uttermost possibility of life. Then he said that death is the unique possibility of life. By that he meant that as you look at all the possibilities of life, death is the only possibility that when it is realized, everything else disappears. It is the unique possibility, the most important possibility we need to consider.

Facing death authentically can teach us to take life seriously. Ray Mullaney was a dear friend when we were living in Charlotte, NC. Though a layman, he was this pastor's pastor. He pulled me aside one evening in the church parking lot and talked about how his cancer had returned and how he was going to die very soon. Then he began to quote poetry, like his mother would, about facing death with faith. I will never forget the final conversation I had with Ray. Very late one night, his wife called me to come over to the house. Ray was at home being cared for by hospice, one of his sons was at the foot of the bed, his wife Martha was on the other side of the bed from me. As part of our regular lunchtime discussions Ray had asked months before about a passage in the Old Testament, wondering what God looks like. So now, in this last conversation, he very haltingly asked the question once again, "What does God look like now, for me?" I responded as best I could as his pastor and friend, "Right now, God looks like a man dying on a cross and that cross is in the very heart of God." In a little while I went on to say, "And in the face of death, God also looks like the risen Lord." But then, as usual, Ray had the best word and in this case some of his last words, as he turned to me and said very slowly, "Tom, God told us what God looks like. God looks like love." What a marvelous thing to have on your lips as you face death: a recognition that death is coming, but you

face it knowing the love of God, who holds all of life - and death - in divine hands.

Weakness teaches us that life is fragile. It can save us from self-reliance. It places life in proper perspective. It teaches us to take death and life seriously. It also saves us from isolation. One thing you know you have in common with everyone else in life is our suffering, our hurt, and our pain. Henri Nouwen came to be known to many in Christian circles through his book *The Wounded Healer*, and what a marvelous image that is. We are not only called to be healers, but we come as Christians to be healers only as we come to grips with our own woundedness. We best minister to one another out of our hurt, not out of seeing ourselves as above pain. Nouwen got that image of the wounded healer from a Talmudic legend of a rabbi who came upon the prophet Elijah and asked when the Messiah would come. The prophet replied, "Go and ask him yourself." The rabbi responded by asking, "Where is he?" The prophet answered by saying, "Sitting at the gates of the city." "How shall I know him?" questioned the rabbi. Elijah answered, "He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all of their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and then binds it up again, saying to himself, 'perhaps I shall be needed: if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.'"<sup>5</sup> What a crucial image of the Messiah: a wounded healer, sitting among the sick and wounded, ready to help. Coming to grips with our own wounds saves us from isolation and helps us to understand that the task of faith is not to save us from being wounded, but to minister even in the midst of our woundedness.

A final thing that has certainly been important for me in facing finitude, sorrow, and illness, is to see how our disadvantages can focus our use of time. Walter Kaufmann, the chief translator into English of the works of Soren Kierkegaard, edited a marvelous book, *Existentialism, Religion and*

*Death* where he brought together several essays on facing death. Kaufmann is certainly no Christian theologian, but in reading through his book I was amazed by the importance of what he had to say. Kaufmann wrote one essay in light of his own experience of facing a terminal illness. In that essay he had a passage that when I first read it I said, “No, no, I’m not reading that right.” I went back and read it again. He said: “The life I want is a life I could not endure in eternity. ... There is no other life I should prefer. Neither should I like not to die.”<sup>6</sup> Think about that: I would not want to live a life in which I would not die. Kaufmann talked about how facing death can focus our use of time. It is amazing how much time we waste. How we continue to put things off – “Oh, I’ll deal with that someday;” or “I’ll get around to that sometime;” or “I’ll patch up that relationship later;” or “I’ll take care of that later.” One advantage of looking at death is realizing we have a limited amount of time. It makes a difference how we live if we understand we are called to use our time wisely. Kaufmann, I think, taught us well when he said, “I would not want to live a life in which I would not die.” We are called to live life as if it were not forever; to use it wisely, here on earth.

Weakness teaches us that life is fragile. It saves us from self-reliance. It places life in proper perspective. It teaches us to take death and life seriously. It saves us from isolation. And it focuses our time. All of this leaves us confronted with some choices. One is a choice of faith or unbelief. It seems to me, the most profound argument for unbelief comes from the issues of evil and suffering. How could there be a good God when there is so much pain in life? Frank Tupper, a professor at Wake Forest University Divinity School, reflects on that issue, and wrote a book of theology in light of his wife’s illness and death. He talked about how the importance of Jesus Christ is not that he removes us from suffering, but that with Jesus Christ, we learn how to endure and deal with

suffering. With Christ, I can believe. Listen how Tupper puts this in his book, *A Scandalous Providence*:

Of course I cannot speak for anyone else, only for me, but this I know: without the story of Jesus, I would not believe in God. Or more probably, God simply would not matter. The story of Jesus enables me to envision God as one who genuinely cares for each and for all of us. In Jesus, God confronts the darkness face to face, incarnate for our sake. Jesus is the light of the gentle face of God, and the story of Jesus says that God laughs with us in our joys, and weeps with us in our sorrows. God strengthens us in our helplessness, God stands with us in the uncertainty of our believing, and God waits for us in our yearning to belong. Ultimately, it is the lonely companionship of Jesus, the suffering of his Passion, that makes my painful journey a sometime story of faith.<sup>7</sup>

Faith or unbelief; it may well be that the issue of suffering can be the very thing that brings us to the deepest understanding of Christ and an experience of faith.

A second choice: anger or creative response. A few years ago I was in the Czech Republic. I had always heard about the city of Lidice. Not a huge town, but a significant village where sabotage and guerrilla fighting had occurred during World War II. The Nazis came in – they wanted to teach the citizens of Lidice a lesson – so they killed every man, and almost all of the older male children. They demolished the town, completely leveled it – there was not a wall left standing. Lidice was almost erased from the face of the globe. You can go back to Lidice today, and there the crumbled remains of the town have been preserved, kept as a memory of past atrocity.

My favorite place on the globe is the city of Coventry England and the new cathedral that has gone up there in that city. It is one of the most beautiful buildings in all of Christendom.

Coventry was bombed and senselessly destroyed during World War II. The old cathedral was burned and ruined. But if you go back there to the site of the old cathedral, there is now an open air chapel. They have taken two of the charred roof beams and formed a large cross, hung it at the front of this now outdoor chapel, and have emblazoned new words on the altar. There, below those charred embers, are written the words, “Father, forgive.” Across the street, is one of the best expressions of Christian art and architecture you have ever seen. Not stained glass windows, but etched glass windows, and a very vibrant and active church. Two cities – Lidice and Coventry – both the victims of senseless warfare. But one is an example of faith, the other an example of destruction. We have some choices to make as we face difficulty. Faith or unbelief. Anger or creative response. I would hope for each one of us, as we face our disadvantages, that we might learn of some advantages as well. ■

<sup>1</sup>Buechner, Frederick, *The Hungering Dark* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 62.

<sup>2</sup>Wills, Gary, *Certain Trumpets* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 144.

<sup>3</sup>Tillich, Paul, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 5-11.

<sup>4</sup>MacQuarrie, John, *Studies in Christian Existentialism* (Montréal: McGill University Press, 1965), 47ff.

<sup>5</sup>Nouwen, Henri J.M., *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 83-84.

<sup>6</sup>Kaufmann, Walter, *Existentialism Religion and Death* (New York: New American Library, 1976), 214.

<sup>7</sup>Tupper, Frank, *A Scandalous Providence* (Macon, GA: Mercer University press 1995), 19.

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# Is God Violent?

By Brian McLaren

I recently received a note from a pastor and missionary we'll call Pete. It went like this: "I have read most of what you have written, including *A New Kind of Christianity*...I would say I am in agreement with [much of what you write], but I do think you bring disservice to this argument in the evangelical world when you shun the 'violence' of God and the subsequent need for the cross' justification, which was also quite violent."

He continued: "You have a lot to say to the church, but when you make these kind of statement that don't really appear to hold weight under the plethora of biblical examples, it mutes your voice. The fact is the Old Testament is a God-ordained bloody mess, and the cross is the ultimate expression of it. This only highlights God's holiness, and when we try to mitigate this reality to save him from a secular mind, we mitigate the power of the cross as well, and end up with a less powerful narrative."

I don't know which shocks you more—that I would question God's violence, or that Pete would defend it. My guess is that nearly all of us would be shocked one way or the other.

If you ask why this question is so important, I think "Sept.11" is a good answer. Since then, we've been marinating in the issue of religious violence, day after day. One day we see a shaky video from the Middle East featuring terrorists blowing up a humvee, with shouts of "Allahu Akbar!" ("God is great!") in the background. Another day we hear a famous Christian televangelist say, "Blow them all away in the name of the Lord." Another day we read about Israel Defense Forces destroying the homes of Palestinians, defending their actions on grounds that God promised them the land 4,000 years ago. And the day after that we hear another Christian televangelist defending their actions, and

urging the U.S. to join Israel in a war against Iran.

A lot is at stake.

A book-length treatment of the question would require us to engage with a number of preliminary and ancillary questions. For example, what do we mean by the term violence? Can there be force without violence, or is all coercion inherently violent? Can there be "surgical" violence, with no cruelty involved, or does violence by its very definition include the intention to violate? Is there a moral difference between defensive and offensive violence, and, if so, where is the line between them drawn?

Let's define violence simply: force with the intent of inflicting injury, damage, or death. I think believers in God have four primary responses to the question of God's violence defined in this way:

**1. GOD IS VIOLENT**, and since we human beings are made in God's image, we're free to use violence as one valid form of political communication (to borrow a famous phrase from Carl von Clausewitz), and in fact we are commanded to use it in some cases.

**2. GOD IS VIOLENT**, but in a holy way that sinful humans are incapable of. That's why violence is generally prohibited for humans except in certain limited cases. In those cases, only those designated as God's chosen/elect/ordained, acting under God's explicit direction, are justified in using violence.

**3. GOD IS NOT VIOLENT**, so human violence is always a violation of our creation in God's image—both for the perpetrator and the victim. If it is ever employed, it is always tragic and regrettable, never justified.

**4. GOD IS NOT VIOLENT**, so violence in any form is absolutely forbidden, no exceptions.

Some of my friends choose Option 4, and they're disappointed that while I

aspire to live by Option 4, I can accept Option 3 as well. Pete, I think, would be almost my mirror image. He would personally affirm Option 2 and would be tolerant of Option 1 in friends and colleagues. He would do so for the two primary reasons he mentioned: the "plethora of biblical examples" and the "quite violent" cross.

How would someone like me—who cannot say "God is violent" without feeling like I'm blaspheming—respond? Do I deny the Bible? Do I seek to minimize the cross, or diminish its power, as Pete suggests? Am I just trying to "save God" to make God more palatable to a "secular mind"?

Before responding, I first would want to affirm how important this conversation is. If we Christians can have a civil, respectful conversation—avoiding physical and verbal violence (!), achieving understanding whether or not we come closer to agreement—I think we're already on a good track.

But such a conversation is not only good practice in nonviolent communication for us as Christians; we need to know that our Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, and other neighbors are interested bystanders. Based on our answers, they'll have an idea of what to expect from us. If we say, "Only Christians and Jews are justified in using violence, under these conditions," they'll expect certain behavior from us. If we say, "All violence is to us a tragedy and a violation of God's character of kindness and love," they'll expect other behavior from us. Our good news, similarly, will be judged better or worse because of our answer. (For example, people who are under physical threat and want to forcefully defend themselves and their children might see an absolutely non-violent gospel as bad news. Those who risk their lives in the cause of violence reduction and elimination would see a violence-defending gospel as bad news.)

I grew up not thinking twice about violence. I was taught that the Bible was about forgiveness, so that was my focus: getting forgiven. Hitting was a sin, as were lying and stealing. I wanted to avoid sins, obviously. When it came to wars and such, I figured that was God's business, and the president's. I just wanted to go to heaven when the rapture came and leave all that "wars and rumors of wars" stuff behind on earth. I remember the first time I heard of something called pacifism: My response was that it sounded terribly impractical and dangerous.

As I came of age and grew into adulthood, of course, I gave these matters the second thoughts they deserved. But it wasn't until the 1st decade that I began struggling to put "God" and "violent" into the same sentence. I've come to a place where I would address Pete's main concerns along these lines.

#### **A Plethora of Biblical Examples**

Pete is right about the Bible having a lot of violence. Most of us were raised reading the Noah story, for example, as a cute story about furry animals on a boat ride. But stop for a second and imagine a mother climbing a tree to escape the rising waters, trying to hold her newborn infant in one arm and her toddler child in the other. One drops and she watches him drown. Then she drops the other, and she watches her drown. And eventually she drowns too. Imagine that story being repeated millions of times. It's not a pretty picture, and in the story, it's not a "natural disaster." It's an act of God. Every person on earth—every man, woman, child, and grandparent—is wiped out the same horrible way, excepting Noah's family. If you're ambivalent about the story, take heart (a little, anyway): So is God, who seems to have immediate second thoughts of God's own and promises never to do that again.

- If that were the only problematic story, it would be one thing. But stories like this pile one upon another, like the collapsed floors of a high-rise in the tragic Haitian earthquake, and similarly unthinkable death tolls mount. The Canaanite genocide would have

landed Joshua in a war crimes tribunal. We would call Samson a Middle Eastern terrorist and David a corrupt warlord if they were alive today. And don't even mention that psalm about children and stones.

Many good Christians have found ways that satisfy them to deal with such texts. For example, some say, "We're all sinners, so we deserve even worse than whatever we get." That satisfied me too, for a decade or two, but eventually it stopped working—especially when I studied church history and got an idea of the social consequences of that kind of logic.

And it wasn't my desire to appease "a secular Mind" that forced me to rethink all this—the problem was my own mind as a Christian and pastor. Was God's eye really on the sparrow? Was the Lord truly good to all, having compassion on all God has made? Did God want us to trust in horses and chariots or not? Did the Lord really want us to move beyond spears and swords to plowshares and pruning hooks, and if so when, or was that just impractical and unrealistic poetry? Was God serious about a day coming when we would study war no more, or was that just heavenly talk?

Gradually I realized that there was another plethora of verses that present God as kind, reconciling, and compassionate, and against favoritism and violence. I realized that I was going to have to choose one plethora over another, or subordinate one to another. How would I choose? Eventually, this dilemma forced me to question some of my assumptions about what the Bible as an inspired and authoritative constitution and started reading it as an inspired and authoritative library.

But that deconstruction and reconstruction took a lot of time and struggle. Before reaching that conclusion, I reached another: that if I see a tension in scripture, rather than appealing to Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Scofield, or the pope to resolve it, I should first turn to Jesus. If Jesus truly was the highest and fullest revelation of God, if Jesus was truly the logo,

The radiance of God's glory, the

exact representations of God's nature, the fullness of the godhead in bodily form, and in very nature God, then his life and teaching mattered in tensions like this. And if the Bible was intended, as Jesus said, to bear witness to Christ, or as Martin Luther said, to be the manger on which Christ was presented to the world, then "when in doubt, consult Jesus" seemed like good advice.

And the staggering reality is that Jesus didn't kill anybody—something that can't be said about Abraham, Moses, David, Paul, or Mohammed (no disrespect intended to any of them). He didn't hit anybody. He didn't hate anybody. He practiced as he preached: Reconciliation, not retaliation. Kindness, not cruelty. A willingness to be violated, not violation. Creative conflict transformation through love, not decisive conflict termination through superior weapons. Courageous and compassionate resistance, not violence. Outstretched arms on a cross, not stockpiles of arms, nuclear or otherwise.

#### **The Cross**

This brings us to the cross and the subject of atonement, which has become a theological war zone these days. Many claim that the theory of penal substitutionary atonement presents an inescapably violent view of God presents an inescapably violent view of God as the one who punishes Jesus in our place. To deny that view is to surrender your status as an orthodox Christian, some say. Others question whether that theory—especially as popularly preached—is biblical at all, while still others retain the word substitution but reject the word penal, and so on.

In my own grappling with this subject, a single question has brought things into focus for me: Where do you primarily find God on Good Friday?

If God is primarily identified with the Romans, torturing and killing Jesus, then, yes, the case is closed: God must be seen as violent on Good Friday. The cross is an instrument of God's violence.

But if God is located first and foremost with the crucified one, identifying  
*(continued on page 29)*

# Global Warming and American Christianity

By Martin E. Marty

Those who long recognized that the public has to take a long view, should it wish to address global warming, learned in the recent election that they have to take a longer view. The Tea Party, which makes its first appearance in *Sightings* today, massively opposes small measures and even serious attempts to bring up the topic. Not a few Tea Partiers undergird their opposition with theology of the biblical sort. Last October 20 in *The New York Times*, John M. Broder did a close-up of typical action in campaigns at Jasper, Indiana. Global warming? “It’s a flat-out lie!” shouted the founder of the local T.P., basing his view on theologian Rush Limbaugh and “the teaching of Scripture. ‘I read my Bible. . . [God] made this earth for us to utilize.’” Lisa Deaton, a founder of Tea Partyish “We the People Indiana,” added gloss: “Being a strong Christian, I cannot help believe the Lord placed a lot of minerals in our country, and it’s not there to destroy us.”

It would be easy to refute and dismiss such proclamations, but they are generously backed. Broder: “Those views in general align with those of the fossil fuel industries,” which subsidize—at the rate of [by now well over] \$500 million in the last two years—lobbying against legislation that would help postpone The End. Such industries

can always find some dissenter against the overwhelming scientific consensus which warns against the destruction of the planet. Ron Johnson, the new senator from Wisconsin, settles it all scientifically. Climate change? “It’s far more likely that it’s just sunspot activity.” Or part of an every ten-thousand year cycle. Wait and see.

Bill McKibben, whom the utilities lobbyists and the Tea Partiers most hate, is an advocate of measures to confront climate change. In *The New Republic*, he writes: “On what is quite possibly the single biggest issue the planet has faced, American conservatism has reached a near-unanimous position, and that position is: pay no attention to all those scientists.” He skewers the “tiny bunch of skeptics being quoted by right-wing blogs.” McKibben, who includes churches as he rides the speaking circuit to awaken publics, is not a total pessimist. He thinks true conservatives, who would like to conserve the earth, will come to see through the conspiracy theorists, utilities lobbyists, and beyond the crack-pots—and help make sacrifices to bring about change.

McKibben, long a favorite of readers of *The Christian Century*, has begun to get support from editors who know what real conservatism means. So it was cheering to see LaVonne Neff commenting in *Christianity Today* on

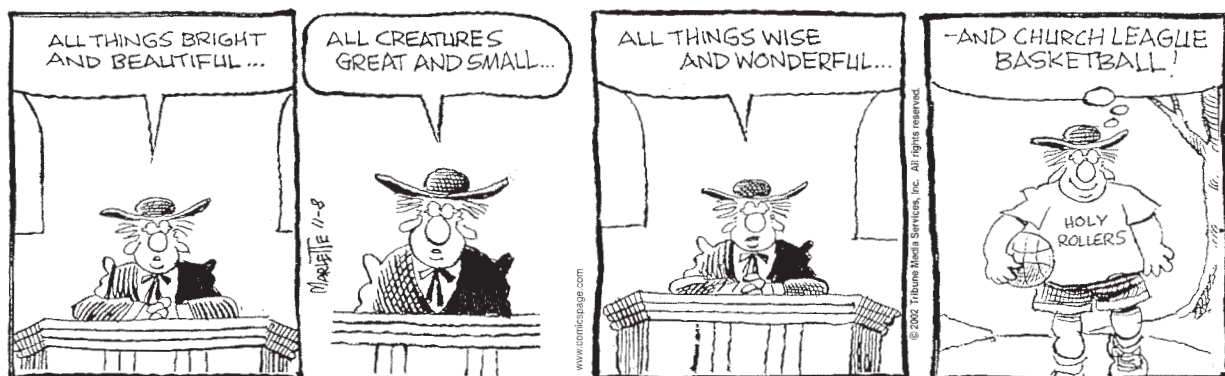
McKibben’s *Earth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. She quoted stories identifying the author as “probably the nation’s leading environmentalist” and “the world’s best green journalist.” He is also, she notes, “a churchgoing, Sunday-school teaching Methodist, who wants to see Christians leading the environmental movement,” and makes a theological case for their doing so. McKibben argues for “small and local” ways to help confront the issue. Ms. Neff, contra Mr. Limbaugh and other theologians on the far right, argues that McKibben’s recommendations “fit well with Scripture’s respect for creation” and “its requirement to love our neighbors as ourselves.”

Many Catholics, Jews, and Mainline Protestants, who have worked this theme in their “social justice” preaching, rejoice to hear such evangelical voices. Neff writes, “McKibben is not a doomsday prophet,” but he is a prophet crying in our heating-up wilderness. ■

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# Two Baptist Theological Contributions<sup>1</sup>

Fisher Humphreys, Prof. of Theology (ret.) Birmingham, AL

Who is a Baptist? What is a theological contribution? Twenty years ago James Wm. McClendon began the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* with an essay that seems to me to represent a high water mark in commentary on baptist theology.<sup>2</sup> His essay is about what he called small-b baptists, a group that comprises not only persons who refer to themselves as Baptists but also most of the heirs of the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century, together with all persons in the Barton-Stone-Campbell tradition of the Churches of Christ and the Christian Church—Disciples of Christ, most evangelicals, most Fundamentalists, and most Pentecostals and charismatics.

McClendon thought that there is very little baptist theology, so little that it can be mastered without much effort. He described baptist theology as almost entirely derivative of the work of others. He said that baptists' poor theological performance is a result of their lack of trust in their particular vision. He wrote that "The baptists in all their variety and disunity failed to see in their own heritage, their own way of using Scripture, their own communal practices, their own guiding vision, a resource for theology unlike the prevailing tendencies round about them."

He defined the guiding vision of baptists as "*shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community.*"<sup>3</sup>

He wrote that the key to understanding the present church as the primitive church is a recognition of the importance of narrative for the life of communities. It is because the story of the Christians of the New Testament era is our story that those Christians are, as is said here in the south, our people.

I want to offer two comments on

this important essay by this creative baptist theologian.

The first is that it is perfectly plausible to link self-designated Baptists with the Radical Reformation and the other groups, and there is value in doing so.

But, of course, there is value in linking Baptists with other groups such as, for examples, Roman Catholics because both Catholics and Baptists embrace the great Christian tradition, or Lutherans because Baptists and Lutherans both have such a high estimate of the importance of preaching, or the Reformed and the Presbyterians because the structure of most Baptists' theology owes more to the thought of John Calvin than to any other antecedent theology. It seems to me that McClendon's grouping is useful but not mandatory.

Moreover, while it is true that the earliest Baptists such as John Smyth and Thomas Helwys did not refer to themselves as Baptists, it also is true that we now have about three and a half centuries of persons who have referred to themselves as Baptists, so that it is quite possible to think of Baptists as that set of persons who call themselves "Baptists" together with their immediate spiritual ancestors. Those will be my concern in this paper.

My second comment is that the plausibility of McClendon's proposal that the impoverishment of baptist theology is a consequence of baptists' lack of confidence in their vision, depends on one's acceptance of McClendon's understanding of the subject of theology. McClendon defines theology as "the discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another **and to whatever else there is.**"<sup>4</sup>

Although in this definition the

subject of theology initially is said to be convictions held by communities, McClendon does add "whatever else there is," which presumably includes God. Even so, if the principal subject of theology is a community's convictions about God, it probably is inevitable that a lack of confidence in one's community's convictions will lead to a lack of theological reflection upon those convictions.

But what if one does not concur that the principal subject of theology is a community's convictions? What if one thinks that the principal subject of theology is God and the relationships that obtain between God and human beings and their world?

When one adopts this understanding of theology, it turns out that Baptists have written a great deal of it.<sup>5</sup> And while it is true that their theology has been influenced by traditions other than the small-b baptist tradition, that is seen no longer as a liability but as an asset. It is not only permissible but desirable that Baptists should be attentive to what Paul Tillich called Catholic substance and Protestant principle,<sup>6</sup> as well as to the distinctive themes that the Radical Reformation added to those.

If, having taken these steps, one asks, "What theological contributions have Baptists made?"—two seem to me to be especially important and enduring.

## **An Intentional Faith Community Achieved by Reserving Baptism for Believers**

The first Baptist contribution embodies an irony. It is a contribution to the universal church, but it comes by way of a practice that creates a deep chasm between Baptists and most of the rest of the church. It is the practice of reserving baptism for persons who have confessed faith in Christ.

As is well known, it was the act of John Smyth, 400 years ago, of baptiz-

ing himself and then his congregation of about forty persons in Amsterdam, that marks the beginning of the Baptist movement. Smyth and his congregation denied that the practice of initiating infants into the church by a rite involving water, a rite which they themselves had previously undergone, was baptism in the biblical sense. Across the intervening four centuries Baptists have continued to engage in the practice of baptizing only believers. Most other churches accept each other's baptisms, provided they were performed in the Threefold Name, but most Baptist churches refuse to accept any of those rites as biblical baptism unless the person being baptized was a confessing Christian.

Because believers baptism creates a chasm between Baptists and other Christians, Baptists who take seriously Jesus' prayer that his followers "may all be one"<sup>7</sup> feel compelled to try to justify their exclusive practice. What warrant can they offer for departing from the 1600-year-old tradition of almost all churches regarding baptism and thereby dividing the followers of Christ?

They offer two warrants.<sup>8</sup>

The first is that, by reserving baptism for believers, they are restoring the faith and practice of the earliest Christian churches. The restoration of biblical practices was important to the first Baptists, and it remains important to Baptists today. James Wm. McClendon was right about that.

However, the appeal to restorationism creates two problems for modern Baptists. The first concerns what the New Testament actually says. It seems to me not to be absolutely certain that in the New Testament era baptism was reserved for believers. Entire families, including small children, may have been baptized together by the first churches. After all, the first Christians were Jews who were accustomed to a rite of initiation for infant boys into their Jewish religion and who therefore cannot be assumed to have been averse to a rite of initiation for infants into their Christian religion. Moreover, while it is not cer-

tain that no infants were baptized by the earliest churches, it is certain that Baptists cannot claim the authority of the New Testament for their rejection of infant baptism, since no such rejection appears in its pages; and it also is certain that Baptists were acting contrary to Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers when they rejected as biblical the baptism of infants and so created a chasm between themselves and other Christians.

The second problem with the appeal to restorationism concerns the entire program of restorationism. In my judgment, there always are limits to restorationism. No Baptists have

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called for Christians today to dress in robes, as the first Christians presumably did, nor has any Baptist proposed that it is a betrayal of apostolic practice to use printed copies of the New Testament, which Baptists have almost always done even though the earliest churches did not. If Baptists are not committed enough to restorationism to wear robes, and if they engage in the non-biblical practice of using printed copies of the New Testament in their services, neither of which contributes to the disunity of the church, they can hardly expect that an appeal to restorationism will

justify reserving baptism for believers, given that it contributes so much to the disunity of the church. It seems to me that, if there is a justification for believers baptism, it must lie elsewhere than in restorationism.

One must look, I think, to another outcome of reserving baptism for believers if one is to find that justification. That outcome is the creation of a church which is an intentional faith community.

In my judgment, this achievement is of such a magnitude that it does in fact justify believers baptism. With a bit of historical imagination, one can appreciate that magnitude.

In Christendom, where infants were baptized, the church was not an intentional faith community because its members included persons who, when they reached the age of discretion, might or might not follow through on what had been affirmed on their behalf in their infancy. Monasteries and convents were intentional faith communities, but, after the dissolution of the monasteries, Protestants had no place to go if they wanted to belong to a fellowship of persons who had publicly committed themselves to follow the way of Jesus. Many of them longed to have such a place.

Baptists created such communities by reserving baptism for believers. For most of their history, most Baptist churches have not received into their membership persons who have not been baptized as believers. Moreover, even the churches which have done so, have received only practicing believers, so that these Baptist churches as well as the others have remained intentional faith communities.

It is difficult to exaggerate the value of an intentional faith community. This is one of the things that Christians most need in their effort to live the challenging life to which their Lord calls them. It is particularly well suited to be a means of grace to the people of God.

Although a believers church is an important asset of Baptist life, it is not Baptists alone who have benefitted



from it. For example, the Pentecostal and charismatic denominations have themselves adopted believers baptism; according to David Barrett, there are now about 605 million Pentecostal and charismatic Christians worldwide,<sup>9</sup> many of them in believers churches.

Moreover, some of the churches which continue to practice infant baptism have been influenced by the Baptist vision of a believers church.

Beginning in 1978 I participated for a decade in a conversation between Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic academics. There were about fifteen members on each team, and we met for two weekends a year for a total of 18 meetings. We became friends, and we wrote three books together.<sup>10</sup> One Sunday morning, while we were meeting in Washington, we were traveling on a bus to attend a worship service in a church, and I happened to be seated next to the leader of the Catholic group, James Niedergeses, the bishop of Nashville, a truly wonderful Christian leader. I took the opportunity to ask him about how he conducted confirmations.

He told me that he got a list of all of the confirmands in the diocese and sent each one an individual letter. In the letter he asked them to write him back and tell him two things. First, they were to tell him what Jesus Christ means to them. Second, they were to describe for him what it means to follow Jesus in the community of the church. He told them to write the letters themselves, without any help from their priests and, in the case of children, without any help from their parents.

He told me that he personally read all of the letters. If the writers were clear that Jesus is Savior and Lord, and if they indicated that they understood that by undergoing confirmation they were making an intentional commitment to be followers of Jesus and to do that in the fellowship of the church, then he wrote them back to say that he looked forward to confirming them.

Occasionally, however, he got a letter which made it clear that the writer

either did not understand that Jesus is Savior and Lord, or else did not understand that by undergoing confirmation he or she was making an intentional commitment to follow Jesus in the community of the church. When he got those letters, the bishop said, he wrote gentle replies thanking the letter-writers and saying that he would not be confirming them this year, and encouraging them to continue to attend confirmation classes with a view to being confirmed the following year.

There is no reason to assume that what Bishop Niedergeses was doing was directly influenced by the Baptist

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vision of a believers church, although the fact that his diocese was located in Nashville does seem a little suspicious. But I think that the same grace of God that led the Baptists to baptize only believers led this great bishop to conduct confirmations in a way that would insure that the confirmed members of his church constituted believers church.

A believers church brought about by the practice of believers baptism is a great contribution that Baptists have made to the wider church, and it is a contribution of such magnitude that it provides at least a partial justification for the fact that it creates a chasm between Baptists and other Christians.

Two additional things should be said about this chasm. In my judgment, Baptists bear a special responsibility to find ways to build bridges over the chasm because they created it. One form of bridge-building is to cultivate an appreciation for the understanding of confirmation which

Bishop Niedergeses expressed and which is found in many other churches as well.<sup>11</sup> Baptists in England have created a splendid document which does this, entitled *Believing and Being Baptized*,<sup>12</sup> and it would be well if similar efforts were made here in the United States.

Also, as great as Baptist gratitude for the creation of an intentional faith community is, Baptists need to appreciate that this is not the most important thing about the church. Here are some examples of more important things. God created the church. The Father redeems persons through Jesus Christ and the Spirit binds them together in a community. The church worships the Triune God. The church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and a holy priesthood. The church remembers and preaches the gospel. The church pursues a mission that God has given to it. Baptists inherited these and other important truths about the church from the churches who came before them. The Baptist contribution did not overturn that rich legacy but added to it the idea of a believers church achieved by the practice of believers baptism.

### **Religious Liberty Achieved by Separation of Church and State**

I turn now to a second theological contribution of the Baptists, one they have made to the world at large. It is the contribution of religious liberty. While others have championed religious liberty, the Baptist contribution came early, was vocal, cost Baptists dearly, and has been politically fruitful. The story of that contribution has been told often, so I want to attend to just one of its most luminous moments, the work of Thomas Helwys.

Before the English men and women who were to become the first Baptists had left England for the Netherlands, they already were political dissenters because they resisted the authority of the bishops whom King James had appointed to oversee the spiritual life of England. They immigrated to Amsterdam in order to be safe from political reprisals.

Sometime around 1611—which

was the last year in which persons in England were executed for religious reasons and also the year of the first publication of the King James Version of the Bible—about a dozen of these first Baptists returned to London under the leadership of the layman Thomas Helwys. Helwys had written a book entitled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, and he began to distribute it in London. He was arrested and imprisoned, and within five years he had died. Joe Early, Jr., noted, “Helwys paid for his convictions with his life. When he perished in Newgate Prison, he became a martyr not only for Baptists but for all people who believe in freedom of conscience and the freedom to practice their religion without the fear of persecution.”<sup>13</sup>

Helwys sent a copy of his book to King James with a handwritten inscription on the flyleaf; that copy is now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Leon McBeth has written that this inscription “is an admirable summary of the entire book.”<sup>14</sup> I find it touching to see these words in Helwys’s own handwriting and to reflect on what it cost him to write this note and this book:

*Hear O King, and diligently note the counsel of your poor, and let their complaints come before thee. The king is a mortal man, and not God, therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual Lords over them. If the king have authority to make spiritual Lords and laws, then he is an immortal God and not a mortal man. O king, be not seduced by deceivers to sin so against God whom thou oughtest to obey, nor against thy poor subjects who ought and will obey thee in all things with body life and goods, or else let their lives be taken from the earth. God save the king. Spittlefield near London. Tho: Helwys.*<sup>15</sup>

I want now to make eight observations about the inscription and the book.

First, neither here nor in the book does Helwys argue that the king’s reign is illegitimate; instead, he emphasizes the legitimacy of that reign and the

obligations of British citizens “who ought and will obey thee in all things with body life and goods, or else let their lives be taken from the earth.” Before leaving Amsterdam Helwys had written in a confession that “It is a fearful sin to . . . despise government.”<sup>16</sup> He did not commit that sin.

Second, in addressing King James

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*Helwys describes his political goal as “that blessed liberty.” But liberty for whom?*

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Helwys does not call for more citizen participation in government, let alone for the establishment of a democratic republic. He does not argue that the king’s authority is derived from the consent of his citizens. His concern about freedom is a political concern, but it is not about political freedom. It is about religious freedom from political oppression.

Third, it is Helwys’s theology that gives rise to his argument for religious liberty.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, Helwys believed that it is God who gives kings and other political leaders their authority. In support of this he repeatedly quotes passages such as Paul’s statement in Romans 13 that “there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom 13:1).

Fourth, Helwys believed that God, who gives political leaders their authority, also sets limits to that authority. Kings are authorized to do some things but not others. They can exceed their authority by certain kinds of behavior.

Fifth, Helwys believed that human beings live in two realms, the earthly realm in which kings have authority, and the spiritual realm in which God alone has authority. In support of this two kingdom idea Helwys quoted Jesus’ saying about giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.<sup>18</sup> Of course, Jesus’ subject was neither religious lib-

erty nor the separation of church and state, but rather the appropriateness of paying taxes even when they are unpopular and are used to support an oppressive government. Nevertheless, Jesus’ words served for Helwys as a suitable slogan for his differentiation of the spiritual and earthly kingdoms.

My sixth observation concerns the fulcrum upon which Helwys’s argument turns, which is that God has not authorized kings to oversee the religious life of their subjects. Helwys wrote of the spiritual kingdom: “With this kingdom our lord the king has nothing to do.”<sup>19</sup> When kings attempt to govern in the spiritual kingdom, they are claiming an authority they do not possess. In the handwritten inscription Helwys wrote that “The king . . . hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual Lords over them.” In the book Helwys asked: “And will our lord the king not withstanding all that Christ has done for him in giving him such [an earthly] kingdom, with such great dignity and power therein, will the king not withstanding enter upon Christ’s kingdom and appoint . . . laws, lords, lawmakers over or in this kingdom of Christ?”<sup>20</sup>

Seventh, when a king enforces religion upon his people, he is effectively committing the sin of idolatry. In the inscription Helwys puts it this way: “If the king have authority to make spiritual Lords and laws, then he is an immortal God and not a mortal man.” Helwys called King James to resist the temptation to do this. “O King, be not seduced by deceivers to sin so against God.”<sup>21</sup>

A useful way to summarize the political conclusion which Helwys draws from these theological convictions is to employ anachronistic language. Negatively, Helwys is not arguing that Christians should withdraw from the public square. Brian Haymes has written: “Helwys recognized Christians had some responsibility for the common life of the State. He held, against the Mennonites and John Smyth, that a Christian could act

as a magistrate. Here was the decision to be engaged in the larger society.”<sup>22</sup>

Positively, Helwys is calling for the disestablishment of the Church of England. He is telling the king to “make no laws respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” I think that Jason K. Lee is right that Helwys embraced “the complete separation of church and state.”<sup>23</sup> But, as extraordinary as this is, we still have not come to the component of Helwys’s political program which was destined to be most fruitful.<sup>24</sup> Helwys describes his political goal as “that blessed liberty.”<sup>25</sup> But liberty for whom?

My eighth observation is that Helwys’s answer to this question displays how radical his vision was. In the first part of his book, Helwys devotes a great deal of ingenuity to the cause of demonstrating exegetically that biblical references to the mystery of iniquity, the man of sin, the abomination of desolation, and the seven-headed, ten-horned beast are all about the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>26</sup> He argues this with so much energy and enthusiasm that it is difficult to imagine anyone being more opposed to the Catholic Church than Thomas Helwys. Moreover, he cheerfully acknowledges that if British Catholics commit political treason, the king is entitled to deal with them severely, for God has given him political authority over all of his subjects. Despite all this, when later in the book Helwys turns to the religious commitments of those same British Catholics, he sounds an entirely different note: “We do freely profess that our lord the king has no more authority over their consciences than over ours, and that is none at all. For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but in earthly causes.”<sup>27</sup>

And then Helwys wrote the most stunning words in his book: “For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and men. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the

earthly power to punish them in the least . . .”<sup>28</sup>

Two things are apparent in this justly famous passage. First, Helwys’s claim was a radical break with tradition. The traditional view was that a Christian king has not only the authority but the responsibility to require that his subjects accept and practice

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***“For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and men. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure”—  
Thomas Helwys added.***

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the Christian religion. This view, known by the Latin phrase *cuius regio, eius religio*, was held by Protestant and Catholic princes alike: “In a prince’s realm, a prince’s religion.” The traditional view also included the conviction that at the final judgment God would hold a king such as James I responsible for whether or not he imposed the Christian religion upon his subjects.

Helwys wants to pluck up this entire tradition, root and branch. He tells King James that the traditional view is a seduction by evil men. He assures the king that “the king shall not answer” to God for the religious lives of his subjects; they alone shall “stand themselves before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves.”<sup>29</sup> Helwys wrote: “Then let our lord the king in all happiness and prosperity sit in his own prince-

ly throne of that mighty kingdom of Great Britain, which God has given to the king. . . . And Let our Lord Jesus Christ in power and majesty sit upon David’s throne . . . which his Father has given unto him. . . . king [James] must needs grant that as he is an earthly king he can have no power to rule in this spiritual kingdom of Christ.”<sup>30</sup>

Presumably Helwys realized that if the king followed this counsel, Jews and Muslims and Christians of all kinds, and presumably anyone else, would be left free to relate to God in the ways that seem right to them. *The Mystery of Iniquity* is not a call for freedom just for Helwys’s religion but for the religion or irreligion of all citizens.

This brings us to a second point. We have seen that Helwys’s principal theological argument for religious liberty is that God has not authorized kings to govern their subjects’ spiritual lives. But when Helwys writes that “men’s religion to God is between themselves and God,” we hear intimations of another argument, namely, that kings should not interfere in religion because religion is a personal matter between human beings and God. Helwys had hinted at this earlier in the book when he wrote: “Oh, let the king judge, is it not most [fair] that men should choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves?”<sup>31</sup> When men “choose their religion themselves,” it is personal.

To say that it is personal is not, however, to say that it is private; in fact, in both these passages Helwys describes religion in social terms. He uses plural language. He does not write that one’s religion is between God and oneself, but rather that “men’s religion to God is between God and themselves.” He does not write that one should choose one’s religion oneself, but that “men should choose their religion themselves.” This is consonant with Helwys’ own life as an influential participant and later on as the leader of a community of Baptists who together were engaged in what Doug Weaver has described so perfect-

ly as “a search for the New Testament church.”<sup>32</sup>

What Helwys was talking about is not religion that is private but religion that is sincere. When a king prescribes religious practices for his subjects, he is making it more difficult for them to respond in sincerity to God. In the inscription Helwys wrote not only that the king should not sin against God but also that the king should not sin against his poor subjects. One reason that it is a sin against citizens for a king to appoint bishops over them and to make spiritual laws for them is that this tempts citizens to submit to the laws and the bishops for political convenience rather than as a genuine response to God.

Helwys was a devout Christian leader whose principal concern was that people come to trust and worship God in sincerity. He treasured religious liberty because as a means to the end of a more authentic Christian faith.

Helwys’ arguments for religious liberty remain as compelling today as they were when he made them. But there is another argument for religious liberty which also is compelling that, so far as I have been able to tell, does not appear in *The Mystery of Iniquity*. To use anachronistic language once more, it is the argument that human beings “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”<sup>33</sup> In modern politics, it is understood that only those nations which promote human rights are treating their citizens with respect; to deny citizens their human rights is to abuse them.

Helwys could have offered ample biblical and theological warrants for the idea that human beings are worthy of respect. After all, did not a psalmist famously write of human beings that God had “made them a little lower than God”?<sup>34</sup> But Helwys does not seem to have made use of this powerful argument, nor does he employ the language of “rights.”

Part of what makes the concept of human rights so useful today is that, although it may have originated in a

particular theological vision, it can be appreciated and embraced by people who do not share that vision. For example, many of the nations which beginning in 1948 became signatories to “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” of the United Nations, would have been indifferent to the Jewish and Christian theological vision of human dignity which had contributed so much to the con-

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cept of human rights.

Even though Thomas Helwys planted seeds of religious liberty, he might be surprised to see how much fruit those seeds have borne and how good the fruit is.<sup>35</sup> The United States was the first national laboratory in which a lively experiment in religious liberty was conducted, and the experiment continues to be wildly successful here. Both the nation and the church are flourishing. America remains reasonably united without the cement of an official religion to bind it together. As for the church, the American people have not all become secularists; in fact, in terms of membership, beliefs, and practices, America is the most religious of the industrially developed nations, followed at some distance by Ireland and Italy.

#### **Conclusion**

My proposal has been that the Baptists’ contribution to religious liberty, like their contribution to a believers church, derived from their

theological convictions. Their thinking about God led Baptists to the conviction that in a religiously pluralistic society the way to secure maximal religious liberty for all citizens is to effect a separation of church and state, just as it was their thinking about God that led them to the conviction that, as long as baptism is understood as a rite of initiation, the way to effect a believers church is to reserve baptism for believers. The fact that we today think of both of these things as so obvious as to be self-evident, gives the measure of the success of the Baptist theological vision.

Today many individuals and groups contribute to the vitality of a believers church. Along with them all, Baptists hold an honored place. The Baptist witness concerning a believers church was early, vocal, and fruitful, and some Baptists paid dearly for it. The church universal today is a better place because of their sacrifice. ■

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<sup>1</sup>This article was originally published in *Baptist History and Heritage Journal* (Winter 2010) and is used with permission of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, 3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, [www.baptisthistory.org](http://www.baptisthistory.org).

<sup>2</sup>James Wm. McClendon, *Systematic Theology I, Ethics*, revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002 [1986]), 17-44.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 26, 30, his italics.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 23, his bold font.

<sup>5</sup>Four books which give some idea of the scope of Baptist theology are William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004); James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009); Timothy George and David S. Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990); (see also the editors’ *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2001)); and James E. Tull, *Shapers of Baptist Thought* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972).

<sup>6</sup>Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 45.

<sup>7</sup>John 17:20-21.

<sup>8</sup>Some Baptists offer others. For example, H. Wheeler Robinson said that, in addition to the two described here, a third warrant was that believers baptism expresses more clearly than infant baptism the importance of conversion. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Baptist Principles*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1960 [1925]), 16-27.

<sup>9</sup>David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "Christian World Communions: Five Overviews of Global Christianity, AD 1800–2025," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33:1 (January 2009): 32.

<sup>10</sup>The third book, unlike the first two, was intended for a popular audience. Recently, thanks to the efforts of my co-editor, Sister Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM, is now available online at the website of the institution in which she ministers: <http://www.mountsaintagnes.org/Resources/Publications/Index.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup>Some theologians in churches which baptize infants say that, while Christian initiation is begun with baptism, it is incomplete until a person is confirmed. See, for example, Alan Richardson, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), s. v. "Initiation, Christian."

<sup>12</sup>The Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Believing and Being Baptized* (Didcot: Baptist House, no date [about 1996]).

<sup>13</sup>Joe Early, Jr., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), 50.

<sup>14</sup>Leon McBeth, *English Baptist Literature on Religious Liberty to 1689* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 31. This estimate is confirmed by Brian Haymes, "On Religious Liberty: re-reading *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* in London in 2005," *The Baptist Quarterly* 42:3 (July 2007): 198.

<sup>15</sup>Some spelling modernized.

<sup>16</sup>William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 122.

<sup>17</sup>This is not to suggest that his

theology exhausts the content of his arguments; for other arguments, see McBeth, 33ff.

<sup>18</sup>Matthew 22:21.

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. Richard Groves (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 34. Another modernized version of the text is available in Early, 155-310. A photocopy of the first edition of Helwys's book is available online at <http://www.baptistlibraryonline.com/library/Helwys/mystery>. The books edited by Groves and Early both contain helpful background essays and comments on *The Mystery of Iniquity*. For some unknown reason, Early does not refer to the earlier edition by Groves. Helwys's argument for religious liberty appears principally in Book II.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, xxiv.

<sup>22</sup>Brian Haymes, "On Religious Liberty," 211. I delivered the present paper at a conference at Baylor University in the fall of 2009. Only afterward did I learn, from my friend Curtis Freeman, of Haymes's article which was originally the Baptist Historical Society's Annual Lecture for 2007. I have incorporated into this article several references to Haymes's lecture because I found many of his conclusions identical to my own. Concerning the public square, however, it was Haymes's article which alerted me to the fact that his welcoming of magistrates into the church amounted to an affirmation of the appropriateness of Christian witness in public life.

<sup>23</sup>Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 285. Lee is making the point that on this issue Helwys is in agreement with John Smyth. There seems to be a consensus among historians that what Helwys was calling for was the separation of church and state. For example, Leon McBeth wrote: "Helwys actually was pleading for separation of church and state." McBeth, 32; J. Glenwood Clayton wrote: "The separation of church and state is a logi-

cal result and implication of the above distinction between temporal and spiritual power." J. Glenwood Clayton, "Thomas Helwys: A Baptist Founding Father," *Baptist History and Heritage* VIII:1 (January 1973): 9-10.

<sup>24</sup>Helwys's combining of respect for government with a call for government to grant religious liberty led William Estep to write: "I think it beyond reasonable contradiction that Thomas Helwys was, indeed, the bold architect of Baptist polity." William R. Estep, Jr., "Thomas Helwys: Bold Architect of Baptist Policy on Church-State Relations," *Baptist History and Heritage* XX:3 (July 1985): 32. Most of this article reappears in William R. Estep, *Revolution within the Revolution: The First Amendment in Historical Context, 1612-1789* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 50-54.

<sup>25</sup>Helwys, 44.

<sup>26</sup>2 Thess. 2:7, 2:3, Matt. 25:15 [Dan. 9:27], Rev. 13:1.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>32</sup>C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup>"The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies," July 4, 1776.

<sup>34</sup>Psalms 8:5.

<sup>35</sup>"This is a strictly theological argument. It is not an appeal to rights. . . . It is far from clear that Helwys realized the political implications and consequences of his argument." Brian Haymes, "On Religious Liberty," 206.

*Used with permission of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, 3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, [www.baptisthistory.org](http://www.baptisthistory.org)*

# What Counts is the New Creation

by Mimi Haddad

Do you find it curious that some Christians seem entirely focused on gender differences? Have you also noticed that this is rarely the posture of Scripture? The Bible emphasizes our similarities as God's covenant people, despite gender, class, or ethnicity. What we share in Christ far overshadows differences of skin color, class, or gender. What are the things we share as believers? According to Scripture men and women are equally created in God's image and given equal dominion in Eden. Men and women are equally responsible for and distorted by sin. Thankfully, men and women are also equally redeemed in Christ, gifted by the Holy Spirit, and included in the new covenant community--where they are also held equally responsible for using their spiritual gifts to advance Christ's kingdom. Finally, men and women are equally called to imitate the life of Christ in selfless service to the world. By making these observations, we do not deny that there are differences between men and women. It's just that these differences do not eclipse our calling (and shared authority) as God's people.

It is worth repeating: no one wishes to deny gender differences. However, to suggest these differences overshadow our oneness in Jesus is not biblical! God has created the world abounding in rich diversity, with men and women of many cultures, languages, and experiences. That which God created as beautiful has been used as the means of domination by sinful people. Yet, in the new covenant, our mutuality in Jesus weaves us together so that gender and ethnic differences no longer estrange or oppress but rather become the means of reflecting God's presence, forgiveness, and love to the world.

When Paul said that there "is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no lon-

ger slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), he reveals sin's lost grip on the redeemed. Paul spoke these words to a culture in which one's class, gender, and ethnicity determined one's value, status, and sphere of influence. Some insist that Galatians 3:28 speaks only of access to Christ, or salvation. But remember,

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*Paul spoke these words to a culture in which one's class, gender, and ethnicity determined one's value, status, and sphere of influence.*

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Paul sent these words to a believing church that was divided over whether Christians should observe Jewish law (Gal. 2:11&ff). This passage concerns church life and practice, to be lived by kingdom values, not cultural prejudices.

Notice how Paul places the ethos of the new covenant above the gender and cultural norms of his day. As Gordon Fee notes, Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother (Philem. 16) and with these words Paul allows kingdom values to take precedence over cultural expectations for slaves, pointing to the fact that the world as we know it is passing away (1 Cor. 2:6, 1 Cor. 7:31).

In the same way, Paul asks husbands and wives to share authority in marriage (1 Cor. 7:3-4). In fact, all Christians are to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21). In the same breath Paul also places additional responsibility on husbands, asking them to love their wives as they love their own bodies--a new request for

first-century men! Taking it one step further, Paul requires husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, denying even their own lives if needed.

How radical this must have seemed to first-century people. Remember, husbands held ultimate authority over their household. As such, husbands could require the sacrifice (even the very lives) of their slaves and also their wives. Paul now asks husbands to give their own lives as sacrifice for their wives--a complete reframing of gender, class, and authority. A new Christian culture was forming! Paul even writes that the free are now slaves and the slaves are now free (1 Cor. 7:21-22).

Of course, Paul asks women to submit voluntarily to the loving sacrifice of their spouses (Eph. 5:22), but isn't this the same thing as asking for mutual submission among Christians (Eph. 5:21)? Yet, the burden of sacrificial love is placed squarely on the shoulders of those who held cultural authority--men. Husbands are those whom Paul primarily addresses, asking them to live out kingdom values, reminding them not to be deceived by temporal authority, for this world in its present shape is passing away (1 Cor. 2:6, 1 Cor. 7:31). The gospel is radical medicine for a world divided by ethnicity, gender, and class, a world that, like ours today, emphasizes these differences in order to maintain divisions and inequities. ■

Dr. Mimi Haddad is president of Christians for Biblical Equality. This essay was first published in Arise Newsletter, reprinted with permission.

# There's something special about peacemakers

by Britt Towery

In all the copies of my Bibles I find Jesus saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." It has been my impression that this was not a sound bite. This was not just an off-the-cuff remark. Peace making was not just a passing fancy of his. It was not just a good quote his hearers to jotted down in their discipleship study books.

Jesus knew the subject of peace was not considered important to his hearers. Coming from Nazareth, how could he know the problems of Jerusalem, the great City of David. What made a carpenter's son think he knew anything about the real world of dog eat dog. "Git 'em, afore they git us" was not the national anthem of Israel, but of the whole universe.

Jesus did know his Bible (the Christian Old Testament) and knew the history of his people. He knew that for centuries king after king led them into bloody wars. He knew too of the society and laws never helped the poor or outcast among them.

Seldom on the table for discussion (then and now) were peaceful remedies to problems. The Roman Pax was anything but a peaceful solution for the empire. Jesus also knew that the different sects of Israel had little love for each other. Too many wanted to

fight. Sling shot trigger-fingers were always cocked. A few knew there had to be a better way to work out their differences with their spouse, or town councils of the immigrants in their midst.

Jesus knew his audience just as he does today. His disciples were keen on fighting just as churches of all labels apparently do. Jesus' disciples probably talked behind his back, such as:

"You suppose he is serious?" "Nobody talks of peace with those depraved half-breed Samaritans next door." "How can he know God with such talk?" "Other countries have a God of War." "You can tell he ain't got a wife like mine...a mother-in-law like mine...problems like mine."

The rabbis, with all their knowledge of ancient times, could quote without end of how God's armies vanquished the enemy. How the God of their Bible sent Joshua out to destroy the original Canaanites. The Prophet Jonah had no sympathy for Nineveh even after he saved them. The Apostle Peter refused to eat with the hated Gentiles. He knew they were bad. He had heard nothing else from birth.

Social scientists tell us the first few years of an infant's life are molding and nourishing the brain. If those precious (once in a lifetime) years are

filled with goodness there is hope for that child. A pattern is laid that affects all the years of life. Any kind of trauma for that infant is present all their days.

When children are traumatized by war, they are more apt to become warriors and killers too. What will the next 80 years be like for the children of Iraq and Afghanistan?

Thanks to being unprovoked into two wars the last decade we should expect hatred and violence to come America's way. Around the world people love America and hate our government. A vast majority of the world want love and peace. While most governments want conflict and the ability to cover it up.

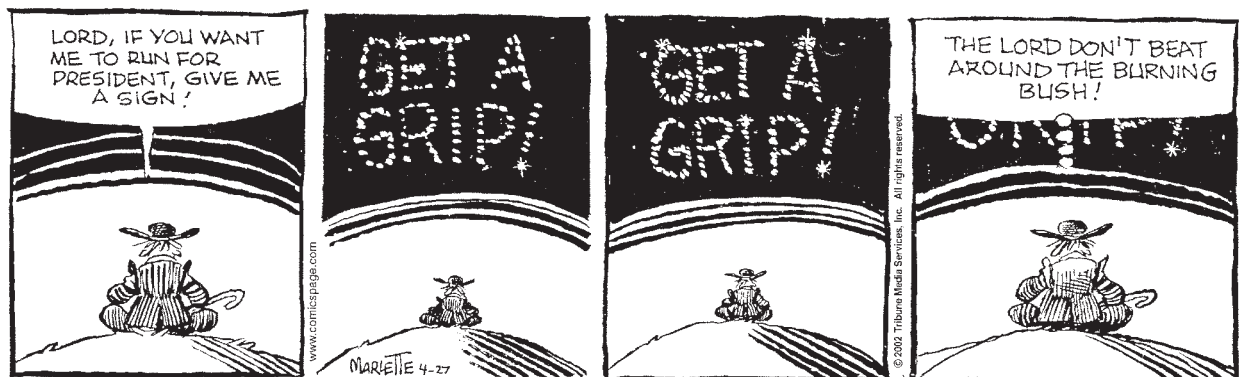
It's a mystery to me why some Christians make up excuses for violence and war. So few Christians go all out and "take him at his word..." as in the hymn.

'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus/  
JUST TO TAKE HIM AT HIS WORD/

Just to rest upon His promise/  
Just to know, Thus saith the Lord.

We sing 'em, but it's more fun when we believe 'em. ■

Britt Towery is a retired Southern Baptist missionary to China, and a writer.



# Some Baptists Echo “The Lie of the Year”

by Brian Kaylor

The 2010 “Lie of the Year” found a snug home among some Southern Baptist leaders.

PolitiFact.com, which won a Pulitzer last year for its investigative fact-checking of political claims, announced this month that the year’s top lie was the accusation that the health care reform passed earlier this year amounted to “a government takeover of health care.”

“The phrase is simply not true,” explained PolitiFact, a nonpartisan fact-checking organization. “PolitiFact reporters have studied the 906-page bill and interviewed independent health care experts. We have concluded it is inaccurate to call the plan a government takeover because it relies largely on the existing system of health coverage provided by employers.”

“It’s true that the law does significantly increase government regulation of health insurers,” added PolitiFact. “But it is, at its heart, a system that relies on private companies and the free market.”

PolitiFact’s announcement noted that many other fact-checkers have also pointed out that the “government takeover” claim was incorrect. PolitiFact credited conservative political consultant Frank Luntz for pushing Republicans to repeatedly invoke

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*The year’s top lie was the accusation that the health care reform passed earlier this year amounted to “a government takeover of health care.”*

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the phrase. Luntz believed the phrase would spark greater opposition to the proposed health care reform.

Although PolitiFact noted numerous Republican legislators and conservative pundits who echoed the phrase, they did not include conservative Christians in their report. Yet, Southern Baptists and other conservative Christian leaders also parroted the phrase.

Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), repeatedly invoked the phrase. While supporting a petition last year that rallied conservatives against the proposed health care reform, Land used the phrase to describe the proposed legislation.

“This petition is indicative of a spontaneous grass roots eruption of

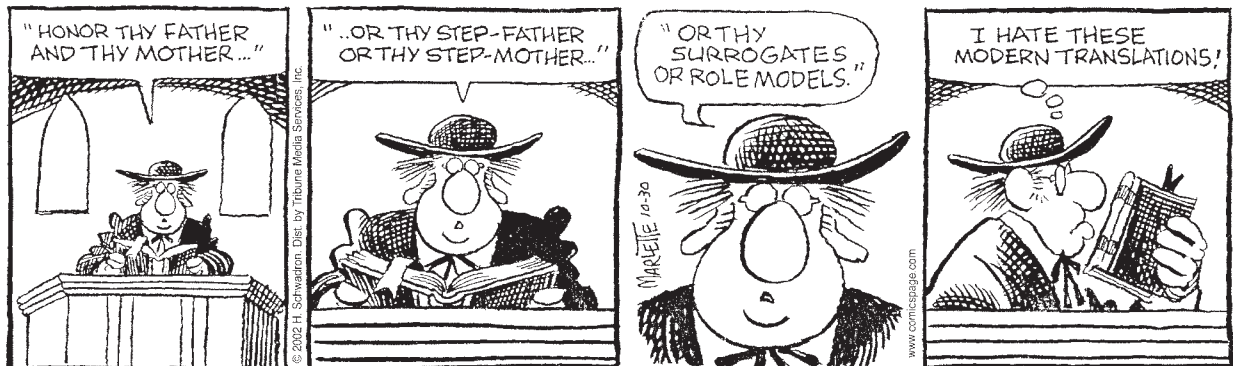
protest against a government takeover of the American health care system,” claimed Land. “Anyone who doubts the strength and vitality of this movement needs only have attended one of the thousands of town hall meetings to know that this is real.”

Following President Obama’s State of the Union address earlier this year, Land again made this claim in a Baptist Press article.

“It is time for the president and the Congress to start over on health care and to address real and serious needs for true health-care reform in a broad-based, bipartisan, issue-by-issue strategy instead of trying to cram down the throats of the American people a one-size-fits-all, government takeover of one-sixth of the economy,” argued Land.

In a Baptist Press column, Land went even further by claiming the proposed legislation would be a “government takeover of healthcare, i.e., ‘socialized medicine.’” Land also frequently invoked the “government” and “socialism” memes on his radio program, “Richard Land Live!” ■

Brian Kaylor is a contributing editor for EthicsDaily.com. This article first appeared on December 29, 2010 and is reprinted by permission.





# You Can't Make This Stuff Up!

By Marion Aldridge

Someday, I want to write a book about South Carolina with the title, "You Can't Make This Stuff Up!" Where would I start? With South Carolina Senator "Honest John" Patterson who served as a Senator in the 1870's? He was called "Honest John" because when he promised you a bribe, he always paid it.

We have the Lizard Man of Scape Ore Swamp in Lee County. Of course, the fact that the Lizard Man was first seen by a 17 year old boy at 2 a.m. may make some people wonder.

We have a Grits Festival in St. George, an Okra Strut in Irmo, a Watermelon Parade in Pageland, and a Chitlin Strut Pageant in Salley. I'm not sure why Okra and Chitlins get to strut while Watermelons and Grits are merely parades.

A year or so ago, in Allendale, the Cave Funeral Home could not fit a corpse into the casket, so they sawed off the legs. Then, the corpse fit. I'm not making this stuff up!

But there are also much deeper mysteries in South Carolina. I grew up in the 1950's and 60's, just this side of the Savannah River. Why did South Carolina Baptists have enough money, in those days, to send millions of dollars to missionaries in Africa, but were unable to scrape up the money to go down the dirt roads next to our churches and make sure the African-Americans who lived there had clean drinking water? Or, adequate health care?

Our missionaries to India came home and told us about the caste system in India, which appalled us. There were people there who were considered "Untouchables." Yet neither these missionaries, nor our pastors, nor our Sunday school teachers, nor our parents ever mentioned that we had an entire social structure of "Untouchables" in our small town. It was weirder than that: We couldn't

even touch what they touched. We had to have separate drinking fountains and separate rest rooms. If you were rich enough to have a maid and a gardener, you built them their own toilet out in the garage.

You know I'm not making this stuff up!

In the Deep South, I have sometimes thought it must be a badge of honor to act dumb. We will tell people who seem to be growing in compassion and grace and thinking new thoughts, "We don't do it that way around here," and "Don't get too big for your britches." That is our Southern way of smashing creativity. No reasons given. We will resist change to our own detriment. The first day I was on the campus of Clemson University in the Fall of 1965, I was a brand new Freshman trainer for the Tiger football team. Coach Frank Howard was on the sideline talking to this big young black man. "Who is that?" I asked. It was George Webster, from Anderson, South Carolina, an All-American at Michigan State University. He was an All-American there because he couldn't play football at Clemson. His skin apparently had the wrong pigmentation. That made me mad. That's stupid.

Welcome to South Carolina.

I love South Carolina, but it was a strange place to grow up. In our church and denomination, for instance, the Great Commission was emphasized, Jesus' command to Go and Tell the Good News. But we pretty much ignored the Great Commandments. Yet Jesus was unconfused about what is important. When he was asked, plainly, bluntly, "Which is the most important commandment?" he answered that there are two: Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Our denominational leadership functioned like a Magician, using smoke and mirrors to deceive us, holding up

the Great Commission—Go and Tell, Go and Tell, Go and Tell—so everyone saw it. Meanwhile, over here, we were hiding the Great Commandments and our response to them because we weren't actually doing such a good job of loving our neighbors. We could evangelize. We could market. We could put on Revival meetings. We could sing glorious gospel songs. But, apparently, based on our actions, we did not think so highly of compassion or justice or mercy.

In South Carolina, the buckle of the Bible belt, we said we loved Holy Scripture. But we loved it closed up and contained, not out there in the world making a difference.

These days, churches do better with missions, sending teenagers and adults on mission trips, sometimes close by and sometimes far away. But when I was growing up, I remember a grand total of ONE work day when church members were asked to DO something for Jesus. We were good at talking, good at preaching. Think of all our hymns:

Go and Tell It on the Mountain

I'll Tell the World that I'm a Christian

Tell the Old, Old Story

We could talk a good faith, but action? We thought attending meetings made us good Christians. The ONE day in my childhood and youth when I was asked to DO anything for Jesus was when our church built a new parsonage for OUR preacher. We were asked to come up on a Saturday morning and plant shrubbery at OUR new church parsonage. Apparently it never occurred to anyone that there might be some poor people in the community, some widows or orphans who needed their plumbing fixed or their leaky roof shingled or food in their pantry to feed hungry children.

It was a strange time in this state, when all the words of Jesus were read week after week, year after year, yet we

never listened to them. How do you miss these Bible texts?

Feed the Hungry  
Clothe the Naked  
Blessed are the Poor in Spirit  
Blessed are the Peacemakers  
Love your Enemies

Do Good to those Who Hate You  
How many times have I sat in Sunday school classes and had the teacher or members of the class say, "It can't mean that!" But it does.

In South Carolina, a black baby is more than twice as likely to die before his or her first birthday as a white baby. That is a terrible statistic. An African-American woman is 4 times more likely to die than a white woman from complications in pregnancy. An African-American is more than twice as likely to have diabetes as his or her Caucasian counterpart. African-Americans with diabetes experience kidney failure about four times more often than diabetic whites. This kind of hard data can hardly be ignored by loving Christians who care about all of God's people. The overall death rate from cardiovascular disease in South Carolina is 354 per 100,000 population, but rises to 402 for African-American women and 526 for African-American men! Almost dou-

ble. That is a dreadful discrepancy.

We are here today to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. Like no other person in the history of our great country, Dr. King got our attention. People had to listen. He got out attention by being the primary point person, early in his career, for a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, when he and others said, "It is not fulfilling the Great Commandment of Jesus to love your neighbor by making certain people sit in the back of the bus." He got attention—even the grudging respect of his enemies—by living out the gospel. Rather than encouraging violent retaliation when treated badly, the way of the world, the way of Bull Conner, Dr. King preached the way of Jesus, peacemaking, offering a non-violent response to those who hate you.

We would not be here today if it were not for Dr. King. The United States of America would not exist as it exists today had it not been for the people—black and white—who understood that Dr. King was reintroducing us to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, let's hear Dr. King's own words from one of his sermons, as he reminds us of Christ's words:

*"If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness." (Martin Luther King, Jr. February 4, 1968, Atlanta, Georgia from the sermon "Drum Major Instinct")*

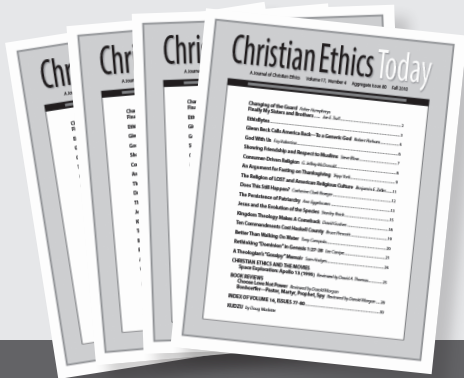
And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.

Amen ■

*These remarks were given by CBF of South Carolina Coordinator Marion Aldridge at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day Breakfast in Anderson, S.C., Jan. 17, 2011.*

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# Book Reviews

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

## Church-State Cooperation Without Domination: A New Paradigm for Church-State Relations

By C. Truett Baker

Xlibris Corp. 2010

*Reviewed by Darold Morgan*

Do not let this understated title lead you away from this new and interesting book on one of the vital areas of interest to Christian ethics today--Church-state relations. Truett Baker has written a timely, helpful book on this subject of substantial importance to all people interested in and concerned about the role of religion in America today.

America is increasingly diverse, pluralistic, and complicated. These qualities have led to a serious clouding of the historic perspective of religious freedom in our country. Baker's book is genuinely helpful primarily because of its solid historical purview with particular emphasis on early Baptist life and the influence that perspective had on the beginnings of a new nation. Baker gives us an exceptional emphasis on the clash of history with contemporary culture in the chapter on "the Supreme Court Role in shaping Church-State Relations." This chapter alone is worth the price of the book. Baker plows through some of the untouched areas of judicial decisions and provides very helpful footnotes which document the bases for his conclusions while providing a starting point for further research into the third branch of decision-making in the federal government. The ultimate emphasis of this chapter, as indeed the entire book, is the importance of upholding the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, properly understood.

The helpful review of American and Baptist history leads to the author's defense and interpretation of the contemporary "Purchase of Care" concept

which is part of the recent federal government's emphasis on "Faith-based" programs. The massive needs of poor people in America are not debatable. The needs of the poor provide the basis of the welfare system in our country. This core concept of the need to address poverty is central to the book. The author proposes "Separation and Cooperation Without Domination" as a way forward for church-state relations, and this approach stems from the author's own experience in institutions which minister to the expanded list of needs of the poor.

The enormous needs of the poor will not vanish. Indeed, we see a multiplication of those in poverty and among those with serious mental health needs. But the unique concept of the separation of church and state need not be sacrificed in addressing those needs. Rather, the profound depths and values, as well as the wisdom of one of America's crown jewels must be balanced in the on-going tensions between church and state.

This book should be read, and its contents made part of the current debate. ■

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## Loving Beyond Your Theology

By Larry McSwain

Mercer University Press (Jul 2010)

*Reviewed by David Sapp*

In his new book, *LOVING BEYOND YOUR THEOLOGY*, Larry McSwain has written a detailed picture of the life and ministry of Jimmy Allen, a seminal leader among Baptists. McSwain has extensively researched the life of Jimmy Allen, not only through the published record, but also through detailed interviews with Allen and many of his associates.

The result is a portrait of a leader, a portrait that can be very helpful for future leaders. I once heard Walter

Shurden say that moderate Baptists emerged from the divisive Baptist conflict of the 1980s and 1990s with "an aversion to leadership." Actually, we may have had that tendency even before our denominational difficulties, but certainly this aversion to leadership created a vacuum that begs for a book like this.

McSwain's book gives a full account of his Allen's as a prominent pastor, an icon of evangelism, a leader in Christian social ethics, a driving force for effective use of media by Christians, an adviser to the President of the United States, and a stellar president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Jimmy Allen was the last moderate to serve as president of the Southern Baptist Convention. While he was nowhere near the liberal that his enemies have made him out to be, he did represent the cutting edge of Southern Baptist life. He was conservative enough to lead the denomination, but progressive enough to help many Baptists to dream of a larger future.

*LOVING BEYOND YOUR THEOLOGY* highlights several remarkable dimensions of Allen's leadership. Those that struck a particularly responsive chord in me are these: 1) Allen's leadership was empowered by his dual commitment to evangelism and social ethics; 2) he was both visionary and pragmatic in his approach to every problem; 3) he was not afraid to lead during times of failure and pain when they visited him.

As a young, energetic, evangelistic preacher, Jimmy Allen led powerful revivals and pastored churches that baptized large numbers of people. He had a deep passion for others to know and to follow Jesus. He also took Jesus seriously enough to challenge his culture on critical issues like race. His evangelistic zeal made very conservative people listen, and his deep ethical commitment gave integrity to

his evangelism. This is not a balance which has been achieved by many.

In addition, *LOVING BEYOND YOUR THEOLOGY* paints a portrait of Jimmy Allen as a man who was at once both pragmatic and visionary. Pragmatism was the key to his success as a pastor, and it was a key to gaining concessions from the Israeli government regarding religious liberty in Israel. In fact, he functioned as a pragmatist in every leadership position he ever held.

At the same time, Allen was a visionary. It was hardly imaginable in the 1950s and 1960s that racial segregation would disappear so quickly from so many areas of American life, but Jimmy Allen had the vision to move Baptists strongly in that direction. McSwain also tells the story of his visionary role during the Iranian Hostage Crisis. He travelled to Iran, sought and gained an audience with influence the Ayatollah Khomeini. He had no reason to believe that he would be successful. He was there because he believed that God could be successful. His pragmatism was no longer driving him but a vision of God's peace.

Vision also drove him when he implemented an unheard of array of social ministry programs at First Baptist Church of San Antonio. The same was true when he labored so hard to give birth to the ACTS network.

Finally, Jimmy Allen's leadership was never stymied by pain. McSwain recounts two of the most painful experiences of Jimmy's life. The first was the failure of the ACTS television network. Allen's dream was so big most Baptist leaders could not grasp it. He dreamed of establishing a Christian television network that would penetrate the soul of America with the soul of Christ. He was not to succeed.

I knew Jimmy well during that period. He gave the ACTS vision all his considerable gifts, but ultimately had to give it up. The old leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention had their hands tied by their commitment to an old system. Other agencies competing for the funds competed for those funds. The extremist leaders who were just coming into power in the Convention could not allow Jimmy Allen to succeed, nor could they succeed themselves without Allen's vision and energy.

McSwain tells how, in the end, Jimmy plunged himself into financial chaos by taking his life's savings and paying the people who had been working with him. Here, McSwain gives us a splendid picture of a man who gave all for a dream he believed in and lost. But he lived to lead again.

Pain stung Jimmy Allen and his family yet again in their excruciat-

ing encounters with AIDS. These experiences are recorded in his book, *BURDEN OF A SECRET*. In McSwain's book he records how Allen dealt with those tragedies, how he learned from them, and how he found healing in the gracious heart of God. The most remarkable story in Jimmy Allen's life, however, might well be the story of his survival as a leader. The final pages of the book are devoted to this story. Jimmy has kept getting up when life knocked him down, and he has made some of his most significant contributions since struggling with those tragedies that would have defeated lesser people.

In years when he could well have retreated to the sidelines, Jimmy Allen helped to birth the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. He became the pastor of the Big Canoe Chapel in North Georgia, and stirred it to an even larger life. He worked with President Carter to launch the New Baptist Covenant, an exploratory effort to build relationships between all the Baptist groups in American who were willing to participate. He has energetically and effectively preached, influenced, written, and spoken for the cause of Christ. Now in his early 80s, he shows no signs of retreat.

Jimmy Allen is one of the finer models of Christian leadership in our time. Of course, just like all the rest of us,

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he has flaws that are real. His record, however, is going to stand the test of time, and this biography helps to preserve the record. As an obligatory matter to mention in a book review, there are far too many printing errors in this book.

Still, as a record of a successful leadership style, *LOVING BEYOND YOUR THEOLOGY* could help to empower the moderate Baptist movement. If only we could free ourselves from that the generational hubris that believes all things must now be re-invented. Let us pray that this volume will help to inspire leaders yet unfound. ■

David Sapp is pastor of Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA

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## The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith

Stuart Murray.

Paperback: Herald Press, 2010.

*Reviewed by Charles Kiker*

In fulfillment of the promise of the subtitle, the author outlines seven core convictions of Anabaptism relevant for today:

1. Jesus is example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord.
2. Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation.
3. Western culture is slowly emerging from Christendom.
4. The frequent association of the church with status, wealth, and force is inappropriate for and damages the witness of followers of Jesus.
5. Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission.
6. Spirituality and economics are interconnected. Anabaptists are committed to finding ways of living simply, sharing generously, caring for creation, and working for justice.
7. Peace is at the heart of the gospel. Anabaptists are committed to finding nonviolent alternatives and to learning to make peace between individuals,

within and among churches, in society, and between nations.

Subsequent chapters elaborate on these convictions.

Murray names the big three among traditional Anabaptists as Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites. (He fails to elaborate on the diversity among Mennonites.) Non-traditional Anabaptists include neo-Anabaptists—Christians who identify with Anabaptist tradition but have no historic links to any Anabaptist-related denomination—and hyphenated Anabaptists—Christians who find inspiration in the Anabaptist tradition but do not identify themselves as Anabaptist. Examples could include Baptist-Anabaptists, Methodist-Anabaptist and various other Denomination-Anabaptist varieties. The distinction between hyphenated and neo-Anabaptists is somewhat strained. For example, if I am an active, participating Methodist with Anabaptist convictions, am I neo or hyphenated?

A recurring theme of this book is the end of Constantinian Christianity. Murray not only acknowledges, but celebrates the demise of Christendom.

This is a helpful book for understanding Anabaptism. It provides a historical overview of the movement that can serve as a refresher course for many of us who have become a bit rusty in our church history, and as an introduction to those who have no previous knowledge of the radical reformation. The author paints the origins of Anabaptism warts and all. Radical reformers and their spiritual heirs are usually thought of as pacifists, but some among early Anabaptists resorted to violence, i.e., the instigators of the Peasants Revolt. While the historical section of this book is no more than a sketch, hopefully it will pique the interest of some to dig deeper into the witness of this important part of the Christian family. ■

Charles Kiker is a retired American Baptist Minister.

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## Is God Violent?

*(continued from page 13)*

with humanity and bearing and forgiving people's sin, then a very different picture of God and the cross emerges.

Both locations present a scandal. The former, it seems to me subverts the entire biblical narrative. God is not then identified with the slaves seeking freedom, but with Pharaoh keeping them in their place. God is not with Paul, accepting Gentiles as sisters and brothers, but with the Judaizers, upholding the Law. And God is not hanging on the cross, but stooping over it, pounding in the nail. That's scandalous in one way.

The latter understanding subverts violence and all those who depend on it for their security, affluence, and happiness. God is with the slaves, not with the slave-drivers. God is found in the one being tortured, not the ones torturing. God is found among the displaced refugees, not those stealing their lands. And God is found in the one being spat upon, not in the one spitting. A very different scandal indeed—and a very different cross, with a very different, but no less profound, meaning.

I probably agreed with Pete when I was his age. Now my journey has taken me to a place to which Pete may never come, or even want to come. I certainly can't force or threaten him into capitulation. So to all who, like Pete, can't embrace a nonviolent God imaged in a man on a cross, I can only say this: Please consider what extremist Christians, Muslims, and Jews are doing and planning today, as we speak, in the name of a violent God. And please, look back in history and see what has already been done. And please—if you change your view, at least protect it from its ugliest potential consequences. ■

Published in *Sojourners* December 2010 used by permission. *Brian McLaren is an author and speaker whose new book is A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith.*

# Verse

## Last Rights

*By Oda Lisa*

A walk through an old cemetery  
Revealed long-ago folks' history.  
Some markers spoke of ancestry.  
Etched Recordings of that year's birth  
And expiration dates punctuate  
In so, Marking a here and there.

Elders, middle-aged, and babies,  
There is no age limit to expiring.  
No academia required.  
Income has no real matter.  
Death is a last-minute equalizer.

One epitaph honored a young mother,  
To the right and left, husband and infant son.  
Another was for a man killed by war.  
Some tombstones tell these sad stories,  
Names and inscriptions of precious loss.  
Imagine, survivors in mourning clothes,  
Weeping, wilted widows.  
Then, at the end of the last granite row,  
One stone marker said it all.  
It needed no name or dates,  
No poem or prayer quoted.  
It proclaimed a joyous news  
With a single word, "FORGIVEN"!

Here lies a hopeful point of view.  
By bright faith beaming,  
Death's sting is dispelled,  
And the human model, renewed.  
Forgiveness pours from the heart of love,  
From Christ, a pure beginning,  
His promise, a new reality.

Finally, a soul can rest in Peace. ■

## A Pastoral Blessing and Benediction

*By Ira H. Peak, Jr.*

As you depart now, and all through the week,  
May the God of Creation  
Remind you that you were born in the image of God,  
For fellowship and for joy; and  
May the God of your Redemption  
Remind you that your salvation is a gift,  
A free gift, of God's utterly "amazing grace"; and  
May the Spirit of God  
Remind you that you are bonded with God  
In a relationship which can never, ever be broken,  
So, go now; go in peace; go with God, and  
BRAVE JOURNEY! ■

## Poor Leisure

*by Al Staggs*

For those increasing numbers of persons  
who have less to live on and less  
to spend for boats, clothes, food,  
excursions with the family,  
and much needed medical care,  
leisure means watching the tube  
and viewing commercials about things  
they cannot afford.  
It's seeing the lifestyles of the rich and famous  
and hearing views from news pundits  
who have no clue as to what it means  
to do without.  
And then there's football and baseball  
where the participants "earn" more money  
in one year than  
the poor family will make in a lifetime.  
Poor Leisure.  
If the best things in life are free,  
the poor should know this better than anyone. ■

# FINANCIAL REPORT FOR 2010

The year 2010 has continued the economic uncertainty following the severe economic depression and collapse of major financial institutions at the close of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. Now at the beginning of 2011, the economy seems to be slowly recovering, although all Americans have had to rethink their financial priorities.

We could not help but wonder, “How will all this affect *Christian Ethics Today*?”—a Journal totally dependent on the voluntary support of its readers? Despite these concerns, we strongly believed in the conviction of Foy Valentine from our inception in 1995, that the Journal should always be sent free of charge to anyone requesting it “as long as finances and energy allows.”

In 2010, 853 individuals (877 in 2009) gave \$96,021—a slight increase over the \$94,172 given in 2009 and an astounding total in light of the economic depression.

Can you believe that with this Issue 81, over 275,000 copies have been published, mailed, and distributed since 1995? We could never have accomplished this without your personal and financial support.

**Every gift is appreciated—whether \$10, \$100, or \$1000—it takes a village of supporters for us to continue!** Most gifts ranged from \$25 to \$100. A few who were able—foundations, churches, and individuals—gave \$500 or more, without which we could not have made our reduced \$90,000 basic budget. Much credit also goes to our capable staff of assistants: Ray Waugh (mailing lists/website) in Austin; Randy Shebek (layout/design) in Des Moines; Jim Renfro of Etheridge Printing in Dallas; Eric Lee of Postal Tech (mailing) in Lewisville, TX; and Audra Trull (bookkeeping/secretary).

## Special Thanks To Major Supporters of the Journal

A special word of gratitude is due to the following supporters who have kept Foy Valentine’s dream alive through their major contributions. Eight persons gave \$500-\$900 each, and the 20 supporters below gave \$1000-2000, and one gift of \$10,000, in 2010:

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\*\*Several gifts received in 2010, as were the two \*\* above, were given in honor of our retiring editor Joe E. Trull and his wife Audra. Our deepest thanks to you all.

## CIOS/Piper Fund Grant

In 2005, a submission for a grant from the CIOS/Piper Fund of Waco, Texas, was approved—\$25,000 each year for four years. This grant has allowed *Christian Ethics Today* to sponsor numerous conferences at colleges, seminaries, and churches, as well as fund various projects including providing books, videos, and resources to various conventions, international seminaries, churches, and colleges.

The Journal wishes to thank the Piper family—Katy, Shirley, and Paul Piper—for their generosity in allowing the Christian Ethics Today Foundation to extend its influence and ministry far beyond our dreams and expectations during these past five years.

## SUMMARY OF FINANCIAL STATEMENT 2010\*

Balance	12/31/09	\$60,611
Gifts/Income 2010		\$96,021
Expenditures 2010		\$91,833
BALANCE:	12/31/10	\$64,799

\*Note: The amounts above may vary slightly due to bookkeeping adjustments and reimbursements.

# Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics

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

—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

## MISSION

The Christian Ethics Today Foundation publishes *Christian Ethics Today* in order to provide laypersons, educators, and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.

## PURPOSES

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

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

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

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

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

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