

# Christian Ethics Today

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

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*Kudzu*

## Freedom to Speak What We Have Seen and Heard – and Doing It: The Origins of G. W. Truett Theological Seminary, Acts 4:13-20

By Doug Weaver

Today people are often afraid of the word dissent. They think it is a bad word, a negative word. It was not always that way. Early Baptists were not afraid of dissent. They saw how establishments or those who insisted on conformity were willing to deny conscience in the name of unity and theological purity. Early Baptist and religious liberty advocate, Roger Williams, described it like this: “People in power are seldom willing to hear any other music but what is known to please them.”

For Williams and other early Baptists, dissent was not only necessary, it was an act of freedom; it was an act of voluntary discipleship. Let’s consider Acts 4:13-20.

Here we see Peter and John practicing dissent against a conformist establishment. They speak what they’ve seen and heard about, what they’ve experienced in Christ, as an act of freedom, an act of voluntary discipleship.

Truett Seminary exists today because of an act of freedom as some visionary leaders were willing to dissent as a free act of faith against a tidal wave of theological conformity.

The remake of the Southern Baptist Convention, called the conservative resurgence by supporters and called a fundamentalist takeover by opponents, had roots dating back decades, but officially began in 1979. A political strategy to elect a series of convention presidents who affirmed biblical inerrancy was devised by Texans Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler, the architects of the takeover. Presidents used their appointive powers to place like-minded men (note I said *men*) in positions of leadership with the goal of purifying SBC agencies and seminaries of their liberalism, as Patterson and Pressler defined that term. Opponents, usually called

moderates, said the Patterson-Pressler movement was in reality a disenfranchisement, an exclusion of persons not willing to abide by a “my way or no way” creed of narrow doctrinal and social positions. While presidential elections were hotly contested, by 1990 the takeover of the convention was accomplished. The new victorious leaders proclaimed that a “new reformation” had occurred and biblical fidelity had been restored.

Southern Baptists reacted in a variety of ways. Let me cite a few. Many supported and hailed the new reformation. Some opposed the new SBC, left Baptist life, or said that Baptist life had left them. There are some ex-Baptists out there in Episcopalian and Methodist pews. Among the responses was a variety of what can be called Baptist loyalty.

1) Some didn’t know what was going on in the SBC and never found out. Their denominational offerings kept going to the same places and if the ministries had changed, they didn’t know or didn’t care. People sometimes say “ignorance is bliss.” I suppose religious ignorance is even more blissful.

2) A larger response for Baptist loyalists was the desire to stay Southern Baptist, even if they didn’t like the new direction of the SBC. These folks had deep roots within the convention. Their love for its ministries and its heritage, especially foreign missions and icons like Lottie Moon, made them hesitant to speak out, although they might speak privately, but they decided to go along. Some in this perspective stayed quiet because they thought they might lose their jobs. Others relied on the motto: “Avoid politics, support missions, the denominational pendulum never swings too far; everything will ultimately be fine.” Of course the

pendulum did swing too far.

3) Some Baptists adopted a fascinating variation on this hesitancy to speak what was being seen and heard—an attempt to deny that the conflict would have any real impact on them, their church or their Baptist identity. About a decade ago, I wrote the history of Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, a wonderful, historic Baptist church in Atlanta, Georgia. The church attempted to stay out of denominational politics. One state convention leader who was a church member said it like this: “I don’t let nobody blow smoke on my blue skies.” He was going to support what he had always supported and if other people said the skies were dark and cloudy, he said they were still blue. The church changed its tune in 1995 when one of its former pastors was fired as president of the seminary in Fort Worth. It felt like a personal attack, and the skies weren’t blue anymore.

I don’t think I can argue that only people who recognized they were directly affected spoke out against the Patterson-Pressler movement. Or can I? I at least want to say that those who directly experience something, whether it be fundamentalism, or more importantly, whether it be an experience of grace or forgiveness, do seem compelled to testify of what they’ve seen and heard.

4) Another reaction evident in the SBC battles that I want to describe to you is this: If you think the skies are still blue, then you have buried your head in the ground. I must dissent. I must speak of what I’ve seen and what I’ve heard. I am compelled by freedom to testify about my experience and warn about those that want to stifle that freedom I have in Christ.

That was the approach of some. That was the approach of Herbert

Reynolds, president of Baylor University from 1981 to 1985, and the visionary creator of G. W. Truett Theological Seminary. To understand Reynolds’ desire to create Truett seminary, we must go back at least to 1979, the year of the start of the SBC conflict between conservatives and moderates. Paul Pressler, architect of the fundamentalist movement, said that problems in the department of religion at Baylor University were the last straw and made him commit to purifying the SBC of liberalism. Pressler said that students he had helped to convert in Bible studies at his church in Houston had been spiritually harmed at Baylor, especially in their required Old Testament class. At issue was a book, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, co-authored by religion professor, Jack Flanders. Pressler was irate that the book did not affirm biblical inerrancy and relied on harmful historical critical methodology, for example, contending that the book of Daniel was a post-exilic writing—all the kind of things you now study in your classes at Truett.

It wasn’t just Pressler. James Draper, pastor in Euless, Texas, a member of Baylor’s governing board, complained to fellow board members about the book. In the fall of 1979, soon after the triumphant election of an inerrantist SBC president, a 16-page critique of the Flanders book was circulated in Texas with the obvious goal of initiating some changes in the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Flanders was on the hot seat and took the verbal beatings hard. What did play out at Southern Baptist seminaries had started at Baylor as well.

President Reynolds responded with a strong voice of support for his faculty and for his school. He was theologically conservative, but he was not interested in narrow theological attacks or a galloping creedalism at his institution. He staunchly defended academic freedom and he defended Flanders, who had been his pastor at First Baptist Church of Waco. When conflict is that direct and personal,

Reynolds found it too hard to ignore.

As the conflict unfolded across the Southern Baptist world, Baptist classrooms were occasionally the target of fundamentalist tactics. Religion professors were going to be guilty until proven innocent. A few students across the SBC tried to tape lectures and find damning evidence of liberalism. I’ve been there and experienced that.

Reynolds aggressively condemned monitoring of Baylor faculty and promised to expel students caught doing surveillance. He believed the

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*You sit in these pews at Truett Seminary today because of an act of freedom as some visionary leaders were willing to dissent as a free act of faith against a tidal wave of theological conformity.*

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goal was to harass faculty to leave the school or to acquiesce to fundamentalist concerns.

In a survey of articles from *Baptist Press*, Southern Baptists’ news outlet, I found several reports of Reynolds speaking loudly, strongly, and pointedly, about what he had seen and heard. Articles from 1984 to the mid-90s trumpet the same themes and concerns. Fundamentalist-dominated skies weren’t blue; indeed they were dark and people needed to dissent to preserve freedom.

Like most moderate Baptists during the conflict, Reynolds called his opponents fundamentalists who insisted on narrow intolerant conformity. He firmly believed that they desired an oligarchy of power, a hierarchy of a few inerrant interpreters of an inerrant Bible and that, besides taking over SBC institutions, they wanted to take over Baylor and impose their uniform

thinking on that institution.

Reynolds said fundamentalists had forsaken historic Baptist identity regarding the priesthood of all believers and the priesthood of each believer, or as Baptists often said it, that each person has the soul competency to have a direct relationship with God and the ability to read the Scriptures. Reynolds added a point often made in Baptist history: At the Last Judgment, each person will answer to God. If that is the case, freedom for the individual conscience is necessary.

Reynolds affirmed the importance of the church; He was no Lone Ranger; he was involved in the life of the local church. He is evidence that one can affirm both individual conscience and the importance of church. Reynolds in particular felt congregational polity was being threatened, but he seemed most concerned as a trained psychologist with fundamentalism as a mass movement. He believed it produced a herd mentality of the community where people simply went along with their so called infallible interpreters and where pastors went along with the hierarchy of leaders in order to get prized pulpits.

Reynolds affirmed that Baptists and Baylor believed in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, but that inerrancy took away freedom rather than preserved it. Baylor was committed to following Christ as the plumb line of faith, Reynolds declared, and he adamantly concluded that Baylor would perpetuate these Baptist commitments “whether there were any conventions in existence outside these institutional walls or not.”

Reynolds’ concern about fundamentalism left a legacy of two major events.

The first major event was the charter change of the university in the fall of 1990, soon after the SBC convention in New Orleans in which all who opposed the Patterson-Pressler movement knew the battle was over and they had lost. Time doesn’t permit telling the charter story in detail. In short, Reynolds had the school’s charter changed so that the

Baptist General Convention of Texas appointed only 25 percent of Baylor's governing board whereas Baylor's board selected 75 percent in a self-perpetuating fashion. It is a fascinating and controversial story, one that ruffled many Texas Baptists. The move to a self-perpetuating board has bothered even some of Reynolds' supporters.

What is important to the story of Truett Seminary is that the decision to change the charter was rooted in Reynolds' conviction that Baylor must not be taken over by fundamentalists like SBC institutions were. When Reynolds left the SBC convention in New Orleans, he would not attend another annual meeting of the convention. He had had enough.

Reynolds would defy what he said that he had seen and been told: that fundamentalist leaders had announced, "We're going for Texas and then we're going for Baylor." In making the charter change, Reynolds declared that Baylor would be known for academic freedom and the freedom embodied in Baptist identity markers. To guarantee these commitments, Baylor must be free of the possibility of fundamentalist dominance and its firing line.

The second major event was the legal establishment of Truett Seminary. It is fascinating that at the very same time as the Baylor charter change, the wheels were in motion regarding the establishment of a new Baptist seminary. In July 1990, Reynolds had the name G. W. Truett Theological Seminary reserved with the state of Texas. The move was reported in the press with one of my all-time favorite Baptist history headlines: "Baptist president bans dancing on campus and considers new Truett Seminary." Reynolds ultimately won one and lost one.

The president remarked that Baylor had not yet committed to starting a school; they would watch to see if Southern Baptist seminaries continued their decline and their drift away from historic Baptist

principles and freedom. If so, Baylor would dissent and be prepared to act on what it had seen and heard.

Why name a school after Truett? It wasn't simply because he was Texas Baptists' most famous preacher of all time. It was because the name of Truett stood for religious freedom. The next year, 1991, Truett Seminary was incorporated. A 15-member advisory board was created and met to help craft a vision for a new seminary. In January 1992, Baylor's governing board approved an opening date for the seminary for 1994. Again, the reasons cited included criticism of existing Baptist seminaries declining because of fundamentalist power plays and the

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### *The founding of Truett Seminary was clearly to provide an alternative to fundamentalism.*

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need for theological education in an atmosphere of freedom.

The founding of Truett Seminary was clearly to provide an alternative to fundamentalism. Reynolds highlighted for potential supporters a positive vision. First, let's see what could result from a focus on freedom and open inquiry in a university setting, a setting much more conducive to providing academic freedom. Second, Reynolds and other early advocates agreed that Truett's identity should be Baptist and evangelical. At one early planning meeting when a document identified Truett as evangelical but without the word "Baptist," an insistence on Baptist identity was quickly reiterated. To no surprise, the school's vision was to embody historic Baptist principles on the freedom of individual conscience, priesthood of believers and congregational church polity.

Third, clearly the Truett vision highlighted the training of pastors and other ministers for Texas. The school was to be a seminary

for ministry, not simply a divinity school. Truett would also have a strong mentoring program for the training of its ministers with significant connections to local churches. There is his focus on the church again. Fourth, Truett would also encompass a broad international outlook. Baylor's motto, *pro ecclesia, pro Texana*, meant for the church and for the world. I am not sure if the current focus on Baylor as a school with an international focus began with the creation of Truett, but the seminary's origins surely gave added emphasis to Baylor's worldwide outlook.

When Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth complained that Baylor didn't need to start a seminary (which in retrospect is so ironic since their president was fired and locked out of his office less than a year later), Houston pastor Daniel Vestal, who was chair of the Truett advisory board, as well as others, emphasized that Truett was not simply starting a new Southwestern. Some key supporters did want that; they wanted to displace Southwestern as the Baptist seminary in Texas.

But the importance of Vestal's response to Southwestern's complaint reveals further details and a fifth point about Truett's original character goals. Truett, because it was attached to a large university, would be able to implement an inclusive identity, which meant, Truett wanted to be multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural. While published goals do not emphasize the role of women, oral tradition says advocacy for women in ministry was clearly there from the beginning and supported by Reynolds. One of the seminary's founding faculty members was Ruth Ann Foster. When she died back in 2006, she was hailed by colleagues and former students as a pastor to students and leader of Truett's women in ministry efforts. Only in an atmosphere of freedom in Baptist life, would women ministers fully be affirmed. I am going to repeat only one line in this address and this is it: Only in an atmosphere of freedom in

Baptist life, would women ministers fully be affirmed.

In 1993, Reynolds' choice to implement the Truett vision as the school's first dean was Robert Sloan who later succeeded Reynolds as president of Baylor. Sloan, at the time a professor in Baylor's religion department, was known by many Texas Baptists as a popular preacher, interim pastor and evangelical scholar. In tapping Sloan, Reynolds hoped to gather support from Texas Baptists across the theological spectrum who wanted an alternative to fundamentalism. Reynolds highlighted that Sloan was committed to religious freedom just as was G. W. Truett.

In the fall of 1994, Truett Seminary opened its doors with 51 students in the B. H. Carroll Education Building at First Baptist Church, Waco. The irony was rich since Carroll had helped start a seminary at Baylor in the early 1900s; that school ended up moving to Fort Worth and becoming Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Financial support for the seminary came from various directions such as the Piper Foundation. Scholarship support has come from the BGCT and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The major and indispensable donors were John and Eula Mae Baugh. John Baugh, like Reynolds, had a passionate dislike for fundamentalism and felt he had to act upon

his personal experiences of what he had seen and heard. Baugh was blunt; he believed the creation of Truett was a battle for Baptist integrity and freedom.

In referencing *Acts 4* to reflect on the founding of Truett Seminary, I could say that fundamentalists had no hesitation to speak about what they believed that had seen and heard --a point taken.

But for Baptists in their 400-year story, *Acts 4* not only addresses the need to speak and hear about our personal experiences of faith in Christ; it addresses the need to do so as an act of freedom, an act of voluntary discipleship.

The apostles Peter and John were

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### *Only in an atmosphere of freedom in Baptist life, would women ministers fully be affirmed.*

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arrested for preaching and commanded to stop speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus. If they had shut up and conformed as commanded, they would have been spiritually bound to a law which hindered their worship of God. If they had been locked up, they would have been free in their spirits despite their outward chains. Their freedom to speak was rooted in

the freedom they received from God. As an act of freedom, they could only speak of what they had seen and heard and experienced.

*Acts 4* speaks to the need to speak freely, to dissent as an act of voluntary discipleship against the prevailing winds of an establishment which demands conformity and defines it as orthodoxy. The establishment represented in *Acts 4* wanted the disciples to be silent, to act as if the skies were blue when they knew they weren't. Peter and John could not do that.

Original identity markers sometimes change; sometimes they get adapted. Part Two of the Truett story would deal with those kinds of issues. But Herbert Reynolds emphasized over and over that the original quest was for a seminary that embodied what G. W. Truett stood for: religious freedom for all. May the faculty at Truett, as they do now, remain committed to speaking and hearing and doing in an atmosphere of freedom. Then and only then will the dark cloudy skies of pressured conformity be derailed and blue skies will be really blue. ■

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# Baptists Bank on Fire and Brimstone

By Valerie Tarico

Southern Baptists are staking their institutional future on the idea that patriarchal religion still has a market. The Southern Baptist Convention is a force to be reckoned with. As the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, with over 45,000 affiliate churches, it has been shaping and channeling conservative Christian sensibilities since the Civil War, when Southern Baptists split from the North so they could advocate on behalf of slave owners. They fought to keep slavery and lost. Then they fought for Jim Crow laws and lost. Then they fought for segregation and lost. Now, faced with eroding membership, the Southern Baptist leaders are fighting against irrelevance. Unfortunately, they have committed to a strategy that will make it harder for their members – and for all of us—to move toward a future based on collaboration, compassion and practical solutions to real-world problems.

With secularism on the rise, entrepreneurial Christian denominations have evolved a variety of survival strategies. Anglican theologian John Shelby Spong (*Why Christianity Must Change or Die*) proposes a rigorous rethinking of Christian belief. Mainline and Unitarian congregations have embraced Michael Dowd's *Evolutionary Christianity*, an interplay between Christian worship and scientific wonder. Elsewhere on the spectrum, Joel Olsteen plays down theology, instead offering comforting platitudes and promises of prosperity to those who pray and give. Willow Creek mega-church in Chicago pioneered sound and light shows and indie rock bands that entice young people into the club by emulating familiar entertainment media. The Catholic bishops are brazenly trying to recreate an epoch in which they were ascendant.

A few weeks ago, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to approve a name change. Congregations will now have the option to call themselves "Great Commission Baptists." The name change is meant to distance them from their past association with racism, but it does much more. To those in the know, it announces that their future will be focused on turf wars – on competing for members and dollars rather than any kind of forward-facing spiritual leadership. To draw an analogy, imagine that Coca-Cola

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*Rather than improving our product, we've chosen to focus on our marketing department. That's essentially what the new name means.*

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decided to distance from its past sales of cocaine drinks by dropping the "Coca" and calling themselves "World Dominance Cola." Imagine it announcing to the public: Rather than improving our product, we've chosen to focus on our marketing department. That's essentially what the new name means.

The Southern Baptist denomination was formed in 1845 when Baptists split over a question of slaveholders as missionaries. Freed from the sensibilities of their Northern brethren, the Southern Baptists became strong and vocal advocates for slavery as a Biblical institution. As one leader, Dr. Richard Furman, wrote to the governor of South Carolina, "The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example."

Over the years, Southern Baptist deacons and pastors moved in and out of Ku Klux Klan leadership positions. In 1956, the minister of the largest Southern Baptist church in the nation testified before the South Carolina legislature, voicing his support for segregation. It wasn't until 1995 that leaders formally apologized for their defense of slavery and 20th-century opposition to equality for blacks. As recently as the Trayvon Martin murder, the denomination has struggled with embarrassing racist taint. Along with the name change, the Convention elected a fiery black preacher as the first African American president in its 167-year history.

In an alternate universe, the Southern Baptist history of endorsing slavery and then Jim Crow laws, so shameful in hindsight, might have led to broad theological growth. For example, it might have softened the authoritarianism that caused ordinary believers to blindly follow whatever their preachers said. It might have called into question the notion of "biblical inerrancy," which gives God's seal of approval to every form of Iron Age bigotry in the biblical record. It might have led to an increase in denominational humility – the sense that maybe there are things to be learned from other kinds of Christians, the outside world, or the moral trajectory of human history. Alas, it would appear that the lesson learned was a narrow one: Blacks are fully human and they can make loyal church members. A cynic might suggest that there was no lesson learned: Economics were on the side of slaveholders at the start and are now on the side of putting blacks at the helm.

Like the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention almost made a leap that would have brought its teachings into line with compassion and the moral demands of the

21st century. In fact, by the 1970s it appeared that the Southern Baptists might be ready to move into a position at the vanguard of Christianity. Doors were slowly opening to women even at the flagship seminary in Louisville; and scholarship in fields like archeology, linguistics and the natural sciences was penetrating and changing theology discussions.

But then at the national convention in 1979, hard-liners seized the reins of power. Theological dissent was purged. Over a period of several years, women were removed from positions of spiritual leadership. By 1993 an adroit biblical literalist, Albert Mohler, who had been instrumental in the coup, was installed at the helm of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A 1997 documentary, *Battle for the Minds*, tells the story of one well-loved but regrettably female theology professor, Molly Marshall, whom Mohler forced out. Under the leadership of Mohler and likeminded theological conservatives, the denomination has pursued the kind of authoritarian "old time religion" that led to the 1845 split, with biblically sanctioned sexism and homophobia replacing Civil War-era slavery endorsements.

Like the Catholics, the Southern Baptists recently have doubled down on controlling women as it has become clear that they are losing their battle to ostracize gays. Last year, Albert Mohler told Focus on the Family Radio that Christians need to prepare for gay marriage. "I think it's clear that something like same-sex marriage is going to become normalized, legalized and recognized in the culture. It's time for Christians to start thinking about how we're going to deal with that."

In January, LifeWay Christian Resources, an arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, published a two-volume Bible commentary about gender roles. The commentary promotes "complementarianism," the idea that God made men and women for different purposes. If you couldn't guess, the purpose of women is home-

making and childbearing. Men are made for marital, social, political, economic and spiritual leadership. Complementarianism is Jim Crow in the gender realm, a desperate last-ditch attempt to ensure that straight white males keep dominance over *somebody*. To date, it continues to have broad appeal among Southern Baptist members.

The Southern Baptists are staking their institutional future and finances on the idea that old time patriarchal heaven-and-hell religion still has a market and will for some time to come. In their choice of a new name, they have made clear how they intend to compete for mindshare in the coming decades: with better and more aggressive marketing of their traditional theological product. The Great

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Commission refers to a set of New Testament texts that mandate proselytizing. Quotes vary slightly from author to author, but they are always composed as words spoken by the resurrected Jesus to his disciples. Here are a couple examples: Matthew: *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* (Matthew 28:19 NIV) Mark: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.* (Mark 16:15-18 NIV)

It's not a given that Bible-centered Christians should make these passages about proselytizing, belief and

baptism the cornerstone of their faith. Some New Testament texts advocate a very different set of priorities. In one place, Jesus says in graphic terms that hell is for those who fail to tend the needy and ill (Matthew 25:31-46). Elsewhere, he suggests that worldly riches mean a person is living outside God's will (Mark 10:17-25). When asked which is the greatest of the Hebrew commandments, Jesus says that the Torah and Prophets can be summed up very simply: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22: 26-40).

Over the centuries many Christians have made these teachings the center of their faith and religious practice. The result is a spiritual life centered on simplicity and service. A Christianity centered on the Great Commission, by contrast has the following defining features:

1. **Every member is a part of the sales force.** Great Commission Christianity is first and foremost about recruiting, because membership is top priority. The Great Commission brand says that the most important thing churches can do is recruit more converts. Overseas medical services, inner-city food banks, even [friendship](#) –all of these can be smart marketing, but they should be a means to an end, conversion.
2. **What is sold is a package of exclusive truth claims.** A focus on outreach necessarily goes hand-in-hand with a certain kind of theology. The recruiting efforts would be pointless if there were many paths to God. The message of the recruiting is that there is only one path to God: being cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Interspiritual or interfaith perspectives are wrong, and adherents need to be wooed from their misguided beliefs to the Righteousness.
3. **The measure of a spiritual person is right belief.** In this case right belief means something like: *You deserve hell; Jesus died for your sins; accepting him as your savior will get you to heaven.* Buddhists may believe that compassion is the heart of spiritual practices. Modernist Christians may

center in on the words of the Great Commandment: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Priorities like these simply don't work with the Great Commission strategy; they are too inclusive.

**4. Other religions and denominations are competitors, not partners.** The Great Commission is a competitive strategy; and in fact successful conversion activities often are described as "winning" souls. Creating heaven here on Earth might require interfaith teamwork. By contrast, salvation through right belief is an individual affair, and those who believe they are saved and headed for heaven tend to get grumpy if someone suggests that there is no hell.

After failing on the great moral questions of the 19th and 20th centuries—full personhood for blacks and females respectively—the Great Commission rebranding effort inadvertently shows the world how little Southern Baptist leaders have learned from two centuries of ethical slumming. Mind you, the Great Commission strategy has been a winner for some mega-churches, and

proselytizing is strongly correlated with the growth in minority sects like Scientology and Mormonism.

In past centuries, religions could capture mindshare through conquest, which is how Christianity spread through Europe and how Islam spread through India. Competitive breeding was baked into both Catholicism and Islam because it offered some additional advantage.

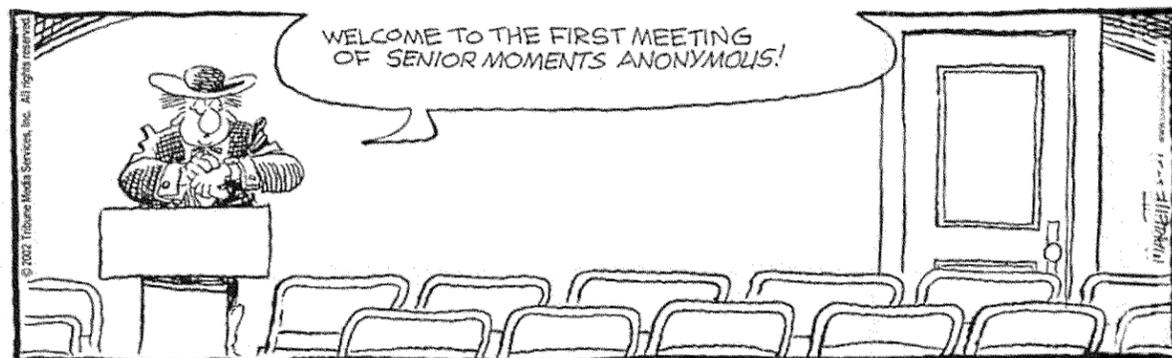
*Whether they win or lose from the standpoint of re-filling church pews and bank accounts remains to be seen.*

But in the last century, the primary mode of competition among religions has been evangelism. In other words, the Southern Baptists have placed their bets on a strategy with some history of success.

Whether they win or lose from the standpoint of re-filling church pews and bank accounts remains to

be seen. What is regrettable, either way, is that by choosing to be competitive they have once again pitted themselves against the moral arc of history. Whether humanity can flourish in the 21st century will depend largely on whether we can move beyond competition to collaboration. Population growth, resource depletion and weapons technology have carried us to the point that there are fewer and fewer "winnable" competitions. Humanity desperately needs to find common ground in our shared moral core and dreams for our children. Just as they did on the questions of slavery and the full humanity of women, the Southern Baptists have positioned themselves as moral dead weight, which is a loss for us all.

*Valerie Tarico is a psychologist and writer in Seattle, Washington, and the founder of Wisdom Commons. She is the author of "Trusting Doubt: A Former Evangelical Looks at Old Beliefs in a New Light" and "Deas and Other Imaginings." Her articles can be found at [Awaypoint.Wordpress.com](http://Awaypoint.Wordpress.com). This article originally appeared on AlterNet. ■*



**Attribution:** In the Spring issue of Christian Ethics Today the text of Angie Wright's sermon "All God's Children are Immigrants" did not include citations, including a shout out to the work of Ben Daniel in his book, *Neighbor*, published by John Knox Press which inspired the author's thinking.

## Southern Baptist Decline

By Martin E. Marty

The two "big kids on the block" of American denominationalism are making front-page and prime-time news this early summer in ways which crowd out other stories of events and trends in most other groups. Only the Mormons are in competition for the spotlight right now. The two churches which are hefty enough to throw their weight around are the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention (a.k.a. "Great Commission Baptists"). Most of the headlines are unwelcome in the eyes of their public relations agents and the hearts of most serious members, but there they are. We do not even need to remind readers of what these churchly involvements in politics, scandal, etc. are. (P-s-s-t: but *do* notice that the Southern or Great Commission Baptists, their denomination born in slavery, did elect their first African American president in the bad-news weeks.)

Through all the decades-long travails of sects, cults, confessional bodies, dissenting and minority denominations, and more, people could always look at the big two and gain confidence in the knowledge that those two, with their millions, knew what they were doing. Critics of what went on in moderate and mainline and liberal church bodies could always point to these two as models: They are doctrinally firm, conversion-seeking, and not wishy-washy as the others are. So, what do we make of current trends?

*Sightings* is not announcing anything new when we mention that Catholicism, apart from its Mexican (etc.) masses, mirrors most trends of the Protestant decliners. Sociologist

Everett Hughes many decades ago said something like "everything that can happen sociologically has already happened in the Catholic Church." Non-Hispanic Catholicism has "happenings" to match social trends in Mainline Protestantism.

The Baptists of the Southern/Great Commission persuasion were supposed to be exempt from (largely) white-Protestant-wide downward trends. Yet in convention in recent days, they announced declines in membership every year of the past five, with more

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decline most recently. You can be sure that leadership will work strenuously to reverse trends, and one may hope with them that they will recover, but . . . Google, or use any search instrument on your computer, and type in "declines" and pair it with the names of churches such as UCC, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, Reformed, United Methodist, Disciples of Christ, and on and on, and you will not lack data about decline. Link almost all of these with their more conservative acronymic partners, e.g., RCA/CRC, ELCA/

LCMS, PCUSA/PCA, etc. and you will find the word "decline" easily. These bodies were looked to as potential winners by church growth experts because they blew against the Zeitgeist with their own spirit, were staunch and not flabby, counter-cultural, God's own people in conflicts. Yet, while not all of them have declined as much as their more moderate counterparts, they also have not been able to resist cultural trends which work against them.

This is not the day to isolate all the trends affecting all the groups, but they include the demographic along with so many more. It *is* the day to suggest that they are demonstrating that there is no place to hide from cultures named "millennial" or "youth" or "pop" or "consumerist" or any other one might name. One does not have to be an ideological "declinist"—I refuse to be one, and I have plenty of company—to know that by amassing the stories of decline one can paralyze or, perhaps, awaken and nudge. ■

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## Update on the Death Penalty

By Fisher Humphreys

### Introduction

Across the years *Christian Ethics Today* has published some excellent articles on capital punishment. I will mention just four which I found helpful. They are “Capital Punishment: An Open Letter” by Curtis Freeman (1998), “The Death Penalty” by Millard Fuller (1998), “Karla Faye and Capital Punishment” by Joe E. Trull (2001), and “Prophetic Challenge to Capital Punishment” by Cody Sanders (2008). In this article I hope to provide a brief update on the death penalty worldwide together with some brief reflections on the principal arguments for and against the death penalty.

### The Current Situation

On July 3 the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, called on all member states to abolish the death penalty (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42382&Cr=Human>).

His call is in keeping with the fact that the worldwide trend is away from the death penalty. In 2000, 31 countries carried out an execution. In 2011, 20 countries did. According to Mr. Ban, about 150 countries have either abolished the death penalty or are no longer practicing it.

But almost a third of the world's nations still have the death penalty. China executes hundreds if not thousands of people a year, more than all other countries combined. In 2011 the countries other than China with the most executions were Iran (360), Saudi Arabia (82), Iraq (68), and the United States (43). The United States is the only G-8 country with the death penalty. In North America and Europe only two countries have the death penalty, the United States and Belarus.

However, the trend in the United States is away from the death penalty. In 2000, 38 states had the death

penalty. In 2012, 34 states have it. In 2000, 224 persons were sentenced to death in the United States. In 2011, 78 persons were sentenced to death. In 2000, 85 persons were executed in the United States. In 2011, 43 persons were executed (for the statistics in these two paragraphs, see the links at <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/death-penalty/us-death-penalty-facts>).

### Arguments for the Death Penalty

Last year, an outstanding political

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*There is no convincing evidence that the death penalty serves as a deterrent.*

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leader in my state told me that the death penalty is something about which good people differ. I agree. There are thoughtful and honorable people on both sides of this issue, and they all have reasons for their convictions.

Those who support the death penalty say that some people do things so awful that they deserve to die. They point out that executing these people prevents them from harming anyone else. They believe that execution is a deterrent which reduces the incidence of violent crimes. Some say that it provides comfort to the victims of violent crimes and to their families and loved ones. Some Christians believe that the Bible teaches that we should execute criminals.

I know that some good, thoughtful people believe these things deeply. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced.

I agree that some people do things so awful that, if society follows the understanding of justice known as *lex talionis* (“life for life,” Exodus 21:23-

25), they deserve to die. But society does not have to follow that understanding of justice. It is all right for a society to treat people better than they deserve. God does that with us all. It's called *grace*.

It's true that executing a criminal prevents the criminal from killing again. But that can be achieved with imprisonment, too.

There is no convincing evidence that the death penalty serves as a deterrent. A 2009 survey of about 500 police chiefs—who ought to know—found that even though most of them support the death penalty, 57% of them concede that it does not deter violence because most people who commit violent acts rarely consider the possible consequences of their violence (see <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/CostsRptFinal.pdf>).

Some people seem to find comfort in the execution of those who murdered their loved ones, but others do not. Some family members of murder victims work to abolish the death penalty (see <http://www.mvfr.org>).

### Arguments against the Death Penalty

I find the arguments of those who oppose the death penalty much more convincing.

One compelling argument is that sometimes innocent people have been executed (<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/05/yes-america-we-have-executed-an-innocent-man/257106/>).

Another is the presence of racial and economic bias in the administration of capital punishment ([http://www.ali.org/doc/Capital%20Punishment\\_web.pdf](http://www.ali.org/doc/Capital%20Punishment_web.pdf)).

Another is the concern of social conservatives about giving government the authority to administer the ultimate punishment (<http://sojo.net/>)

(continued on page 30)

## Health Care: The Endless Debate

by David Sapp

On June 28 the Supreme Court of the United States upheld the Affordable Care Act by a 5-4 margin. The divided court reflects a country dangerously split on health care and a host of other issues.

On the particular issue of health care, we have become not only divided, but confused. We are confused about the necessity of government involvement in health care. We are confused about what to do about the growing lack of affordable health care. We are confused about how to take care of the poor in these circumstances. We are confused about the nature of our economic system, rendering us ineffective in trying to devise acceptable solutions to the economic problems of health care.

Our discussion of these issues has yielded little light. A few days ago I googled “right to health care.” I got the usual million or so links. I read a few. Interestingly, the ones I selected were all editorials that concluded emphatically: “There is no right to health care!” The opinion pieces employed all kinds of reasoning -- ideological, economic, political, and more. But not one of the pieces utilized a single shred of *moral* reasoning.

Likewise, a few days ago, I heard a truly impressive speech by one of the lawyers who argued against the Health Care Bill before the Supreme Court. He reiterated the arguments he had made before the Court, and stated his opinions about the consequences of their ultimate decision. I had heard and read his arguments before but, as I listened, I was struck that his argument was basically a legal argument and not a moral one. I am not criticizing him. That was his job, and would be the job of any good lawyer under the circumstances.

So far, we have been making decisions about health care with little ethical reflection about the moral issues

which underlie the decisions we are making. This is no way for a great nation to process such profoundly important matters.

With the controversy raging around us, we might do well to set aside for the moment our feelings about Obama-care and the role of government, and reflect at least briefly about the biggest underlying moral question: Do people, by virtue of being born, have a right to health care? My answer is “yes,” and here is why.

Healing is a gift of God. He endowed nature itself with the ability to heal. He put natural healing processes in the human body, healing agents in plant and animal life, and ingenuity and compassion in the minds and hearts of human beings. He has placed the responsibility for administering healing and making it available largely on the shoulders of human beings. In other words, human beings are responsible to God for how his health care resources are used.

For whom did God intend gifts of healing? Well, for whom did God intend the air? For whom did God intend the water he placed on the earth? For whom did God intend the sunshine? We can easily see from nature that God intended all these gifts for all his children. God did not intend for advanced health care to be available only to those who can pay for insurance, or only for Americans, or only for Westerners. God intended it for all and gave human beings to the responsibility to devise systems in which his intention of grace could be fulfilled.

The Bible attests to this understanding even though there was no health care available in ancient times that was comparable to what we have today. When life and death matters are involved, the Bible comes down squarely on the side of life. The right

to food, for instance, is crystal clear in Holy Writ. From the creation narrative on, the Bible makes clear God's grace for the sick. Stories of healing abound in Old Testament and New. In Exodus, God delivered the Israelites from the plagues. In the Psalms, the poet celebrated his deliverance from sickness at the hand of God. In the Gospels, Jesus healed people everywhere he went. The Bible makes it clear: There is a right to health care because there is a right to live. There is a right to health care because every human life is sacred.

I am convinced, however, that the discussion about whether there is a right to health care, in the current environment leads nowhere. In this land of the Bill of Rights (championed, by the way, by Baptists), “rights” has become a tainted word. Speak the word “rights,” and many people have apoplexy. “Rights?” they say. “What about responsibility? America has nearly been ruined by people demanding their rights.”

Let people take responsibility for themselves. The world, my friend, doesn't owe anybody anything.”

Never mind that the Bible itself strikes a balance between rights and responsibilities. For example, Jesus clearly believed that poor Lazarus is entitled to share food from the rich man's table; but Paul also says, “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10, NIV). The people of Israel were required to do nothing for their manna in the wilderness, but they were taught again and again to work. Rights and responsibilities are not mutually exclusive.

The existence of human rights may well need to be rethought by believing people. Our nation is founded on those rights and our faith speaks loudly about their divine source. At the moment, however, we are a culture without consensus on the existence of

those rights. For Christians, however, this should not matter in thinking about health care. Even without the existence of any rights, Christians have a clear mandate to care for others.

Christians are commanded to go to the sick, to care for the needy, to bind up the wounded. What biblical Christian could possibly join Ayn Rand in saying greed is good or selfishness is the way to justice? On the contrary, believers are clearly and uncompromisingly commanded to take serious responsibility for the needs of others.

Take, for example, the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the roadside. A priest and a Levite pass by and ignore the man's need. Finally a Samaritan, who has every reason to be hostile to the poor man, stops to help. He binds the man's wounds and takes him to a doctor. Not only that, he pays the man's doctor bill. Finally, Jesus asks his hearers which of the three passers-by was neighbor to the man who had fallen among thieves. The answer, of course, was stunningly clear: The Samaritan was the neighbor. The enemy was the friend.

Jesus did not focus on the victim's right to healing. That was presumed. Jesus focused instead on the obligation, the duty, to provide for others, especially those who cannot provide for themselves. The priest and the Levite were obligated to help accord-

ing to the laws and the faith commitments of their people, but they did not help. The Samaritan, on the other hand, had no such religious or legal obligation to help a Jew, but he was obligated by love. The law of love, the parable plainly says, is higher than any human law or custom which obligates us to each other.

The focus of the parable, then, is on the obligation of love to render care. We are stewards of God's gift of healing. We are obligated by love to render at least as much care as the Samaritan. The parable considers no other factor -- not the worthiness of the victim, not his foolhardiness in traveling alone on a dangerous road, not whether he was grateful or repaid the Samaritan. Jesus simply never mentioned such considerations. In my experience, we bring up such matters most often when we are trying to rid ourselves of our moral obligations.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is not the only place in which the Bible makes this obligation clear. In Deuteronomy, for instance, God commands: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deut. 15:11, NIV). This is a strong imperative.

But here as well, the believer is not bound to feed the hungry because the hungry have a right to it. Rather, the believer is bound to feed the hungry because he or she is obligated by the

command of God, because he or she is the servant of a God who loves all people. This is part of our responsibility under the covenant God has made with us. I believe it is clear that the hungry have a right to food, and the sick have a right to health care, but we are obligated to help them whether they have rights or not. We are obligated to help them because this is the commandment and the heart of God.

Or again, in Matthew's Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, the same principle appears. The sheep are separated from the goats in the Last Judgment. Those who have ministered to human needs are blessed because they have rendered help to Jesus himself. But, they ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" (Mt. 25:37-39, NIV). And the King answered, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt. 25:40, NIV). This is no discussion of the human rights of the needy. This is a discussion of the responsibility of believers. ■

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## Strangers in Our Home

By Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

For the past decade my family and I have lived in a hospitality house that welcomes guests who show up at our door as if those guests were Christ. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," is engraved on our door knocker. But strange as our guests may be, we've learned over time that many of them have a good deal in common. Indeed, prison is such a common factor in the stories of folks who become homeless that we see how it draws a line between people, separating us like sheep from goats. There are, on the one side, those for whom prison is unimaginable, unreal. On the other side are people for whom prison has long been part of their life. Most of us are on the first side. Here at Rutba House most of the guests who show up at our door live and move and have their being on the other side.

Early one Sunday morning, I drove to the Durham Correctional Center to pick up Greg. Greg had spent the past 16 months at a state prison, working overtime in the kitchen so he could get out six weeks early. A few days before, the Department of Corrections transferred him to this local minimum security facility. Greg knew the place well. He had been released from there before.

"Feel good to be out?" I asked as we walked through the gate of the chain-link fence, nodding good-bye to the guards. "You know it does," Greg said, his back straight and his eyes fixed on the horizon, smiling from ear to ear. (I remembered another friend who once scrambled to roll down the window when I picked him up from another minimum security prison. He was not being released, just let out on a four-hour pass, a taste of freedom meant to prepare him for his return to society. He held his hand out the open window as I drove along the state highway at

55-miles-per-hour. "You don't know how good it feels to touch free air," he said, relishing this little taste of freedom.)

As good as it might feel to walk through the gate, hop in a car, and put a hand out in the breeze, guys like Greg know from experience that leaving prison does not mean you get to leave this part of your life behind -- not even if you are released from

*Guys like Greg know from experience that leaving prison does not mean you get to leave this part of your life behind.*

among the 2.4 million Americans locked behind bars on any given day. Three times that many people are still under criminal justice control after prison, checking in with a parole officer who has the power to carry them back to jail any time they do not pay their monthly fees. That's three percent of the adult population in this country. In a neighborhood like ours, someone from every family is among that population.

Even after walking out of prison with time served as Greg did, a released prisoner will have to check the "convicted felon" box on every job application, face the debts and ruined credit that piled up while he was locked away and figure out what to do with relationships that were cut off because of a decade behind bars four counties away.

Maybe it was because he was our neighbor's son or maybe it was because he was so likable, but it did not occur to me when we welcomed our first guest coming home from prison that we were crossing some

kind of line. When a reporter called to ask if we had seen his record, we began to understand that some people consider living with a convicted felon as peculiar, offensive and dangerous. Years later, after we had welcomed a dozen ex-cons into our home, we still received an occasional anonymous email saying, "You should think of your children. You should think of our children. You're not just endangering yourselves. You're putting us all at risk."

As much as such a note would make my stomach clench—as angry as I am that this "neighbor" would not talk to me directly, would not even sign his or her name—I know that they are right about this much: There is a risk in welcoming people coming out of prison. You might come home after a Thanksgiving celebration to find that all the laptops in your house are gone. You might learn, only years after it has happened, that another guest's social security number was stolen—that he had been listed for years as a dependent on the tax return of someone he never knew. When you learn these things, you pray with everything in you that worse has not happened—that people you love are not carrying unspeakable wounds. But even when you have contemplated the worst, you will know this: These dangers are not peculiar to the formerly incarcerated. Yes, the risk may be greater with some people than others, and you would be foolish not to account for that. But the dividing line between good and evil does not run just between those who have been to prison and those who have not.

Living with guys like Greg has taught us that people are not that different, even though the prison experience separates people marked as "criminal" from the rest of society. The condemned are essentially not very different from the rest of us.



While in college, I read a line from Dostoyevsky: “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” Here at Rutba House, I suspect that Dostoyevsky was right because he, like so many of the people we host, actually spent time in prison. From the inside, prison is a particular sort of window on our world.

Befriending people on their way out of prison turns out to be its own way in. “Recidivism” is the official label given to the tendency of people who have been in prison to end up there again. Most efforts to curb this tide are focused on helping individuals make better choices. Greg got arrested for stealing a paint brush one night and I thought: *Why the heck would he steal a paint brush?* But recidivism is about more than stupid choices. There are plenty of places where picking up a neighbor’s paint brush when drunk would not land you in jail. But for Greg, he faced 12 years in prison as a “repeat offender.” *Twelve years for a paint brush?*

Greg’s first letter to us after this event, as every friend’s first letter does, told us which visitation day Greg had been assigned. Each inmate at our county jail can have four people on his visitation list at any time. Once the inmate is sentenced to serve time in prison, the limitations are similar. A visitor cannot be on more than one inmate’s list unless they are immediate family, so Leah and I usually sign up for different inmates. Eventually, everyone in our little community of a dozen or so people write or visit someone who is locked up. We call their names at morning prayer. We send them books. When we can, we try to see them. These are our small steps across the prison line.

It is not a single relationship, nor any one particular incident, but rather the cumulative effect of living back and forth across the prison line that begins to affect us. Whatever abstract thoughts any of us once had about prison are distilled by the difficult stories of people we cannot ignore -- people who have eaten at

our table and gone on vacation with our families. Yes, they can be frustratingly selfish and annoying. Some of them have done terrible things; and as much as they regret it, they might well do them again if they were put in the same situation. These people are not angels. But they are people, for heaven’s sake.

Once our friend Marcia called to tell us about a guy named Al whom she met through a re-entry ministry that she helped to start. She had made it her personal mission in life to stop gun violence in our town. Rarely do you find in a determined activist someone with a heart as big

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### *The condemned are essentially not very different from the rest of us.*

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as Marica’s. She is the sort of mother who, having raised her own children, now sees them in anyone who has a need. Al is just wonderful, she tells us, but he is sharing a room with a guy who is using drugs. She would just hate to see anything happen to him. Is there any way we might help? It is hard to say no to Marcia. Matt made room on his top bunk and Al moved in with us.

Marcia was right: Al’s great. He cleaned up after himself, was always courteous, helped out around the house, even landed a job a couple of miles away within walking distance. When I saw Marcia at a meeting downtown, I told her she had sent us the model guest. “Oh, I know,” she beamed. “Isn’t he just wonderful?”

How did a guy like Al end up in prison? One night at our kitchen table, he told me the story. As a young black man in New York City, he had struggled to find work that would pay the bills. He kept his eyes open, of course. Al wasn’t lazy; he was always on the move. But his options seemed so limited. A friend told him about a place where he could sell a lap top computer for

\$100, no questions asked. “Are you serious?” he asked. Al’s the type of guy who notices things. “Every coffee shop in Manhattan is *full* of lap tops.” Al started making a good living off college students who thought they could just run to the bathroom real quick while writing a paper at Starbucks.

After several months of this, Al was sitting in his apartment one night, looking at a lap top he had stolen that day, when he noticed the sticker on the bottom had a phone number to call for technical assistance. He dialed the number, asked a few questions about hardware, and then asked, just as casual as that, “Where are these things made, anyway?” He jotted “Research Triangle Park” on a piece of paper, and his wheels started spinning. The next day, when Al took the lap top to his buyer, he asked him, “What would you give me if I brought you a whole truckload of these?”

“Same price,” the guy said. “A hundred bucks apiece.”

Al had a plan. He worked on it for several months, recruiting friends he could trust to help him and doing his research to find out what security was like at this factory and who would be in the building when. He rented a U-Haul truck, picked up his three co-conspirators, and drove to North Carolina, arriving at the factory late on a weekend night. Wearing a ski mask and wielding a hand gun, Al burst into the factory, got all the employees together in one office, and tied them to their chairs.

In the chaos of these intense minutes, a middle-aged African-American woman started freaking out. She was screaming, “Please don’t kill me,” and starting to hyperventilate. Al could not help but think how much she looked like his mother. He wheeled her to the side, pulled back his ski mask, and said, “Look at me. I ain’t gonna hurt you. Please just sit in this room until we’re gone. The police will come in a few minutes and let you out.”

She quieted down, Al and his

friends loaded up the truck, and in 30 minutes they were headed north on I-85, blowing off steam and laughing about how they’d pulled off the heist of their lives with hardly a snag. Just after they crossed the New Jersey line, Al noticed the blue lights in his rear-view mirror. He looked down and saw that he was speeding. “All right, everybody stay calm,” Al said. “I’ll handle this.” But before he could stop him, one of his buddies was rolling out of the passenger side door, jumping the guard rail to make a break for it. The officer called for back-up, and it was game over. Al went to jail and ended up doing 10 years in prison.

I felt myself leaning forward, caught up in the story. “*What an idiot his friend was,*” I thought to myself. “*They almost got away.*” But this is not an action movie. It is Al’s life. He had 10 years to tell and re-tell the story, and he had the timing down just right. It is entertaining. “You should write a novel,” I told him, and he smiled. But the fun of telling his story is bitter-sweet because Al also knew it cost him everything; he is marked for life.

I could not help but think about the crazy things I did as a kid. Al is a convicted felon; but he is more than that, just as all of us are more than the stupidest thing we ever did. At our best, we don’t forget that. At our best, we can even tell the stories and laugh.

Knowing people like Greg and Al moved us to start Project TURN (Transform, Unlock, ReNew) in North Carolina prisons. The idea was simple: People who have never been to prison can cross the line by

taking a class once-a-week, behind the walls, with incarcerated folks as their classmates. The prison system agreed that these sorts of peer-to-peer relationships might help with re-entry for inmates who are being released. We hoped so, but we also suspected that getting people from the outside in is also a way to begin to imagine some alternative to our system of mass incarceration. We launched the program in 2007 and now host classes each semester at two state and one federal institution. (You can learn more about Project TURN at [www.newmonasticism.org/turn.php](http://www.newmonasticism.org/turn.php).)

One afternoon, Julie, a woman who

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### *These people are not angels. But they are people, for heaven’s sake.*

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had been incarcerated for 20 years, a woman who had taken a number of our classes, learned that she was being paroled. Of course, she knew that her release date was near. She already had a spot in a re-entry program that would start in three months. But the word she had just received was that she has to leave...that day.

Our system of mass incarceration is not set up to care for people like Julie. Though nothing of this exit plan had been communicated to her until that day, it was all within the law. No one had broken any rules. She was expected to get in a car, ride to the county of her infraction, a place she had not

visited in 20 years, and get out on the street corner. This, according to the system, should be good news. Julie was going home early.

But it was not good news. Julie’s particular case was complicated by the fact that, due to the nature of the plea that she agreed to sign when she was taken to jail after reporting her husband for child abuse, Julie is registered as a “sex-offender.” This does not mean that she sexually abused her child or that she would ever think of hurting anyone else. But it does mean that her name is on a list that makes everyone think she did. It means she cannot live in a household with children or within 1000 feet of a school or daycare facility. That eliminates all of our houses in Walltown, as well as most of the friends we know who are willing to welcome prisoners into their homes.

Fortunately, we found two roommate graduate students who had taken classes in our prison program and were willing to welcome her into their home until permanent arrangements could be made. But Julie is an exception. Julie is someone who had folks advocating for her. She is, as much as anyone, a reminder of the problem of the prison line. But she and those women who were ready to welcome her are also an interruption to our broken system. They are a sign that something new becomes possible for those who cross the line. Christ is indeed present when we welcome the stranger—present in the peculiar new community that forms, which is the body of Christ. ■



# Eye on the Sparrow

by Beth Norcross

When I read about the dire impacts of global warming, I think about Howard Thurman. This might be perplexing to those more familiar with Thurman as the author of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, a book Martin Luther King Jr. was said to carry with him wherever he went.

While Thurman is well-known as a theologian, prolific writer, mystic, seminary professor, and religious leader, few realize that—well before environmentalism became mainstream—Thurman articulated a complex theology of the “original harmony of creation,” a harmony that human action had significantly disturbed. As he lamented in 1971, “Our atmosphere is polluted, our streams are poisoned, our hills are denuded, wildlife is increasingly exterminated, while more and more [humanity] becomes an alien on the earth and a fouler of [our] own nest.”

From the early years of his life at the start of the 20th century, Thurman’s faith was formed in intimate connection with the natural world—specifically, the Halifax River and northeast Florida woods and coastline, where he wandered and played as a boy. Thurman’s relationship with nature deepened when a heartbreaking event estranged him from organized religion. When he was seven, his beloved father died quite suddenly. The family pastor refused to conduct a funeral because his father was not a regular churchgoer, and a traveling minister who officiated at the service took the opportunity to expound on the dangers of dying “out of Christ”—to the small boy’s wonderment and rage, “preach[ing] my father into hell,” as he later recalled.

In contrast, the young Thurman found solace and comfort in nature’s seasons and cycles: Here I found, alone, a special benediction. The ocean and the night

together surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances.

Sitting against an oak tree, he would “reach down in the quiet places” of his spirit, take out his “bruises and ... joys, unfold them, and talk about

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*Throughout his career, Thurman would return to nature as a means of expressing his personal theology.*

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them ... know[ing] that I was understood.” As an adult, Thurman began to understand that it was God that had been stirring there; when “the boundaries of my life spilled over into the mystery of the ocean and the wonder of the dark nights,” it was a “cosmic religious experience.” In young Thurman’s sense of intimate belonging to something deeply personal and intuitive as well as grand and external, he experienced both the immanent and transcendent God. He found the quiet space necessary for his spirit to meet the Spirit.

Throughout his career, Thurman would return to nature as a means of expressing his personal theology. In his meditation “Surrounded by the Love of God”—published in 1953, but first developed as part of his ministry at the pioneering interracial Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, which he began to co-pastor in 1944—he wrote: The earth beneath my feet is the great womb out of which the life upon

which my body depends comes in utter abundance. There is at work in the soil a mystery by which the death of one seed is reborn a thousandfold in newness of life ... it is order, and more than order—there is a brooding tenderness out of which it all comes. In the contemplation of the earth, I know that I am surrounded by the love of God.

While Thurman was decidedly not a pantheist (one who believes that God *is* nature), he did see God’s spirit, God’s very breath, in each and every one of God’s creatures. As he wrote in his 1963 book *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Jesus saw and taught that:

God breathed through all that is: the sparrow overcome by sudden death in its flight; the lily blossoming on the rocky hillside; the grass of the field and the clouds, light and burdenless or weighted down with unshed waters; the madman in chains or wandering among the barren rocks in the wastelands; the little baby in his mother’s arms ...

As his reputation as a theologian and religious leader grew, Howard Thurman carried with him his deep connections to the earth community.

Although he did not link the oppression of African Americans to the oppression of nature as explicitly as do present-day figures such as James Cone, in *Disciplines of the Spirit* Thurman drew a connection between the way the dominant culture treated nature and the manner in which that culture treated other humans. He explored that connection in a passage in which, inspired by South African writer Olive Schreiner, he affirmed that Christianity has misunderstood Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 10 that a sparrow does not fall to the ground “apart from your Father.” While this passage is certainly meant to be reassuring to humans, Thurman, like Schreiner, believed that Christians too

often forget its literal premise: God cares deeply for the sparrow.

“Christianity as it has developed since the time of its founder wrongly limits the ethical concept of reverence for life to human personality,” Thurman wrote, where “personality” means that which culture defines as fully human. This limitation, he pointed out, leaves the door open for the mistreatment of *both* the nonhuman creature and of the person to whom the dominant race does not ascribe full humanity: “Deny personality to [certain] human beings and the ethical demand no longer obtains ... People who are victimized by injustices must be defined as being, in Kipling’s phrase, ‘the lesser breeds without the law.’”

To illustrate his point, Thurman told the story of a young white girl for whose family he worked when he was growing up in Florida. One day, as she kept re-scattering the leaves he was raking, he threatened to report her to her father. In retaliation, she pricked young Thurman with a pin. When he drew back in obvious pain, the little girl was taken aback, saying, “That didn’t hurt you really! You can’t feel.” By denying Thurman’s full humanity, the girl gave herself permission to do him violence.

In a meditation published in 1951, Thurman articulated the connection between the oppression of nature and that of humans in the evolution of human power. In early times, Thurman wrote (in the gendered-language convention of the day), “man learned how to use a club in self-defense and thus to extend his control over an area farther than his arm unaided could reach. When he learned to throw this club with precision and power, it meant that the control of his environment was farther extended.” Thurman then traced the increasing sophistication of human power over the earth from club to “bow and arrow, gunpowder, gasoline engine, through various kinds of vehicles and machines up to ... the atomic bomb.” The challenge then to “modern man is to match spiritual and moral maturity with the

amazing power created by ... mastery over nature. He has learned a part of the secret of energy by unlocking the door of the atom, yet he continues to be moved by prejudice, greed, and lust!” The use of power began as a means of controlling one’s own environment and quickly expanded to the violent domination of other peoples.

Howard Thurman could not have foreseen the extent to which humans have used their power to unravel the original harmony of creation, most notably by significantly altering the climate of the planet. However, his most famous book—*Jesus and the Disinherited*, published in 1949—offers poignant insights as Christianity attempts to come to grips with the impacts of climate change on the earth’s most vulnerable. In this work, Thurman made the compelling case that, despite Christianity’s historical use by dominant powers to affirm their dominance, “the basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed.” Jesus stands, side by side, with those who have “their backs against the wall.”

As I reread this book today, it is hard not to think of the farmers of Bangladesh, struggling to grow rice on flooded fields, or the villagers of Shishmaref, Alaska, an Indigenous community being forced to relocate from its ancestral lands due to the melting permafrost. It’s hard not to think of the nearly 10 million people in the Horn of Africa who face a severe food crisis, brought on by a prolonged drought. It’s hard not to think of the “climate gap” in the mainland United States, where the poor are bearing a disproportionate burden of climate change impacts. As temperatures soar and sea levels rise, Thurman offers hope to the oppressed, as well as a distinct challenge to those of us who, by our own actions and inaction, have become the oppressors. Thurman reminds us that Jesus was, first and foremost, a poor Jew who suffered the indignities

of the mighty Roman Empire, not to mention from the religious authorities of his time. As such, he speaks, always, on behalf of those who are afflicted, on behalf of those who suffer at the hands of the powerful.

While he boldly confronted the dominating powers of his time, Howard Thurman also was an unwavering believer in the potential of humankind to alter the course of history when we are open to the leading of the Spirit. More than 60 years ago, Thurman wrote the following words in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in the face of the pernicious racism of the mid-20th century: “The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of [humans] which is committed to overcoming the world ... For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline,” he or she “can live effectively in the chaos of the present the high destiny of a [child] of God.” Today, Thurman’s words offer renewed hope as we confront the seemingly overwhelming challenges of our overheating Earth home.

Howard Thurman’s understanding of God, and the human relationship with God, was molded in large measure by his intimate connection with the natural world. It was here that he saw the Creator’s original intent for creation—harmony and unity. It was here that he found the divine in the complex entanglement between all creatures, human and non-human. That unified, loving community, which binds us all together, holds our primary hope for redemption and renewal. ■

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# “Guns Don’t Kill People . . .”

By Marie M. Fortune

“Guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” This National Rifle Association (NRA) answer to any suggestion of gun control is only partially true. The fact is that men with guns kill people. At least this is what the headlines tell us.

Whether the target is a Congresswoman, a crowd in a theater, a wife and kids, students at a university, a gynecologist providing health care for women, or people misidentified as Muslims, men with guns continue to wreak havoc at every turn. Unless we are willing to talk about guns and about gender, we will only be able to stand by and watch this combination create the same predictable results. The implications for violence against women are significant. “American women who are killed by their intimate partners are more likely to be killed with guns than by all other methods combined. In fact, each year from 1980 to 2000, 60% to 70% of batterers who killed their female intimate partners used firearms to do so.”

My grandfather taught my brother and me to hunt which meant learning to use guns safely. My grandfather had no gender bias in this area: girls as well

as boys needed to learn to hunt. I am grateful for the life lessons I learned in handling a .22 rifle. Neither my brother nor I chose to pursue that portion of our cultural heritage. But that experience is light years away from having access to an AK-47 or a semi-automatic pistol whose only purpose is to take out as many people as possible before anyone can stop you.

## Women who fear men’s violence are told to arm themselves in self-defense.

When I was in Iceland last year lecturing on violence against women, I asked if it was common for people to have guns. My host, the Dean of the School of Theology, gave me a puzzled look and said, “No, why would we need guns?” Indeed. She went on to explain that hunting rifles were legal for people in rural areas who actually hunt for food. And then she added that they average one homi-

cide per year in a country of 300,000 people. That’s right: one per year.

It’s not that women aren’t into guns. In fact gun manufacturers and the NRA using fear tactics, target women as consumers. The irony of this is not lost: women who fear men’s violence are told to arm themselves in self-defense which means that more guns are available in homes throughout our communities where women and children find themselves victims.

I realize that a white supremacist or other bigot, a person who is mentally ill, or a batterer whose wife and children have left him can still find ways to cause harm and mayhem. But shouldn’t we make it a little harder for them?

A civilized society should be able to have a civilized conversation about what the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We need local and national leadership who have the courage to take us there. ■

*This article appeared on the blog of Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune, Faith Trust Institute, [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org) on August 08, 2012 and is reprinted here with permission.*

# Will We Respond to Fear or Our Better Selves?

By Colin Harris

It seems like it has been a long journey from Jim Crow to the Party of No, but one wonders if it has really been very far.

There was a time when a good Baptist deacon would teach Sunday school the morning after wearing a white sheet on Saturday night to terrorize his neighbors with a burning cross.

There was a time when ordinary citizens stood by quietly while some of their neighbors were frightened into submission by very legal policies that restricted their access to public services and relegated them to serving the needs of a privileged few.

We celebrate our exodus from that Egypt of bondage to our own prejudice and have repented on many levels for our insensitivity and complicity with such injustice.

Prophetic voices we now claim as heroes called us as a people to live out of the deeper resources of our souls and change our society toward a better reflection of who we are.

I recently re-read Gov. George Wallace’s 1963 inaugural address, remembered mostly for its famous line: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!”

It is a splendid piece of rhetoric, by a master of the language, designed to assure and appeal to those who felt threatened by a tyrannical government bent on imposing the will of a few “communist” (read liberal socialist) elitists against the will of the American people.

The message was clear: The status quo of Jim Crow must be preserved at all costs.

But we are beyond all that now,

aren’t we? Aren’t we?

We don’t lynch people any more out of retaliatory passion as a lesson to those who would step out of line and as a way to bring “closure” to a violent injury, do we? No, we make sure we do it according to the law that says we can.

We don’t relegate any of our neighbors to second-class status just because it is legal to do so, do we? We don’t break up families without regard for their well-being, do we? No, we do it because they are “illegal” and our law says we can, and should, to protect our way of life from such people.

We don’t deprive people of needed care and support just because it is likely to reduce the tax advantage of a small percentage of very wealthy people, do we? No, we do it because tax laws allow such tax breaks, and we are committed to not raising taxes under any circumstances.

The glaring line of the current deficit debate is as clear and forceful as that of Gov. Wallace nearly 50 years ago: “No tax hikes for the job creators, today, tomorrow, forever!” The status quo of the Party of No must be preserved at all costs.

Masking our prejudices with legalities that make it possible to kill people quite legally on the basis of retaliatory passion, to break up families by deportation, to deprive millions of adequate health care because the profit margins of the insurance industry require it, to weaken the collective voice of working people, to empower corporate interests to buy more political influence without limit or disclosure – these are the cancer-

ous and crippling immoralities of our time that hide beneath the disguising sheets of “acceptable” rhetoric.

As we wring our hands at the looming deadline for raising the debt ceiling, perhaps it would be good for us to listen again to those who call upon us to look beneath the ideological white sheets that disguise our new prejudices.

We need to see our common humanity in a new generation of the human struggle. Red, blue, black, white, rich, poor, documented, undocumented – the distinctions that bring security and comfort to some, while leaving many in insecurity and despair, fade when we look through the lens of the faith we claim.

Is it time to be less concerned about our bond and credit ratings and more concerned about our soul as a national community?

Jesus told a story about a man who was prosperous and focused all his attention on building bigger barns to hold his wealth. When called upon to account for his life, the verdict was harsh: “Thou fool! ... What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”

Let us hope that the brutality and suffering of that exodus a half-century ago will not be necessary again for us to hear and heed the voices that are calling us to our better selves. ■

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# 'No Midnight Long Remains': The Evangelical King and the End of Nonviolence

By Kristopher Norris

Martin Luther King often described the situation under segregation and periods of the civil rights struggle as “darker than a thousand midnights.” King’s analogical eloquence signals his sense of urgency for the task before him, one requiring both careful strategy as well as moral conviction. In this paper, I will argue that King’s conception of nonviolence embodied both of these dimensions, that is, a consequentialist/pragmatic logic and a deontological urgency, with their confluence pointing toward a deeper, more radical, even evangelical end—reconciliation and the creation of the beloved community.

When analyzing King’s conception of nonviolence, one must attend to both its form and nature. By form, I distinguish his conception of nonviolence as nonviolent resistance rather than nonresistance, a position often espoused by other Christian pacifists. For King, this distinction in form is manifest in taking direct action against injustice while not submitting to any unjust law: “an act of massive noncooperation” (“Stride Toward Freedom,” 429). By the nature of nonviolence, I point to the orientations of nonviolence mentioned above: expedient political strategy as well as Christian moral imperative. As King positions himself fully on the side of nonviolent resistance in terms of form, he seems to interweave both consequentialist and deontological notions of the nature of nonviolent resistance throughout his speeches and books. This correspondence is echoed in his condemnations of violence: “Violence is not only morally repugnant, it is pragmatically barren” (“Showdown for Nonviolence,” 65). It is this dual vision of the nature of nonviolence that is addressed in this paper.

These two perspectives of nonviolent resistance as tactic or moral imperative are often posited as oppositional, and often King is described as prescribing nonviolence solely for expedient political reasons. I contend that in King’s thought they designate two congruent dimensions of King’s vision of the end of nonviolent resistance – that is, the building of reconciliation and community. I will take each dimension in turn, focusing primarily on two texts: his short essay “Nonviolence and Racial Justice” and his longer work, “Stride Toward Freedom,” complementing these with notations from other articles and speeches. After exploring these two perspectives, I will demonstrate the ways in which their confluence points to King’s deeper vision of the beloved, or gospel, community—noting the evangelical impulses that animate his vision and practices. I conclude by attending to three underlying theological suppositions that function to unify the two ‘natures’ into this deeper vision. In reading King’s nonviolent theology evangelically I follow Peter Goodwin Hetzel who, in arguing against those who frame King merely as a Niebuhrian realist or mainline liberal, or a progeny of the black church, contends that King’s theological vision was shaped by all three dimensions: the black church, liberal theology, and evangelical theology. He claims, “King cannot be fully understood without attention to the evangelical features of his theology, practices, and identity.” In agreement with Hetzel, I attend in this paper to the evangelical dimensions of an area of King’s theology and practice largely neglected by Hetzel: King’s nonviolence.

## Nonviolence as Tactic

In one of his early articles,

“Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” Martin Luther King outlines five points concerning nonviolence as a “method” to bring about better racial conditions:

1. It does resist.
2. It does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship.
3. It is directed against the forces of evil rather than against the persons caught in those forces.
4. It avoids external violence and internal violence of the spirit, because it is based on love.
5. It is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice (paraphrased, 7-9).

While his first point concerns the unquestionable distinction in form, the second evidences King’s conception of the nature of nonviolent resistance as an effective strategy for socio-political change—to win over the opponent. I will label this dimension nonviolence-as-tactic. This method of resistance, King suggests, is not an end in itself but rather “means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent” (“Nonviolence,” 8). On one level, nonviolent direct action is a pragmatic tactic to elicit certain changes in the political system in the struggle for freedom and equality for the oppressed. King’s nonviolent tactics, appropriated from Gandhi’s success in India, were employed to create “pressure,” or crisis, situations that would force oppressors to reckon with their own actions and attitudes, as well as demonstrate their sinister character to any sympathetic “onlookers,” especially those with political power. These crisis situations incorporated economic and social elements, and directed them, nonviolently, toward a psychological objective—

fostering a sense of shame or outrage to engender socio-political change. For instance, the nonviolent tactics employed during such activities as the Montgomery bus boycott and Selma marches revealed those in opposition to be the “instigators and practitioners of violence” King would suggest, in an intentional effort to garner attraction and support to the cause of freedom (“Stride,” 484).

During his reflections upon receipt of the Nobel Prize, King confirmed that nonviolent action was “a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation” (“Nobel Prize,” 225). Often calling nonviolent resistance a “potent weapon,” King asserted that its purpose was persuasion of the oppressors and powerful to “see the error of their approach and come to respect us” (“Stride,” 447, 485; STL, 150; “Our Struggle,” 81). This ironic invocation of violent imagery reinforces the pragmatic nature of nonviolence for King; he was no “doctrinaire pacifist,” he would assert (STL, 152). His “realistic pacifism” was an expedient political tool that accomplished much in the first 10 years of the movement. King summarized the tactical methodology of the movement: “The nonviolent strategy has been to dramatize the evils of our society in such a way that pressure is brought to bear against those evils by the forces of good will in the community and change is produced” (“Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” 58), alluding to the student sit-ins as examples of the strategy’s “dramatic” expediency. Despite the abundance of methodological rhetoric, however, this perspective does not exhaust King’s conception of nonviolence.

## Nonviolence as Moral Imperative

The third and fourth points regarding nonviolence in “Nonviolence and Racial Justice” suggest that King viewed nonviolent resistance as more than strategy. His foundation of nonviolence on a “love ethic”—defining this agapic love as disinterested, “neighbor-regarding concern for others”—entails a deeper moral conviction

undergirding the tactical notions presented in the previous section. King understood that while tactical operations of nonviolence may break through the legal barriers of Jim Crow, something must “touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right” (STL, 37-38). Throughout speeches and sermons, he continually describes nonviolence as a refusal to hate. In claims that seem to demarcate the aims of the movement from its motivation, King avers that nonviolence “in the truest sense” is not a strategy that one uses only due to its expediency; it is “a way of life”

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*King asserted that its purpose was persuasion of the oppressors and powerful to “see the error of their approach and come to respect us”*

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for people who believe in “the sheer morality of its claim” (“Stride,” 450; “An Experiment in Love,” 17). This second nature of nonviolence for King is nonviolence-as-moral-imperative, even Christian moral imperative. This underlying moral imperative is not an abstract notion of the good or utilitarian calculation of right action; it is a confessional proposition of nonviolence as a “simple expression of Christianity in action” (“Stride,” 450).

As many have argued, the movement, as far as King was concerned, was a Christian movement supported by the churches and operating out of a Christian moral imperative to love both neighbor and enemy. In this sense, nonviolence was a sign of faith. While acknowledging its pragmatic purposes, King’s perpetual call to refuse to hate oppressors revealed the basic rationale: Jesus’ command to “Love your enemies . . . that ye may be children of your Father which is in heaven.’ We are called to this dif-

ficult task in order to realize a unique relationship with God.” He continues, “We must love our enemies, because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness” (STL, 55). This confessional language frames nonviolence in Christological terms, that is, faithfulness to the commands of Christ. This eucharistic language situates nonviolence as a means of communion with God. King describes it as a Christian ascetic practice, a beatific experience, even a form of sanctification.

Far removed are we now from mere tactical calculations. King seemed to shift between pragmatic rhetoric of consequentialism and deontological notions of obedience to the call of Christ, imparting a potent Christian element onto the work of the movement. While there is no doubt King remained firm in his belief in the success of nonviolence, these texts express the sustaining quality of this moral imperative, even in moments of fluctuating practicality. King seems to enter one of those moments in his “Remaining Awake” speech: “There comes a time when one must take the position that [nonviolence] is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but he must do it because conscience tells him it is right. I believe today that there is a need for all people of good will to come with a massive act of conscience and say in words of the old Negro spiritual ‘We ain’t goin’ study war no more.’” (277)

King’s understanding of nonviolence is not contained by its pragmatic or its moral nature; he often waxes seamlessly between them. The two dimensions flow together into a constructive body that entails more than the sum of these two parts. In fact, King claims that these two elements must always work toward growth (“Stride,” 488). The confluence of these two natures in King’s discourse envisages an end beyond pragmatic, political success or deontological obedience—political expediency is not for the sake of expediency in the same way that moral obedience is not for the sake of obedience. Together they serve a deeper,

more proleptic—dare I say, more evangelical—end, and it is to that I turn.

### The Gospel Community

“Nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as the regulating ideal,” King wrote. “In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method” (“Stride,” 447). Spirit and method collaborated toward one unified end in King’s mind. In a sense, one could say both natures, as I have described them, were methodological—that is, they were structured means toward the achievement of one over-arching end. That end, however, lay beyond political gain and beyond the moralism of obedience. “The end,” urges King, “is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community” (“Nonviolence,” 8; “Stride,” 487). The five points of nonviolence articulated in “Nonviolence and Racial Justice” point toward this proleptic goal—proleptic because in King’s mind the beloved community is not a purely eschatological reality; it can be both now and not yet. By crafting his second point to suggest that nonviolent resistance aims to win the friendship and understanding of the opponent, King does not intimate this “winning” is for material gains, but speaks of true, spiritual conversion. The aim of nonviolence and its love for the enemy is conversion, reconciliation, and community—to “transform oppressors into friends” (“Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” 141). It is evangelical.

King utilizes familiar evangelical language in these descriptions, portraying nonviolent resisters as “witnesses to the truth” who “wear you down” by their example of suffering and “appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process” (“Stride,” 485). This conversion, King expresses, is the precondition for reconciliation—“it reaches the opponent and so stirs

his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality” (“Stride,” 487). Conversion is the result of Christ’s command to love neighbor and enemy and, as the nonviolent resisters witness to Christ’s “love ethic,” they will win their oppressors over to their side. That is the beginning of the beloved community, Christ’s beloved community. In fact, agape does more than merely concern itself with others, as I previously indicated. “Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community,” he insists, “to go to any length to restore community” (“Experiment,” 19-20). King’s ultimate vision of agape is to cultivate community, to found the beloved community between black and white, rich and poor, on Christ’s self-giving

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### *King’s ultimate goal: reconciling the opposing forces of racism and oppression into a Christ-centered community of agapic love.*

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love and call to love others as he loves.

King’s conceptual fabric of the movement and its practices are woven around the person and work of Christ, and those who practice nonviolence are “witnesses” to Christ. The beloved community is not a progressive, socio-humanist development; it is a Christo-centric creation based on Christ’s call to love one another. In other words, it is an evangelical community founded on a gospel ethic—an ethic of good news to the poor, oppressed, and powerful alike. King incorporates this language of gospel in his description of the integration of the two natures of nonviolence in their unified aim of reconciled community. “The gospel of Jesus Christ,” he describes, “is a two-way road. On the one side, it seeks to change the souls of men and thereby unite them

with God; on the other, it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed” (STL, 102). This Gospel community has peace as its means and end, and thus, is the “presence of justice and brotherhood . . . which is the Kingdom of God” (“Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience,” 51). In sum, King conceives of nonviolent resistance not solely as an expedient tactic and not solely as a moral injunction. These two streams converge and point to King’s ultimate goal: reconciling the opposing forces of racism and oppression into a Christ-centered community of agapic love. King weaves these strands seamlessly throughout the discourse of his speeches and sermons to construct this Gospel vision of community.

### Unifying Elements

Having demonstrated the way in which King weaves the tactical and moral notions of nonviolence into a coherent directive for reconciled community, we are still left with a question regarding the underlying theological resources King used to craft a unified vision. In other words, what theological presuppositions allowed King to unify the strategic and deontological forces of nonviolence? Throughout his speeches and publications on nonviolent resistance, King alludes to three underlying presuppositions that act as unifying agents in his thought: his understanding of cosmic morality, redemptive suffering, and divine participation. I will conclude by exploring each of these briefly in turn.

In the midst of the darkest midnights of the movement, King often repeated the claim, “The arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice” (“Our God is Marching On,” 230; and others). This conception of a deep, cosmic morality oriented toward justice underlies many of King’s claims and constitutes his fifth point of nonviolent resistance: It “is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side

of justice” (“Nonviolence,” 9). This cosmological certitude that permitted King to send himself and others into the perilous situations he encountered (and engendered) entailed more than an abstract universal morality or providence; rather the “loving purpose” of God placed within the structure of the universe absolute moral laws to ensure that “truth will ultimately conquer its conqueror” (STL, 152, 111). In other words, even in the dark midnight of the struggle there is a theological and providential rhyme and reason to the world, and truth ultimately overcomes the forces of evil. God created the universe and instilled within it an orientation toward justice. “God is on the side of truth and justice” (“Nonviolence,” 9), and God’s “cosmic companionship” struggles alongside the oppressed (“Facing the Challenge,” 142). This theological and moral orientation incorporates yet another Christological element as King suggests this moral bent toward justice reverberates in the “triumphant beat of Easter drums” (“Nonviolence,” 9).

King’s conviction in the moral orientation of the cosmos, based on God’s solidarity with the oppressed and Christ’s triumphant resurrection over worldly powers, enables his belief in redemptive suffering. The realization that “unearned suffering is redemptive” is a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, “to accept blows from the oppressor without striking back” (“Experiment,” 18). As threats and retaliatory attacks mounted against the movement, King developed a stronger conviction that suffering may bring about greater goods. If God is in control of the moral order, then God can certainly deliver profound goods from the midst of suffering. With this conviction, King viewed ordeals as opportunities to transform the self and heal those involved in tragic situations (“Suffering and Faith,” 41). “The nonviolent say that suffering can be a most creative and powerful social force,” he suggests (“Love, Law,” 47). Though challenged recently by many womanist and feminist ethicists, for

King, transformative suffering reflects a point of congruence between the pragmatic and imperative perspectives of nonviolence, a congruence further rooted in King’s notion of humanity’s participation with God in the work of justice.

King’s confidence in God’s cosmic morality and faith in the redemptive value of suffering cast the end of segregation as an ordained inevitability, but not a cause for complacency. He calls the belief “that God will cast evil from the earth even if man does nothing except sit complacently by the wayside” a fallacy as untenable as the belief that humans can do everything for themselves (STL, 132, 133). Both precepts are founded on a deficiency of faith. Instead, King understands God and humanity as co-workers in

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### *God created the universe and instilled within it an orientation toward justice.*

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the struggle to speed up the inevitable demise of Jim Crow (“Facing the Challenge,” 143). Human beings participate with God on the side of justice through the gift of God’s agapic love. “Both man and God,” King professes, “made one in a marvelous unity of purpose through an overflowing love as the free gift of himself on the part of God and by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man, can transform the old into the new and drive out the deadly cancer of sin” (STL, 133). As Karen Guth notes, nonviolent love is a ‘creative practice’ for King—creating a new type of community and re-creating a redeemed world. In this way, the tactical purposes of nonviolent resistance are caught up in the redemptive purposes of God and made into “one marvelous unity of purpose” to redeem and reconcile oppressors and oppressed in the unified community of Christ. Through their participa-

tion, nonviolent resisters become “instruments of God” and allow “God’s energy” to enter and direct not only their actions, but their souls as well (STL, 135). This participatory imagery ascribes a new theological dimension to the work of the movement that breaks down the delineations between pragmatism and faithful obedience, incorporating both into the deeper purpose of God’s redeeming work. Human agency becomes oriented toward participation in divine work. Humans become, in the words of Guth, “co-creators who work with God to carry on God’s process of creation.” In the end, nonviolent resistance becomes more than a means to socio-political accommodations and more than adherence to moral duty. It is the divine work of reconciliation, actualized in the building of Christ’s beloved community in space and time through participation in the redemptive activity of God. The two natures of nonviolence are united in a type of incarnational community that seeks nothing less than the redemption of the whole world.

Even when the prevailing darkness of midnight obscures God’s purpose, the difficulties of the struggle suggest that suffering for the sake of love only perpetuates oppression, and one must confess, “It is difficult to be faithful,” King points to a new reality on the horizon. In the confusing darkness of midnight, King suggests the nonviolent work of the movement is, in fact, Gospel work. God is on the side of justice, and he proclaims that if his listeners will participate with God in that struggle, the beloved community is a possibility—a community founded on the love of God, embodied in the converting and reconciling acts of nonviolence, and manifest in the hope of the coming dawn. “The most inspiring word that the church may speak,” King preaches, “is that no midnight long remains. The weary traveler by midnight who asks for bread is really seeking the dawn. Our eternal message of hope is that dawn will come” (STL, 66). ■

# Don't Let the Day Pass: The Tragedy of Joe Paterno

by John Galloway Jr.

I first became a Penn State and Joe Paterno fan toward the close of the 1971 season. My late father-in-law called one afternoon from his home in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was serving a church on the west of Rochester, and took the call on the wall phone of the manse kitchen. It turns out he was calling me to say, "My boys are playing your boys on Saturday afternoon."

Since I doubted that his Tennessee Volunteers were likely to be playing my Princeton Tigers, I asked him what he was talking about.

"Tennessee's playing Penn State."

"So what?" was about all I could come up with on the spur of the moment. It was not enough.

"Penn State are your boys," he said.

"No they aren't," I said. "I did not go to Penn State. I have never cheered for Penn State. I have never been on their campus. I have no interest in Penn State and I live in New York."

"Yes, but you grew up in Pennsylvania. My boys are playing your boys."

As we talked, regional issues crept into it and I felt Lee and Grant were about to have a rematch.

So you can well imagine that when the game was played that Saturday afternoon, I was a Penn State fan, wanting the Lions to devour the Volunteers. And it was a great Penn State team with Franco Harris and Lydell Mitchell and an awesome defense. They had rolled over all their opponents that year. But it proved to be one of those days when everything went wrong and Tennessee won handily.

As I was trying to figure out what to say to my father-in-law, I noticed that the Penn State coach was not beating up on his players. He was encouraging them, patting them on the back, being gracious. "What kind of coach is this? I wondered. It was my first close look at JoPa.

After that game, the sports media

declared northeastern football dead. Now my regional pride was feeling offended. When Penn State trounced Texas in the Cotton Bowl, I was delighted. When I moved to south central Pennsylvania the next year, I became hooked. I began making contributions to the Nittany Lion Club. Church secretaries were advised to tell prospective brides that I had conferences out-of-town on certain dates in the fall (season tickets). I had a few chances to meet Joe and Sue Paterno. And, yes, I had my very own life-sized cardboard likeness of JoPa. And, today, amid all of this, I still have a real fondness for the guy. As the current cliché has it, "He did in fact do a lot of good."

So what happened? I am writing this in the middle of the afternoon, a few hours after the NCAA came down on the PSU football program with devastating penalties. It is a time when all of us wonder how a man we so admired, and still find much about him that we admire, could have failed so miserably on the Sandusky issue. The same question can be asked about the other leaders of the University. And for us who think of ourselves as basically moral people who follow Jesus, is there anything in this we can take away from it that might inform our own decision-making in our futures?

I think there is and, among other things, it is this: Mr. Sandusky's sick behavior had not only been going on for a long time, but the coach and the administration at Penn State had known about it for a long time, and that is the point. At some moment, well over a decade ago, Joe learned that Jerry Sandusky had been accused of very, very inappropriate behavior with boys. From what I can gather, there was an "Ah ha" moment when Joe had to conclude that the rumors were true. What one does at a moment like that

will determine the future. One does not have a tomorrow to which one can defer today's decision. One must decide today and live the rest of one's life bound by that decision.

In the Red Letters of Matthew 6, Jesus is quoted as saying, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Matt 6:34) A part of that profoundly wise teaching is the need to tend to today's issues today. If we do not take sometimes difficult steps for morality today, it will only multiply the difficulty to a point of near impossibility tomorrow. Failure to be responsible today can box us in tomorrow. I believe that is what happened to Joe and it can happen to any one of us.

The fact that Joe had the information and did not act on it meant that when he received word that Sandusky was at it again, he realized that he could not turn in his now former defensive coordinator without himself being revealed. Once he opted for inaction, he was guilty of a cover-up. He could no longer turn in Sandusky without turning himself in at the same time. And it compounded with each new circumstance. When a graduate assistant saw that awful sight in the shower, it was already too late to report it without bringing down the head coach and the football program.

The lesson for us is that not only are today's troubles sufficient for today. If we do not tend to the moral demands of today, tomorrow will hit us with problems that may be impossible. ■

*Dr. John Galloway is a retired Presbyterian minister and graduate of Princeton University and Princeton Theological Seminary. A frequent guest preacher, Dr. Galloway is the author of three books, the latest of which is Ministry Loves Company, a guide on how to be a parish minister. He is also the executive director of Tony Campolo's missionary organization, EAPE. This article first appeared on RedLetterChristians.com on Tuesday, July 24th, 2012 and is used with permission.*

# What is Freedom?

Reflections of women at Amani Ya Juu\*

With the celebration of Independence Day in the United States, we asked some women at Amani, Kenya, to reflect on what freedom means to them. They shared with us from their different backgrounds. Some are Kenyan, and others are refugees working in Kenya.

**Freedom as Peace:** Freedom is being free from a certain problem. When I think of freedom, I think of being at peace with my inner self. I feel I am the most free when I forgive someone who has done a bad thing to me. I just feel free. *Martha Nekesa (Uganda)*

**Freedom as Independence:** To me, freedom is the feeling that I can say or do something. It's when I am able to do what is in my feeling. I feel the most free when I can do something on my own. *Millicent Achiong (Kenya)*

**Freedom from Sin:** Freedom is when you let go of your bad past, when you confess and repent of all

your sins. It makes me feel joy and peace, and keeps me going forward and not moving backwards. I feel the most free in those moments when you know Jesus Christ is freeing you. *Grace Samwel Sebishahu (Tanzania)*

**Freedom to Create & Work:** For me, freedom is the ability to make a decision and do what I want in peace. When I think of freedom, I think of the feeling of being motivated to create new activities. I felt the most free when I came to Kenya; I discovered many things which gave me the freedom to start working hard as I was feeling safe. *Diane Nzitonda (Burundi)*

**Freedom from Fear:** Freedom is when you can talk about your burdens with people listening to and understanding you; it's walking without fear, and it's looking at your leaders without experiencing discrimination. The purest form of freedom is truly having peace in my heart. Those moments in which I have felt

the most free are those when I am living at peace with my neighbours, and when I don't have problems in my house or family. *Janviere Mukamana (Rwanda)*

*\*Amani ya Juu (meaning "higher peace" in Swahili) or Amahoro ava Hejuru (in Kinyarwanda) is a sewing-marketing-training project for marginalized women in Africa, many of whom have escaped from sectarian war in their native lands. The main center is located in Nairobi, Kenya, with sister centers in Rwanda and Burundi. The women involved in the project are learning to work together through faith in God who provides a higher peace that transcends ethnic differences. Amani itself portrays a unique picture of diversity with women coming from Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia as well as other African countries. [amaniafrica.org](http://amaniafrica.org) ■*



# Living as a Broken Vessel with Chronic Pain

By Kerry Smith

I am a chronic pain sufferer. Looking at me, you would think I am fit and successful. “Fit” is something I am working on, and successful is another definition altogether. I had earned both a bachelor’s and master’s degree, been a church planter, a campus minister, a denominational church starter strategist, and an award-winning professional artist. I was climbing the ladder of success when all of that dramatically changed without warning in early December 2001.

Our family went to a local Christmas tree supplier to choose the “absolute best Christmas tree” during the Christmas season of 2001. After much deliberation and strong negotiations from my four-fold family, each with differing opinions, we chose a tree. After paying the cashier, the tree was netted and carted to our minivan to load on top for the trip home. I reached down, in my normal manly way of “I got this” fashion, and picked up the tree by the netting. To my surprise the netting broke. I attempted to reposition myself to keep the tree from slipping from its netting. Without any warning my back popped, and I almost hit the ground. I had ruptured a disc in my lower spine. In so doing I started on a journey of finding ways to manage something known as chronic pain that continues even today.

Over the course of the next 11 years, I underwent 11 procedures and surgeries. Since that December day I have, in roller coaster fashion, sought to find a way to exist, to live without pain, and to function. I have not been entirely successful. Trying to come to grips with the purpose of my pain and redream a dream of a greater purpose has exhausted me and my family emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. The

journey has taken me to some awfully dark places.

The American Academy of Pain Management reports that 116 million adults in our country alone are chronic pain sufferers. That is over one-third of our population! The academy estimates that worldwide over one billion adults suffer with chronic pain! This number does not include children.

There are two categories of pain: acute and chronic. Most everyone at times experiences acute pain such as a headache, a sprained ankle, a broken bone, or other types of issues that cause pain that medicine or therapy can relieve. However, chronic pain may have no known starting place, and the problem is that nothing seems to help, and it becomes a paralyzing, unresolved, lifelong riddle.

I am a creative man with visionary capabilities. I am a minister and a professional artist, having done art work for over 30 years. I helped finance mine and my wife’s seminary educations by selling my art work. I became a full-time artist in 2003 when a denomination chose not to renew my contract -- partly, if not mostly, because of my back issues.

I have tried as best I could to provide for my family. At times I have created art pieces while lying in bed on my back with wood chips falling all around me. Concerns about college for my children, health benefits and retirement stared me in the face regardless of my condition.

Fortunately my wife, Karen, earned her degree in 2004 and started work as a campus minister. Through her ministry I have, in some small ways, lived out my calling. However, my soul yearns to change lives; but chronic pain has, in many ways, robbed me of that ability.

When I paint a picture, sculpt a piece, or carve a bird, I do so with

a vision of what I think the subject should look like. As a minister I work to create my ministry to reflect my vision of the Kingdom of God. (Don’t most ministers?) However, my chronic pain clouds and robs that vision of creativity.

Though I am not always able to see clearly the purpose of my journey with chronic pain, I have described it through art. I created a bronze piece titled Release!—a dove pulling out of the muck and a chafe. It reflects my desire to be released from the throws of pain. My painting Found! represents a deep spiritual meeting that I had with God following one of my carpal tunnel surgeries. I sank into darkness, standing alone, lost in a field. God came and walked with me. (You may see both pieces on my website, [www.kerrysmith.me](http://www.kerrysmith.me))

The pain, the darkness, and the prejudgment of what I am able to do career-wise is not unique to me. Chronic pain is an epidemic affecting every institution within our society, including the local church. I am not sure the church knows what to do about it.

The reaction of the religious world to my condition has both puzzled and pained me. I believed that the church would always recognize my calling and creativity in ministry. Never did I imagine that it would turn its back on me as I battled the effects of chronic pain. Nor would I have thought that it would close me out because of my physical condition of which I had nothing to with the exception of being a hard-headed, Christmas tree-throwing man!

One religious institution asked me to take disability. I did not. So, within a few months, it refused to renew my contract. While serving as an interim minister in a local church, the personnel committee considered docking my salary because, in its

opinion, I was not “fulfilling office hours.” Never mind the good work I was doing nor the agreement we had put in place that allowed flexibility for me to manage my pain. My physical condition created problems for continued employment and was a factor in my not receiving a permanent position.

These kinds of discussions and decisions present ethical dilemmas for all concerned. Can one who struggles with chronic pain minister at a level the congregation is comfortable with? Can the congregation graciously create a schedule and a space for pain management for a minister who suffers from chronic pain? Can the congregation be supportive of the minister’s family while the minister lives with the pain? Unfortunately, in not only my case, but in the lives of many congregations and ministers, the implications and effects of chronic pain are creating distressing results to both entities. Does it have to be this way? How can the goodness of Christ and the justice of a living God flow both ways?

Some institutions now look at me not by what I can contribute to God’s Kingdom, but how my chronic pain will potentially hinder the work of the Kingdom. Even though I have the giftedness to make profound differences in the lives of many, I am prejudged because of my physical condition. The hurt is indescribable. The pain I feel from such discrimination is, at times, as great if not greater than the actual physical pain I endure daily.

Yet ministers are not alone in this struggle. The church has responsibilities and concerns for working with ministers who experience a lifelong struggle with pain. The church must be flexible in working with a minister with chronic pain in order for the minister to be effective. However, the congregation may not understand what chronic pain means. It may have difficulty accepting the flexibility of time off due to pain, doctor’s visits, or the uncertainty of long-term ministry. If terminated it means a

loss of purpose, a loss of call, a loss of revenue and subsequent financial discomfort for the minister. This begs the question of how the church can deal constructively and compassionately with the minister suffering from chronic pain and how the minister can minister effectively to the congregation that has called him or her. It is a difficult and complex issue with which to struggle.

Dr. Hulitt Gloer, the preaching chair at Truett Seminary, is a stroke survivor. He is working to overcome his disability while working in an institution that has been more than gracious in working with him and his physical limitations. In his sermon, Otherwise, he describes the Apostle Paul’s physical limitations and how he effectively ministered in spite of the debilitating problem that plagued him. And it was precisely his limitations which, according to Dr. Gloer, Paul used to express great healing and hope. They were not hollow words, spoken by someone who had gone untested by life’s trials. His words, impacted by the grace of the living God, were given to people who would need them “otherwise” as they experienced suffering. For in Paul, he had witnessed great suffering in almost every way.

Dr. Gloer observes that Paul even took the idea of brokenness one step further. He used the biblical idea of a clay pot used to hold a treasure. Families placed their treasures in clay pots and buried them in the home. The only way to retrieve the treasures was to break the pots. Paul related the clay pot to our human bodies and how inside our body or vessel a great treasure is housed. Dr. Gloer, a person physically broken from a stroke, talks about the richness of life he has grown to appreciate through his own brokenness. “Otherwise,” we would never experience the great treasure people with pain or disabilities possess without dealing with their brokenness.

If the church can understand the brokenness of ministers suffering from chronic pain as revealing a great

treasure and respond to them accordingly, it will present unique ministry opportunities. But to see the minister as a broken vessel rather than the treasure found within is to miss the entire message of what Paul is saying as well as missing a whole realm of ministry. Some of the most beautiful people are those who have been broken and who demonstrate their richness as a result of their brokenness and their reliance on the living God. That is what the church needs to see.

Can you name the churches who have a ministry to pain sufferers? Probably not. Do you see chronic pain patients in your church? More than likely, not. Why? Because it hurts too bad to sit in a pew, to be touched, to stand, to walk down long halls, and to have to talk about how you are doing or not doing on that particular day.

One hundred sixteen million people suffer with chronic pain. One hundred sixteen million vessels are broken and many long to be contributing members of the Kingdom of God through the ministries of a local church. Pay attention to those who are chronically pain-broken; create systems and ministries for them that are grace-filled; view them not as broken pain filled vessels, but as the great treasures they are.

Here are ways to assist your understanding of people suffering with chronic pain as found in the Facebook support group “Chronic Pain.”

1. People who are dealing with chronic pain seem unreliable. (We can’t count on ourselves!) When feeling better, we promise things (and mean it). When in serious pain, we may not even show up.
2. An action or situation may result in pain several hours later, or even the next day. Delayed pain is confusing to people who have never experienced it.
3. Pain can inhibit listening and other communication skills. It’s like having someone shouting at you, or trying to talk with a fire alarm going off in

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

the room. The effect of pain on the mind can seem like attention deficit disorder. So you may have to repeat a request, or write things down for a person with chronic pain. Don't take it personally, or think that they are stupid.

4. The senses can overload while in pain. For example, noises that wouldn't normally bother one, seem too much.
5. Patience may seem short. We can't wait in a long line or endure a long drawn-out conversation.
6. Don't always ask, "How are you?" unless you are genuinely prepared to listen. It just points attention inward.
7. Pain can sometimes trigger psychological disabilities (usually very temporary). When in pain, a small task, like hanging out the laundry, can seem like a huge wall too high to

climb over. An hour later, the same job may be quite doable. It is sane to be depressed occasionally when you hurt.

8. Pain can come on fairly quickly and unexpectedly. Pain sometimes abates after a short rest. Chronic pain people appear to arrive and fade unpredictably to others.
9. Knowing the location of a refuge (such as a couch, a bed, or comfortable chair), is as important as knowing where a bathroom is. A visit is much more enjoyable if the chronic pain person knows there is a refuge if needed. A person with chronic pain may not want to go anywhere that has no refuge (e.g. no place to sit or lie down).
10. Small acts of kindness can seem like huge acts of mercy to a person in pain. Your offer of a pillow or a

cup of tea can be a really big thing to a person who is feeling temporarily helpless in the face of encroaching pain.

11. Not all pain is easy to locate or describe. Sometimes there is a body-wide feeling of discomfort, with hard-to-describe pains in the entire back, or in both legs, but not in one particular spot you can point to. Our vocabulary for pain is very limited, compared to the body's ability to feel varieties of discomfort.
12. We may not have a good "reason" for the pain. Medical science is still limited in its understanding of pain. Many people have pain that is not yet classified by doctors as an officially recognized disease. That does not reduce the pain, – it only reduces our ability to give it a label, and to have you believe us. ■

## John Claypool and Wine *By Hardy Clemons*

On one occasion when his church was observing Communion, John decided to address the fact that the early Christians--and still many churches today--use real wine in the observance. In fact when Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, it was genuine fermented wine.

"There are two Greek words for wine," John said. One is a word that means unfermented wine. The other is a word that means fermented

wine. In the New Testament story the latter word is used. Jesus turned the water into fermented wine."

Standing at the door after worship, John was addressed by one of the teetotaling women in his church. "Dr. Claypool, you must be mixed up. Jesus would never have made a fermented wine for the people to drink. I just can't believe that!"

John invited the woman to come by the office that week so they could look at the passages together. She agreed and John laid out his lec-

tionaries and was all prepared for a Greek lesson when she arrived.

He explained that in John 2, the Greek word used is *oinos* which is the fermented wine. The Greek word for the wine that does not intoxicate is *ethikos*.

Now," said John, "do you not agree that Jesus did make the water into real wine?"

"Well, . . . yes, I suppose so" the woman said. "But I would think a lot more of him if he hadn't done it!" ■

## No Tide Rising: Theology, Economics, and the Future

By Joerg Rieger, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009. Paperback pp. xii + 192 pp. \$20.00. ISBN 978-0-8006-6459-6)  
Reviewed by Michael D. Royster

As a systematic theology scholar at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, the author Joerg Rieger has consistently challenged conventional theological discourses that disregard the harsh realities of economic crisis. Rieger, Joerg, s. *No Tide Rising* addresses Western Christianity's collective underestimation in collapsing financial market's disturbing effects on humanity, and its theological implications. Rieger warns readers that economic instability and pessimism will inevitably escalate without a substantive individual and institutional shift in trajectory. The text implicitly denounces the ideology of micro-level charity as sufficient, while refraining from structural adjustments as an essential part of Christianity's role in actively transforming society as an agent of justice. In five concise chapters, Rieger dispels the myth that faith and religion function independently from economics, while exposing how the 'sub-middle class' suffers from religion's perpetuating the myth.

The first two chapters present the civic dogma of "the rising tide" as a 19<sup>th</sup> Century socially constructed scam, which has undergone globalization and recent exposure. Rieger critiques the "middle class church" as having collective guilt for contributing to a broad ecclesiastical culture's unsustainable false sense of economic security. The author effectively expresses the state of the church from a marginal perspective to a greater extent than most relative systematic theological understandings. Such

perspective entails a belief that the Horatio Alger myth of the universal accessibility of upward social and economic building contradicts reality. Furthermore, Rieger draws attention to the over-spiritualization of theological praxis which removes the racial economic disparity from the dialogue.

Chapter three focuses on the trend of mainline churches becoming increasingly influenced by the permeation of "prosperity gospel" elements. The belief in a benevolent "invisible hand" in control of free markets reinforces social-Darwinist ideological thought both inside and outside the church, such that direct market intervention becomes discouraged during crisis. Under such social and religious tenets, the overt expression of a lack of faith in the free market or its rhetorical references equates to civic blasphemy. Rieger stresses that "if religious people want to talk about how faith can impact their use of money, they first need to understand how the use of money impacts their faith." (79) The author further argues that adherents to mainline Christian culture collectively deny that capitalism contains the basic elements of religion. Classical sociological theorist Emile Durkheim would argue that capitalism contains rituals, a moral community, and a set of beliefs. Rieger further argumentatively opposes the conventions of "invisible hand" ideology with an additional reference to classical sociological theorist Thorstein Veblen. "Economic institutionalism, a school of economics based on the work of Thorstein Veblen, notes for instance, that the market is never a purely formal entity, yet the author finds it perplexing why the church strictly adheres to *laissez-faire* socio-religious discourse rather than develop alternatives.

In chapter four, Rieger challenges the myth that humans have the

innate will to consume endlessly and unyieldingly by giving account to the atrocities economic loss have on entire social sectors. The author is one of a growing number of clergy and theologians who hold the church and other forms of organized religion accountable for contributing to the socio-economic status quo. "Religion is frequently the ally of free-market capitalism." (98)

The fifth chapter stresses empowering the common person as compared to conventional aristocracy-like systems of social engagement which have long proposed an ecclesiastical endorsed system of unrestrained consumption and waste as the solution to social problems. Rieger further supports such claims by critiquing the truncated interpretation of Christian creeds which embrace beliefs, yet ignore the implications of the life and ministry of Christ.

Throughout the text, Rieger raises the theological issue of the problem with habitual consumption as a mean and unsuccessful attempt to fill a spiritual void. Due to human's insatiable appetites, mammon itself becomes empowered to function as the ultimate false-god. In his critique, the author takes a sympathetic approach towards "fiscally conservative" policy per se if it involves a broad commitment to justice. However, he essentially equates the economic reality of such policies as the proliferation of greed and deprivation. Such irony has been overlooked by large sectors of the American culture until recently. Rieger's bold assertions about the church and the markets involve a degree of risk due to an escalating, hostile polarization which permeates both civil society and the church.

An indigenous perspective would have further strengthened Rieger's arguments. In the long run, the relatively small fraction of the world's



population grows increasingly addicted to excessive overindulgence which also defies their self-interest due to the near-irreversible ecological destruction which results from humanity's primary materialistic resource upon self-reliance. ■

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## "Uncluttered Faith"

by John Scott (Brown Book Publishing, Dallas, Texas 2012, \$15.95 pb)

*Reviewed by Darold Morgan*

Let this reviewer recommend strongly and enthusiastically a new paperback which is one of the best volumes he has found in the current "theism-atheism" controversy which is attracting world-wide atten-

tion. What you have in this small book is a candid, fascinating pilgrimage of a man through agnosticism, atheism, and on to a vibrant commitment to Jesus as Lord and Saviour. But the heart of the book is a basic and intriguing response specifically to perhaps the world's most publicized atheist, Richard Dawkins, and his book, "The God Delusion".

That Scott's book is eminently readable is an understatement. One of the author's purposes is to put his response into laymen's language without the scientific or theological jargon that is often unintelligible to many. He uses the novel approach of addressing seven letters to Dawkins, picking up on Dawkins' major themes and responding with some very solid Christian responses to the issues he has raised. It is far from a narrow-minded diatribe. The issues raised are timely, rational, convincing, giving the searching student in this area some solid ground to aid in the

vital Christian apologetic. Scott possesses genuine rhetorical skills in his writing and philosophical approach, resulting in some very helpful approaches to an extremely important field of study.

The book is worth its price because of the author's skillful and timely use of dozens of apt quotations from multiple sources. His end notes will confirm this. Any speaker will find this quite useful as a resource. Another strength of the book is its organization with the "letter approach" as it copes with the extremely serious issues that Dawkins had raised...i.e. the Christian history of violence, God and suffering, the ascendancy of science, the rise of fundamentalism, the very existence of God, the mistakes in the Bible and, of course, evolution versus creationism.

Anyone reading this book will find that one can think almost immediately of someone they know who needs it. Please spread the word! ■

no more than 13 executions." That is, of course, vastly more than would have been spent if the death penalty were abolished and California had imprisoned its violent criminals rather than attempting to execute them. (See [http://media.lls.edu/documents/LoyolaLawReview\\_CADeathPenalty.pdf](http://media.lls.edu/documents/LoyolaLawReview_CADeathPenalty.pdf)).

These arguments are decisive for many people today. I understand that. They all seem right to me. I also understand the sense of horror some people intuitively feel when they reflect seriously about the fact that their government is executing people.

But I am trying to be a follower of the way of Jesus; so for me the decisive reason for opposing the death penalty is the gospel that Jesus

brought. Jesus said: "Be ye merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful" (Luke 6:36). I think mercy is the right way of life for individual Christians and for churches. I believe it is also good social policy. In our society we are in a position to follow Jesus' teaching about mercy. We can stop executing murderers *and* at the same time protect the public from murderers by keeping them in prison *and* at the same time not run the risk of executing innocent persons *and* at the same time save billions of dollars. I think that is what we should do. ■

*Fisher Humphreys is retired professor at Samford University in Birmingham, AL and is a member of the Board of Directors of Christian Ethics Today.*

## For Just Such a Time as This

*Patrick Anderson, editor*

A good friend of mine, while an infectious disease professor at Harvard Medical School, shared a conversation she had with a senior infectious disease scholar when the feared avian influenza was first discovered. The senior scholar gleefully exclaimed: "Here near the end of my career when I had thought there would be no more epidemics for me to help solve...we now have a PANdemic?!...I cannot wait to get to work!"

One of my favorite scenes in the movie, Patton, shows the venerable warrior sidelined from World War II despite having prepared his entire life to lead armies in war. General Patton angrily said, "The whole world is at war?!...and I am not in it?!...God will not let this happen!"

Sometimes we are faced with such momentous challenges that we cannot sit still or be silent, and we eagerly step into the fray. Although the phrase may be overused in our lexicon, we agree when we hear: "So-and-so has come for just such a time as this." The underlying meaning is that a person's skills, training and disposition

are uniquely suited for problems and issues which challenge us presently.

I believe the same sentiment is true for this journal, Christian Ethics Today. As I consider the issues we face as followers of Jesus Christ, I cannot help but be grateful to Foy Valentine for establishing this publication. Through the years this journal has had relevance in just such a time as the present.

Our society is engaged in epic public discourse on issues of human sexuality. America has public policies regarding executions of mentally disabled, youthful, and sometimes erroneously convicted criminals. More people are living below the poverty line in America than at any time since the 1960s. People are being killed in faraway Syria and in the nearby Mexican border territory. Creation itself is groaning under the weight of pollution, climate change, and destruction. Politicians lie, trust is violated by ministers and coaches and corporate boards.

In times like these we need a word from the Lord, and in the pages of this journal readers consistently find

reflections by fellow believers who take time to focus their minds and hearts and understanding of Christian faith on various issues.

Jesus faced the issues of his day head-on, face-forward. While many religious leaders took refuge behind legal pronouncements, Jesus challenged accepted religious understanding when he healed lepers on the Sabbath, cast out money-changers in the Temple, associated with tax collectors and prostitutes, stared down the stoners and oppressors, and brought love where hatred had prevailed.

In our day we need Jesus to shine through us who claim familial identity with him. "What would Jesus do?...or say?" is less a question than an indictment. I think we usually know the answer. I hope you value the content of this journal when you are both in agreement with its contents or not, when you are either comforted or aroused by something expressed.

Feel free to share its contents with others, and help us by contributing to *Christian Ethics Today*. ■

Your financial support of *Christian Ethics Today* is very important. We depend on gifts from our readers. As Bill Moyers says, "Look upon these pages as you would a campfire around which we gather to share our life experiences -- the stories, ideals, and hopes unique to our understanding of faith. **Then imagine what we lose if the fire goes out.**" Please help us keep the fire burning. Gifts to *Christian Ethics Today* are tax-deductible. Please use the envelope provided in this journal.

# 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.”

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