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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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The Most Important Election in My Lifetime

By Ronald J. Sider

Recently, I was asked to speak in chapel at a Christian high school. So I told the students I wanted to talk about Christianity and politics. Why? Because I think the 2016 presidential election will be the most important one in my lifetime. (More on that later.)

Let me be clear. Politics is not the most important thing in life. Just being the church, living out day-by-day what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus is more important than politics. But politics is still important

Politics in this election cycle has already proven to be exceedingly nasty, vicious, dishonest and depressing. So many good Christians conclude that we should just forget about politics.

That, I believe, is a huge mistake for two reasons, one practical and one theological. First, it is a simple historical fact that political decisions have a huge impact – for good or bad – on the lives of billions of people. Think of the devastation and death the world might have avoided had German Christian voters not helped elect Hitler to public office. Think of the freedom, goodness and joy that followed for tens of millions from the fact that evangelical politician William Wilberforce labored for over 30 years and eventually persuaded his colleagues in the British parliament to outlaw first the slave trade and then slavery itself throughout the British Empire.

It is through politics that country after country has come to enjoy democracy. It is through politics that nation after nation has stopped jailing and killing “heretics.” It is through politics that we develop laws that either restrict or permit widespread abortion, that either protect or weaken religious liberty, that either harm or empower the poor, and that either protect or destroy the environment.

Politics is simply too important to ignore.

The theological reason for political engagement is even more compelling. The central Christian confession is that Jesus is now Lord – Lord of the entire universe. The New Testament explicitly teaches that He is now “ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5). “All authority in heaven and on earth” has been given to the risen Jesus (Matt 28:18). Christians who know that must submit every corner of their lives to this wonderful Lord.

Since we live in a democratic soci-

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ety where we have the freedom to vote, our vote – or even our failure to vote – shapes what happens in the important arena of politics. One way Christians must live out our belief that Christ is Lord, even of political life, is to think and pray for wisdom to act politically in ways that best reflect Christ our Lord.

But that raises the question: How do we let Christ be Lord of our politics? Three things are important: We must have a biblically balanced agenda

We need a passion for truth
We need a passion for civility

First, what do I mean by a biblically balanced agenda? If you want to be truly Christian in your politics, you need to ask: What does the Bible say God cares about? When we ask

that question, it quickly becomes clear that the God of the Bible cares about both the sanctity of human life and economic justice (especially for the poor); about both marriage and peacemaking; about sexual integrity and racial justice and creation care.

In January of this year, I spoke to a large conference of hundreds of Christians in Washington at an event called Evangelicals for Life. The conference was held to coincide with the annual March for Life which calls for an end to widespread abortion on demand.

I explained that for many decades, I have believed and taught that Christians should act on the belief that from the moment of conception, we are dealing with persons—human beings made in the image of God. And for many decades, therefore, I have been a part of the movement to reduce abortion both by legislation and through supportive programs to assist unwed pregnant mothers.

But over the years, I have also been disturbed by what seemed like a fundamental inconsistency in much of the pro-life movement. Those in this movement talked a lot about combating abortion, but often seemed unconcerned when poverty, starvation, smoking, environmental degradation, racism and capital punishment also destroyed lives of persons made in the image of God. It was not an entirely unfair characterization when some joker said it looked as if we believe that “life begins at conception and ends at birth.”

It bothered me when I saw that some pro-life leaders opposed government funding to search for a cure so that people with AIDS would be able to live; it bothered me when an important pro-life senator fought to end abortion but then defended government subsidies for tobacco which destroys the lives of persons; it both-

ered me when pro-life advocates failed to support programs designed to reduce hunger and starvation and save the lives of millions around the world.

I agree with Pope Francis who said, when he spoke to Congress last year, that Christian faith teaches “our responsibility to protect and defend human life at every stage of its development.”

Because of global poverty, millions and millions of people die unnecessarily every year. Every single day, 18 thousand children under the age of five die—most of them from hunger and preventable diseases. That is comparable to 35 jumbo jets crashing every day. Many of them die of pneumonia, diarrhea and malaria which are easily treatable. But their poor parents and poor countries lack the resources to provide the inexpensive treatment. President George W. Bush launched, and President Obama continued, an historic program called PEPFAR which has saved the lives of millions of people who would have died from malaria or AIDS. But major politicians in recent years have called for dramatically cutting this kind of life-saving program. Should not biblical Christians urge Congress to increase, not cut, effective governmental programs that reduce poverty and prevent unnecessary death?

Smoking is also a pro-life issue. Smoking kills about 480,000 people in the U.S. every year. Around the world, the death toll from smoking rises to about 6 million each year. Environmental degradation is also a pro-life issue. Global warming, unless we act soon, will cause devastating climate change that will lead to the death of millions of poor people.

Racism is also a pro-life issue. We all know how dreadfully true that has been in our history. White racism made it possible for us to enslave for centuries tens of millions of Africans made in the image of God. After slavery ended, thousands of lynchings murdered African-American men. Today, young black men are far more likely to be shot by white policemen than are young white men.

Capital punishment is a pro-life issue. I have never understood how killing a person guilty of killing another person is the best way to teach people not to kill and to respect the sanctity of human life.

So if we want to be truly Christian in our politics, we cannot be one-issue voters. We must have a biblically balanced agenda that is pro-life and pro-poor, pro-family and pro-racial justice, pro-sexual integrity and pro-peace and pro-creation care.

Second, Christian voters must have a passion for truth. Sadly, politicians often tell lies—half lies and whole lies. Christians know that God hates lies—and also that lying in politics is bad for democracy. So in this and every election season, Christians should insist on knowing the truth.

Christians should demand honesty and civility from all politicians. And if politicians claim to be Christians, then we should be especially strong in condemning any dishonesty or lack of civility in their actions.

It is easy to go online to Politifact (who has won a Pulitzer prize) or to Factcheck. Responsible fact-checking organizations like these can quickly tell us whether what a politician says is true.

And third, Christians should have a passion for civility as they engage in politics. Biblical faith calls us to respect every person, no matter how much we disagree with them, because every person is made in the image of God and is loved by God. Civility demands that we truly listen to those with whom we disagree so that we genuinely understand what they are saying. Civility refuses to use racist innuendo and does not encourage violence against opponents or their supporters.

We are privileged to live in a democracy where every person has a vote and the people (at least theoretically) can decide who will be our political leaders. But democracy works well only if citizens are informed and thoughtful and if politicians are honest and civil. Christians should demand honesty and civility from all politicians. And if politicians claim to be Christians, then we should be especially strong in condemning any dishonesty or lack of civility in their actions.

So what does this mean in 2016? And why do I say this year’s presidential election is probably the most important in my lifetime? The answer is that the candidate who has dominated the Republican primaries and is now the presumptive Republican candidate for president lies, nurtures racism, violates our history of religious freedom for all, belittles women, supports torture and appeals to much of the worst in our society.

Trump began his political career attacking the legitimacy (even questioning the citizenship) of our first black president. In this campaign, he has not so subtly appealed to white racists by not quickly disavowing the support of the Ku Klux Klan.

Trump made insulting racist attacks on Mexicans and advocates mass deportation of all undocumented immigrants which would destroy millions of families.

Trump has advocated an unconstitutional ban on all Muslim immigrants to the U.S.

Trump has mocked women, made sexist (and disgusting) remarks about female reporters—this from a man who has publicly flaunted and boasted about cheating on his multiple wives.

Trump has threatened to use torture techniques “far worse” than waterboarding against alleged terrorists and (contrary to U.S. and international law) threatened to kill their “family members, even their children.”

In spite of all that, Donald Trump has won by far the most votes in the Republican primaries and is now posi-

tioned to be the Republican candidate for president. And millions of evangelicals—including a few prominent ones—have chosen to support him.

Fortunately, a number of prominent evangelicals who are political conservatives have dared to condemn Trump's actions.

Bestselling evangelical author Max Lucado has never in the past endorsed or opposed a presidential candidate. But this spring, Lucado publicly condemned Trump, pointing out that since Trump claimed to be a Christian, his despicable actions would lead some non-Christians to reject the Christian faith. Lucado condemned Trump's "antics," saying that "such insensitivities wouldn't even be acceptable for a middle school student body election." Lucado said Trump's belittling of women and people with disabilities is not the way Jesus taught us to speak. Especially astonishing to Lucado is the fact that in spite of his claim to be a Christian, Trump said publicly: "I've never asked God for forgiveness."

Russell Moore is a political conservative. He is the most prominent Southern Baptist voice in Washington and is president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. But in several op-eds in the *New York Times*, Moore has condemned Trump and urged evangelicals not to vote for him. Moore laments the fact that this election "has cast light on the darkness of pent-up nativism and bigotry all

over the country. There are not-so-coded messages denouncing African-Americans and immigrants; concern about racial justice and national unity is ridiculed as "political correctness." Religious minorities are scapegoated for the sins of others, with basic religious freedom for them called into question." Sadly, Moore noted, those who have criticized Trump's vision for America "have faced threats and intimidation from the "alt-right" of white supremacists and nativists." (Op-ed, May 6, 2016)

Another prominent evangelical, Peter Wehner, who served in three Republican administrations and now is a senior fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, has expressed astonishment and dismay that fellow evangelicals like Jerry Falwell, Jr., and Pat Robertson are supporting Trump. Wehner noted in an op-ed in the *New York Times* that Trump "humiliated his first wife by conducting a very public affair" and at one time supported even partial birth abortion. Wehner condemned Trump as a "compulsive and unrepentant liar," and said he has been "more erratic, unprincipled and proudly ignorant when it comes to public policy than perhaps any major presidential candidate in American history." (Op-ed, March 1, 2016)

Perhaps nothing underlines the extent of Trump's incompetence, racism and belittling of women and Muslims as much as the fact that very

prominent Republican politicians—Mitt Romney, John McCain, Lindsey Graham, the first and second Bush presidents—have publicly said they will not support Trump for president.

In the past, my "completely pro-life agenda" has always required a hard choice in presidential elections (and I have voted both Republican and Democratic). I usually felt that the Republican candidate was better on the issues of family, abortion and religious freedom and the Democratic candidate was better on economic and racial justice, poverty, peace and the environment. Again this year, the latter is true. But this year, on the first part, the apparent Republican candidate says he now opposes abortion although he formerly supported even the awful process of partial birth abortion. He models the opposite of responsible marriage and family and tramples upon our basic American principle of religious freedom for all.

I believe Republican columnist David Brooks is right. This presidential election is a "Joe McCarthy moment." I believe a Donald Trump presidency would seriously undermine much of what is best in American history, culture and life. Christian voters, I hope, will help us avoid that tragedy. ■

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Sticks 'n Stones and Campaign Words

By Randall O'Brien

If ever there were a folk "saw" that is one hundred percent false, would not this be it: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me?" Mercy! As we know, words certainly may hurt—a lot. Cruel words harm the targeted victim, the one espousing cruelty, and the community of which the verbally abused and abuser are a part.

Words matter. Contained within words is the power to bless or to curse, to accept or to reject, to make well or ill. Blessed persons, and persons who bless them, are healthy individuals, contributing to healthy systems and communities. Cursed persons, and those who curse them, struggle to know happiness and wellness. Ill will is never positive in human relations. Goodwill makes well.

"Politics ain't beanbags," remarked a Chicago comedian in 1895. Boxing may be more like it. Those who do not wish to hit, nor be hit, some might say, should stay out of the political ring. Is there any such thing as civil boxing? Boxers fight to hurt, to win. Politicians and their handlers do well to learn from boxing's cutmen who, before each fight, put petroleum jelly on likely places of impact on their boxer, particularly the face, to make the area slippery so punches might glide off. Politicians, like boxers, hit and are hit often.

The 2016 presidential campaign is a battle royale between competing narratives. In the "Right" corner the narrative goes something like this:

America is self-destructing. Illegal immigrants are over-running our borders by the millions. Refugees, concealing terrorists, are knocking on

our door and many want to open the door to let them in. Muslims threaten to destroy us, as they proved on 9/11, and must be banned. Obama is asleep at the wheel with ISIS, but is driving us over the cliff with Obamacare. Drug gangs and welfare queens run amok in our country. Police are disrespected. The government wants to take our guns, make us open our bathrooms to all comers, and impose abortion and same-sex marriage on us. The

Words matter. Contained within words is the power to bless or to curse, to accept or to reject, to make well or ill.

Feds want to run our schools and take away our religious freedom. They are totally kicking God out of America. Our military is being weakened. The Feds permit unfair trade agreements, while our jobs go to foreign countries. Global warming is a hoax. The Supreme Court is illegally rewriting the constitution. The madness must stop. Now! The old order must be preserved, now, before it's too late!

In the "Left" corner the opposing narrative counter-punches:

America, land of the free, is at last becoming what it promises. Progress has been made. The march must continue. Racial injustice, including profiling, mass incarceration of African-American males, and police brutality, must end. Black Lives Matter. Women must have complete control over

their reproductive rights and decisions. LGBTQ discrimination is immoral. The Supreme Court got it right—same-gender marriage is right for America. Transgender rights must be protected. America is a nation of immigrants. Welcoming refugees, helping immigrants and all impoverished Americans are moral imperatives. A strong, tax-supported federal government safeguards social justice and poverty programs. Healthcare must be universal. Gun control is long overdue. Education must be available and affordable to all Americans, not just the rich. The environment must be protected through enforced regulations. All religions are equal. Religion must not block civil rights. Just change is underway in America. Full speed ahead! The battle is joined. Lines are drawn. Bumper stickers reveal camps:

- Republican. Because not everyone can be on welfare
- Guns don't kill people. Abortions kill people
- The government is not your baby's daddy

Versus:

- Republican Health Plan: Don't get sick
- Weapons of Mass Deception
- Science flies you to the moon. Religion flies you into buildings

It should be clear even to the most casual observer that America is a divided country. Comedian Jay Leno cracked, "According to the latest polls, 50% of Americans say we are a divided nation; the other 50% say we are not."

Humans are tribal. People belong to groups. Survival dictated this necessity early on in human history. The phenomenon stuck. We love our teams. We compete to win. In America we have a Red Team (conservative) and a Blue Team (liberal). Barring war against a common foe, rarely do the two opposing teams cease fire. Instead, the competing sides battle for control of America's future: Republican v. Democratic Party visions and platforms.

The Raging Rhetoric of the 2016 Presidential Campaign

Charitable discourse is not a hallmark of the current presidential campaign. Epithets spewed at candidates and others include: Lyin' Ted, Low Energy Jeb, Little Marco, Big Donald, Little Hands Donald, Crooked Hillary, One for 38 Kasich, Lucifer-in-the-flesh, Crazy Bernie, Goofy Elizabeth Warren, Illegals, Unqualified Hillary, Liar, Killer and Loser.

One candidate has been branded a "fiery populist demagogue," an "outsider," who has built a campaign on anger and fear. Incendiary attacks target illegal immigrants, Muslims, President Obama, a decorated war hero, party opponents, opposite party opponents, a candidate's wife and father, the media, protestors, even the Pope.

Supporters point to realistic fears of terrorists, job loss, immigration problems, trade issues, economy, military reduction, Supreme Court over-reach, executive branch fiat, national debt, attacks on police authority, threats to sanctity of life, religion, gun rights, and freedom, which demand strong responses. Passivity is a tool of the ruling class. Civility rarely brings needed change. Anger is the agent of change.

Critics, on the other hand, decry "The Politics of Meanness." Uncivil discourse is a frightening model for our children, they lament. Raw rhetoric would not be tolerated in a middle school student body election. Hostile speech is a form of abuse. Abusers must not be tolerated. Behind words of assault stands a violent assailant. The character of America and her

politics is at stake.

The Future of the Past

The future of the past is upon us. Rough rhetoric and worse reverberate throughout the halls of the nation's political history. The author of *Gentlemen's Blood: A History of Dueling*, notes, "Men in public life called each other . . . liar, poltroon, coward, and puppy . . . fornicator, madman, and bastard; they accused each other of incest, treason, and consorting with the devil."

Jefferson was accused of having relations with his slave, Sally Hemmings. Lincoln was labeled a buffoon, ape, coward, drunk, savage, robber and traitor. President Cleveland was accused of beating his wife, and appointing brothel-keepers to office. Vice President Aaron Burr

What, then, does Haidt recommend? Friendly conversation. Charitable discourse builds bridges.

was charged, but not prosecuted, for murder for killing his rival, Alexander Hamilton, in a duel. Prior to becoming president, Andrew Jackson, previously a state senator, and a veteran of 13 duels killed Charles Dickinson in a duel. Even Lincoln narrowly avoided a duel while in the Illinois legislature after criticizing state auditor and future senator, James Shields.

In the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy's "Red Scare" cost thousands of people their jobs. In the 1960s, Alabama Governor and presidential hopeful George Wallace "race-baited" a fearful populace, which then turned his hateful words into hateful deeds during the civil rights movement. Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, and others before him, followed the same political course.

In the 1990s, House majority leader, Dick Armey, referred to openly gay Democratic Representative Barney Frank as Barney Fag. Bumper stickers

during the presidential years of the 1990s and later during the 2012 presidential campaign read, respectively, "Where is Lee Harvey Oswald When you Need Him?" and "Don't Re-Nig in 2012." Violent words and deeds in American politics are nothing new.

Confession

James Thurber wrote, "We all have our faults. Mine is being wicked." Each of us has the capacity to be devilish or saintly, do we not? Today's candidates frighten me, not because they are different than I am, but because they are not. Luther said, "We had better be kind to the prostitutes and murderers, because we are all made of the same dough." To be sure, the current presidential campaign repulsively parades racism, sexism, bigotry, xenophobia, narcissism, misogyny, lies, name-calling, deceit, and bullying, among other vices. "If only there were evil people," wrote Alexander Solzhenitsyn, ". . . and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." There, except for the grace of God, go I.

We must demand better of ourselves. The "politics of meanness" is not limited to individual candidates. Individuals come from cultures. Tillich has written, "No human relation exists in an empty space. There is always a social structure behind it." Has society at large failed us? Have we failed ourselves? National pundits such as Maureen Dowd and Al Sharpton on the left, and Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter on the right, give voice to our anger and feed our thirst for aggression. Do we have a pathology of community? Where do we go from here?

Hope

"Hope is a verb with its shirtsleeves rolled up," wrote Orr. Individual and communal wellness will take much work; but it's worth the work. Where to begin?

In his important book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, social scientist Jonathan Haidt posits,

contrary to popular belief, reasoning follows rather than precedes strongly held views. Intuitions, or "gut feelings," form in individuals before conscious reasoning attempts to support convictions. Therefore, trying to win an argument via reason as a means to change another person's political stance is futile.

What, then, does Haidt recommend? Friendly conversation. Charitable discourse builds bridges. Working hard to understand another person's position generates goodwill. Telling someone he is wrong is counter-productive. Respecting the views of others, rather than questioning their intelligence, integrity, and motives, allows for civil discourse. Reasonable minds may disagree.

From biblical teachings, to Sigmund Freud's postulates, to modern social science research, it is agreed that a significant determinant of human happiness is healthy relationships. "The

Golden Rule" remains the gold standard for relational wellness. Love heals. Hate speech, on the other hand, effects dis-ease. How might the pathology of hate be treated? Eminent psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, offers five ways in his book, *Love Against Hate*:

- (1) Work. This, he states, is the moral counter-equivalent to war. People who work together love each other.
- (2) Play. Games release repressed aggression, a "burning off steam."
- (3) Faith. "All things are possible for those who believe."
- (4) Hope. Noted Luther, "Everything that is done in this world is done by hope."
- (5) Love. "Love is the medicine that cures all sorrow." Love is our most powerful weapon in our war on our aggressive instincts. Listening carefully and identifying with the other person, trying hard to "see where she is coming from," and why, disarms opponents. Love listens deeply. Love sees the other

person as God sees her.

Practicing emotional calm is HUGE in effecting charitable discourse and transforming relationships. "Everybody thinks of changing humanity," Tolstoy lamented, "but nobody thinks of changing himself." Ah, but family systems theory teaches us that our own part in a relationship is the only part we have the power to change. Changing the way we relate to the other, however, changes the relationship.

Let us dream. Perhaps one day the old folk saw may more honestly say, "Sticks 'n stones may break my bones, but kind words heal us."

"Come friends," invited Tennyson, "it's not too late to seek a better world." ■

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Strangers in an Alien Land: Religious Liberty in a Secularizing Society

By Randall Balmer

When Nathan Deal, the governor of Georgia, a Republican, vetoed House Bill 757 recently, he noted the irony “that some in the religious community today feel that it is necessary for government to confer upon them certain rights and protections.” The bill, which passed by overwhelming margins in the Republican-dominated legislature and which supporters called the Free Exercise Protection Act, would have allowed faith-based organizations in Georgia to refuse “social, educational or charitable services that violate” their religious convictions. Those organizations could also refuse to hire anyone whose religious beliefs conflicted with theirs.¹

The governor, a member of First Baptist Church in Gainesville, Georgia, noted: “What the New Testament teaches us is that Jesus reached out to those who were considered the outcasts, the ones that did not conform to the religious societies’ view of the world.” Religious liberty, Deal said, is conferred by God, not by the government, and he added that perhaps the best remedy for perceived grievances is a simple recourse to the First Amendment to the Constitution.

The Georgia legislation, similar to bills passed in in South Dakota, North Carolina and those considered in other states, is generally understood as a response to the legalization of same-sex marriage. How these faith-based groups specifically are disadvantaged by same-sex marriage remains something of a mystery. Negotiating these matters of contestation between church and state is always complex, and it is undeniably an ongoing process. As with any negotiation, no party is fully satisfied with the outcome; but anytime you deal with contending entities, what St. Augustine character-

ized as the City of God and the City of Man, conflicts are inevitable.

This recent spate of legislation has provided various groups the occasion to nurse—and to rehearse—their grievances. Standing outside of the governor’s office, Dave Baker, executive director of the Faith and Freedom Coalition in Georgia, for example, declared, “We’re going to continue to press to make sure that we have the same protections in our state law that citizens in other states have.”²

But we Americans eventually rise to our better selves and respond to what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.”

If Baker takes the governor’s advice and seeks shelter in the First Amendment—as he should—that doesn’t authorize him to disregard other elements of the Constitution. How would he propose, for example, to circumvent the 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal protection under the law?

Any discussion of religious freedom, however, must proceed in historical context. And without any question, the numbers are staggering. Although we Americans remain a religious people—more so than any other Western nation—the numbers are in decline. According to a 2015 Pew survey, the number of Americans who describe themselves as Christian dropped by nearly eight percentage points over the previous seven years. In that same span, those who would be considered religiously unaffiliated—agnostic, atheist, or “nothing in particular”—increased more than six percent.

The Pew survey showed decreases in every major group: evangelical, mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and Mormon. Although roughly seven in 10 Americans still identify as Christian, the decline in religious affiliation was especially noticeable among the younger generation, those born after 1980.³

At the same time, American society has changed dramatically. A century ago, women did not have the right to vote, and only recently did we observe the 50th anniversaries of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As Theodore Parker noted in the 19th century, and as Martin Luther King Jr. repeated at the conclusion of the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Throughout American history, that arc has consistently pointed toward inclusion—far, far too slowly, in many cases, but inexorably. The story of America is that we eventually rise to our better selves, embracing the principles encoded into our charter documents, including the rights of minorities. Addressing the consequences of America’s “original sin,” racism, is an ongoing process, but few would argue that we’ve made progress over the past three centuries, even though, as the news reminds us almost on a daily basis, true equality remains elusive. The disparity in the earning power between women and men persists, but the gap has narrowed somewhat in recent years, and whereas women a century ago couldn’t vote, today a woman is mounting a credible campaign for the presidency.

Slow progress, to be sure. Sometimes achingly slow. But we Americans eventually rise to our better selves and respond to what Abraham Lincoln

called “the better angels of our nature.”

It is in this context that a clear majority of Americans (but by no means all) believe that the guarantee of equal rights, including the right to marry, should be extended to all Americans, including to those who want to contract same-sex marriages. In contrast to matters of race and gender, the rapidity of shifting sentiments on this question has been breathtaking. According to the Pew Research Center, Americans in 2001 opposed same-sex marriage by a margin of 57 percent to 35 percent; by 2015 the numbers had flipped: 55 percent of Americans supported same-sex marriage, 39 percent opposed it.⁴

The United States Supreme Court’s decision last summer in *Overgefell v. Hodges* settled the matter. “No longer may this liberty be denied,” Anthony M. Kennedy wrote in the majority opinion. “No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were.” Kennedy’s decision framed the issue clearly in terms of constitutional rights. “The issue before the court here is the legal question whether the Constitution protects the right of same-sex couples to marry,” he wrote. The Constitution “grants them that right.”⁵

For opponents, those who style themselves defenders of “traditional” marriage, these recent changes in American society are disheartening. It doesn’t take too much imagination to see these two impulses—“traditional values” and the appropriation of constitutional rights—as on a collision course over the past decade or so. And when the “traditional values” caucus cloaks its position, however improbably, in the language of religious liberty, the stakes ratchet even higher.

How are we to negotiate this apparent collision between constitutional rights and religious freedom? The first thing that must be said is that any such negotiation is dicey because it

represents the conflict—or the potential for conflict—between two value systems, one of them liberal democracy and the other religiously informed principles. Advocates for both are, for the most part, sincere and well-intentioned. The second thing that must be said is that such negotiations are part of the price we pay for pluralism. We can pine for a homogeneous society—and some do—but America has never been homogeneous, not even in the 17th century. Negotiations of this sort have been transpiring ever since that time—over blue laws, for instance, or divorce or alcohol or abortion. Such are the consequence and the challenge of pluralism.

The governor of Georgia’s comment about the First Amendment may have been a throwaway line,

Those cloaking themselves in the “free exercise” clause seek to exercise their religious prerogatives by effectively (though not admittedly) denying constitutional rights to others.

but I suspect there’s some promise in this approach. I happen to regard the First Amendment as the genius of American life. It is, I am persuaded, the reason Americans remain so incurably religious, despite a trailing off in recent years. The First Amendment set up a free marketplace for religion in America, and throughout American history religious entrepreneurs (to extend the metaphor) have competed with one another for popular followings. American history is littered with examples, from Mother Ann Lee to Sister Aimee McPherson, from John Humphrey Noyes to Elijah Muhammad, from Joseph Smith Jr. to Arthur Blessitt. All have taken liberal advantage of the First Amendment’s promise of a free market, where all religions compete equally (more or

less), where the government provides no favor for one religion over another.

There are, of course, two parts of the First Amendment. The opening part deals with religion, and the second section deals with freedom of speech and expression. And the first part has two provisions. The first enjoins Congress from enacting any law leading to religious establishment, and the second guarantees “free exercise” of religion. Taken together, these provisions of the First Amendment comprised a policy that Thomas Jefferson characterized as the “separation of church and state.”

And so it does. And it’s worth emphasizing again that the separation of church and state provided in the First Amendment has served religious groups remarkably well over the course of American history.

In the current supposed contestation between constitutional rights and religious freedom, those who style themselves defenders of “traditional values” frequently appeal to the “free exercise” clause of the First Amendment. “I am signing HB 1523 into law to protect sincerely held religious beliefs and moral convictions,” Phil Bryant, governor of Mississippi, declared last week. “This bill merely reinforces the rights which currently exist to the exercise of religious freedom as stated in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.”⁶

Those cloaking themselves in the “free exercise” clause seek to exercise their religious prerogatives by effectively (though not admittedly) denying constitutional rights to others. My religious convictions prohibit me from using contraception, the argument goes; in the name of free exercise and religious liberty, I should not be compelled to provide funding for contraception to my employees as part of their benefits. Or, I personally oppose same-sex marriage, so, even in the face of the 14th Amendment or Title II of the Civil Rights Act, I should be able to deny my business services to same-sex couples. For historians, these arguments have a familiar ring. The day after Lyndon Johnson signed the

Civil Rights Act of 1964, Lester G. Maddox, brandishing an axe handle, intercepted three African-Americans who wanted to purchase a meal in his restaurant. Another segregationist, Moreton Rolleston, owner of Heart of Atlanta Motel, declared that “the fundamental question . . . is whether or not Congress has the power to take away the liberty of an individual to run his business as he sees fit in the selection and choice of his customers.”⁷

These issues have been, and will continue to be, argued in legislatures and in the courts. But I want to suggest that a more constructive approach might be for people of faith to focus not so much on the free exercise clause of the First Amendment, but on the establishment clause, the clause that protects against any religious establishment. And here I want to return to the wall of separation metaphor that Jefferson employed in his January 1, 1802, letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut.

The antecedent for Jefferson’s remark was Roger Williams’s declaration a century and a half earlier. Williams, a Puritan minister in Salem, Massachusetts, and founder of the Baptist tradition in America, very early on detected the dangers of too close an association between church and state. Following his banishment from Massachusetts, he organized what became Rhode Island as an experiment in religious toleration. In 1644, he wrote that the “garden of the church” should be set apart from the “wilderness of the world” by means of a “wall of separation.”

Williams’s metaphors are now so familiar to us that we miss their meaning. But to grasp the significance of his declaration, we must bear in mind that the Puritans were not members of the Sierra Club; that is to say, they did not share our post-Thoreau romance with wilderness. For 17th century colonists, the wilderness was a place of danger where evil lurked. So when Williams said that he wanted to protect the *garden* of the church from the *wilderness* of the world, his concern—

unlike Jefferson’s— was for the integrity of the faith. Williams sought to prevent any sort of religious establishment having too close an association between church and state because he did not want to imperil the church.

How does a shift in emphasis from the free exercise clause to the establishment clause in the First Amendment help us negotiate the apparent conflict between constitutional rights and religious freedom? It serves as a reminder to religious groups that religious values are not the cornerstone of constitutional values, even though the two have rarely been in conflict. My rights as a citizen are granted by the Constitution, including the rights of assembly and association, not by religious entities. And when those values diverge, as at times they must, religious groups have no right to cry foul. That is the price of disestablishment.

But there is a further advantage as well. Relieved of the burdens of religious establishment or even the maintenance of moral hegemony, religious groups have the opportunity to more effectively exercise their prophetic calling. No longer must they function as stewards of the status quo. As constitutional rights expand, the systems of values people of faith espouse are no longer coterminous with those of the state. Therefore, they no longer bear responsibility for shoring up morality in the public square. They can agitate instead from the margins, not within the corridors of power.

As Roger Williams recognized long ago, therein lies *true* freedom of religion, a faith not tethered to the vicissitudes of legislation or court rulings or political intrigue or even public sentiment. This is the circumstance in which people of faith can exercise their prophetic voice. Religion, after all, always functions best from the margins, not in the councils of power.

The Mormons provide a good example of these dynamics. Arguably, no one in American history took fuller advantage of the free marketplace of religion carved out by the First Amendment than Joseph Smith Jr. Mormonism was nothing if not a

populist movement, from the *Book of Mormon* itself to the new religion’s appeal to the disinherited. And the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was hardly an established religion. The Mormons, in fact, illustrate my earlier point about the slow extension of equal rights guaranteed under the Constitution.

But Mormonism thrived on the margins. The 19th century was the golden age in the development of Mormon theology and its expansion, both numerically and geographically. When Mormonism sought to take on the trappings of theocracy, however, matters did not go so smoothly. Absent a hegemonic faith and a homogeneous society, which of course is what Brigham Young sought in Deseret, what we might call “civic Mormonism” has faltered—in Kirtland, in Nauvoo, in Deseret, in Utah – even to the present. I think it is now widely acknowledged, for instance, both inside and outside the church, that Mormon support for California’s Proposition Eight was a serious miscalculation.

Another way to understand the shift I am proposing lies in H. Richard Niebuhr’s durable *Christ and Culture* paradigm. The days of “Christ above Culture” slipped away with the Protestant Reformation, and the “Christ the Transformer of Culture” position preferred by many who espouse “traditional values” is no longer tenable or realistic in a pluralistic society. Many people of faith now find themselves in the “Christ against Culture” paradigm.

I acknowledge that, for many religious groups, adopting the posture of outsiders, strangers in an alien land, might be jarring to their self-identity. Whereas the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would merely be reclaiming a previous identity, other groups have long regarded themselves as the embodiment of “American values.” But America is changing, as the aforementioned statistics attest. For some, that is cause for celebration; for others, lamentation, for change is always unsettling. This sense

of displacement, for instance, for many years fueled the passions of the Religious Right.

The invoking of the Religious Right calls to mind another circumstance that compromises religious organizations’ complaints about persecution at the hands of the government— and that is the issue of public subsidy of religious or faith-based institutions in the form of tax exemption. This, not abortion, is the issue that lay behind the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s. The 1971 *Green v. Connally* decision in the district court for the District of Columbia held that, under the provisions of the Civil Rights Act, any organization that engaged in racial segregation or discrimination was not, by definition, a charitable organization and therefore had no claims to tax-exempt status. Following that ruling, the Internal Revenue Service began making inquiries about the racial policies at so-called segregation academies, including Bob Jones University and Jerry Falwell’s Liberty Christian Academy. Evangelical leaders cried foul; Falwell himself complained that in some states it was easier to open a massage parlor than a “Christian” school, by which he presumably meant a segregated school. The leaders of the nascent Religious Right protested that they received no funding from the government; therefore, the government had no right to tell them how to manage their affairs—whom to admit or not admit, whom to hire or fire.

That argument is not as specious as it sounds. I remember very clearly from my childhood the visits of Bible institute presidents to our evangelical church. They were trying to recruit students and raise money, generally during the Sunday evening service. Each had his own spiel, of course, but one of the staples of every pitch was the refrain that we don’t accept money from the government.

Well, yes, up to a point. That argument, however, ignores a crucial point: Tax exemption is a form of public subsidy. Citizens in every com-

munity subsidize religious and other non-profit organizations with their taxes. I’m not arguing here whether or not that is good or appropriate; there are powerful arguments on both sides. But make no mistake, tax exemption is public subsidy, and if religious organizations truly want to exempt themselves from the legal mandates they profess to abhor, their argument would carry a great deal more credibility if they refused the public subsidies of tax exemption.

Religion functions best from the margins and not in the councils of power. Adopting the mantle of disestablishment, as alien as it may seem to some religious groups and people of faith, allows them more effectively to exercise their prophetic voice. This posture relieves them of

Religion functions best from the margins and not in the councils of power.

the responsibility of defending the established order or supporting such silliness as contemplated by the state of Tennessee in designating the Bible as the state book.

All of this brings us back to Roger Williams and his concern to shield the garden of the church from contamination by the wilderness of the world. Too close an association between these two entities trivializes the faith.

In 2001, Roy S. Moore, chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, installed a two-and-a-half-ton granite monument emblazoned with the Ten Commandments in the lobby of the judicial building in Montgomery. At the same time, Moore, who claims to be a Baptist, refused any other religious representations in that space. The case went to court, and I was asked to testify, which I did gladly, arguing that the establishment clause of the First Amendment had served religion well throughout American history and that any attempt to designate any one religion as favored by

the state undermined the integrity of the faith.

After Judge Myron Thompson ruled, correctly, that what had come to be known as “Roy’s Rock” violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment, he ordered it removed. As workers were preparing to do so, one of the protesters screamed, “Get your hands off my God!”

Unless I miss my guess, one of the commandments etched into the side of that granite monument said something about graven images. Isn’t it ironic that Roy Moore, the idolater of the Bible, apparently failed to read it? And that was precisely Roger Williams’s point about protecting the faith from fetishization, from too close an association with the state.

More and more, people of faith find themselves strangers in an alien land— not unlike Jesus and his followers in first-century Palestine or, for that matter, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and their followers in 19th century America. The path of faithfulness lies not in shoring up some approximation of theocratic order; Jesus, after all, explicitly disavowed any such schemes with his declaration that his kingdom was not of this world and that his followers should render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.

Pursuing a path of prophetic faithfulness outside of the corridors of power may require a reorientation for people of faith, especially for those who have nurtured the illusion that they embody American values. But therein, not in the construction or the defense of a theocratic order, lies the path of faithfulness. As Jacques Ellul noted long ago, Jesus did not call his followers to be successful; he called them simply to preach the gospel, regardless of the consequences. That is the posture of faith for strangers in an alien land. ■

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The Moral Side of the News

by David Sapp

Like nearly everyone, I am a news consumer. I watch all the major cable news networks. I read several online news sources. I occasionally listen to radio news when I am in the car. I still read newspapers, although less often than I used to. I consume media as a person whose values are shaped by my belief in the goodness and the righteousness of God. This is the only expertise I have with which to write this article.

Nevertheless, here I sit at my laptop, pecking away. Don't get me wrong. I appreciate the news media. I appreciate the information they provide and the variety of perspectives they present. Nevertheless, I am sitting here pecking because I am bothered by some things I see happening in today's media, and I am bothered by the fact that they seem to be more present than ever in this presidential election year. Let me highlight just two of things that bother me.

The news media have become excessively divisive. I find the tone divisive far too often, as well as the choice of which news items get the attention. As for tone, shouting matches too often stand in for helpful debate, and condescension toward and between persons of differing viewpoints is rampant. As for content, there is a strong bent to using those stories involving conflict (the more intense, the better), political horse races, relatively unimportant gaffes by the candidates and polls. Meanwhile, political crises in other countries, international agreements, and important acts of Congress that lack "sizzle" get only secondary coverage. This approach, designed to win the ratings race, has the deadly side effect of deepening the divisions already present in our society, and sometimes creating new ones. Too much attention is given to irresponsible positions. When people

advocate ideas that are based on erroneous facts which can endanger our society (climate change is just one example), the media have a responsibility not to give undue and unintended credibility to those ideas.

The news media have an obligation to the serve the common good just like every other institution in our society. Objectivity between reasonable positions is highly desirable, but objectivity between irresponsible voices and sanity is unethical. There must be some responsibility to the common good of our society.

This is a distinction so fine that it is meaningless. A democracy requires an informed citizenry. In return for being granted enormous influence on that citizenry, the media have a moral obligation to provide factual, responsible, and reasonably unbiased news coverage.

Both of these "bothers-me's" are, of course, a result of the fact that money now rules the media. The free press is rapidly becoming the free market's press. According to numerous reports, six companies now own 90% of the media. Ratings drive profits. Profits drive companies. It's that simple. Everybody knows it. Everybody talks about it. So why isn't anything being done?

The situation is dangerous. It has driven deep wedges into the heart of our society, and it has fanned fearsome flames of anger and hatred. Combined with the undue power of money in politics, the threat to the

health of our society is overwhelming. The values that gave rise to the First Amendment are being rapidly eroded, and the truth of Christian scripture is being made evident once again: "For the love of money is the root of all evil..." (1 Timothy 6:10).

The current system is entrenched. I have some sympathy for individual media outlets. They have to meet the competition. They have to stay in business. To make meaningful changes would put them at such a competitive disadvantage that they probably could not survive. Meanwhile, although the public wants pizza while needing broccoli, the media will continue to deliver pizza.

Nevertheless, the need for change is urgent. We cannot continue to fan the flames of conflict and division in the service of money. Democracy cannot thrive on a misinformed and morally manipulated public. We cannot overfeed the beast of materialism without starving ourselves. So here I am, writing this article for this one tiny media outlet which by the way does not make a profit because it depends entirely on the generosity of its readers and supporters. I am writing with the hope of sowing a little rebellion in one small field.

Before change can come to giant institutions, it must come to human minds. Ideas come before structures. I have four changes of mind to suggest:

First, we must surrender the notion that the free market is morally self-regulating. This is a badly flawed notion that has ruled much of the media. The idea is that, since the market depends on trust to succeed, it will eliminate untrustworthy behavior on its own.

Reality, however, does not usually work out this way. The market serves only one value: the economic well-being of the players. Other values are

always subservient to that one even when a media company acts with some degree of altruism.

The situation that results looks like this: John D. Rockefeller squeezes the railroads to get Standard Oil preferential freight rates. With this enormous advantage, he runs his competition out of business, and then goes to church on Sunday morning, feeling that he has acted according to Christian values. Or, an industry engages in informal price-fixing and then defends itself as having done nothing wrong. The primary value of the market has been upheld. The only problem is that ethical decisions do not depend on just one value. They depend on the consideration of multiple values and, most often, on justly weighing the importance of competing values.

Second, we must restore the concept that news is a service a news medium owes to society, not a profit center it owes to itself. This idea never should have been discarded. It was based on the idea that the airwaves belong to the public, and then abandoned because cables do not belong to the public. This is a distinction so fine that it is meaningless. A democracy requires an informed citizenry. In return for being granted enormous influence on that citizenry, the media have a moral obligation to provide factual, responsible, and reasonably unbiased news coverage.

The idea that news divisions must sit on their own financial bottoms alongside entertainment and sports is ludicrous. To operate in this way abridges the freedom of the press, and ultimately the freedom of the society.

Third, the ethical principles that guide the news media must constantly be re-examined. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, said Thomas Jefferson, and it is most especially the price of freedom of press. Time not only passes, it changes realities. When the First Amendment was adopted, guaranteeing that Congress would make no law abridging the freedom of the press, the press was a far different entity than it is today. In fact, the

press of that day was largely an uncoordinated group of local papers and magazines which owned themselves and published news and opinion that reached comparatively few people. Today, the whole of media is gargantuan, local news has been dwarfed, and few media outlets "own themselves." Few are even locally owned.

To produce "fair and balanced news" (as one network puts it) in 2016, demands different considerations than were required in 1787. Being fair and balanced is an admirable goal. But what do these terms mean in the context of our contemporary news situation? Fair to whom? Balanced between what?

For the media, fairness often seems to mean giving equal footing to every position on a given issue. This is fair

It is not fair to give equal footing to lunacy and intelligence.

only to the advocates of these issues. It is *not* fair to the public who need adequate information to make judgments about tissues. It is *not* fair to give equal footing to those who deny science and to environmental scientists. It is *not* fair to the society to give equal footing to fomenters of ethnic tensions and the advocates of ethnic justice. It is *not* fair to give equal footing to lunacy and intelligence.

And what is "balanced" news coverage? Is it balanced between the left wing and the right wing? If so, "balanced" is a moving target, for in the last 40 years or so, the center has veered sharply to the right. Is it balanced between time-honored principles and innovation? If so, the public needs help in knowing what America's "time-honored principles" are and how innovative ideas stand up under historical and ethical scrutiny. Is it balanced between telling the truth and doing no harm? Or, is it simply balanced between the need to tell the truth and the need to attract

viewers?

Who makes these judgments and how they are enforced are tough questions. But we are not even addressing them. We are rolling along carelessly with both the media and the government losing more freedom to the marketplace every day. Reflections and discussions of how to end this madness must begin.

CONCLUSION

Of course, these three suggestions—giving up the idea that the free market is morally self-regulating, recapturing the idea that news is a service, and constant re-examination of the principles that guide news reporting and discussion in our time—change only minds, not the reality with which we live.

Still, no reality was ever changed without a change of ideas that came first. Stubborn structures never give way until stubborn minds do. But structural change is urgent, urgent to the integrity and health of our society. The path to attain it is unclear. Perhaps it is enough to pray that this little article might produce a few other reflections and conversations that could contribute to the kind of change that is required.

I would offer one final thought: Neither the media nor its owners can be their own monitors. Some other entity *must* protect the freedom of the press. The FCC used to play a larger role, but then in 1987 it abandoned its own Fairness Doctrine. Maybe a version of it that fits our day should be adopted. Government control, you scream? Well, like it or not, government is perhaps the key guardian of our freedom in America, and right now it needs guarding. A government of the people, by the people, and for the people is not prohibited from *protecting* freedom of the press, only from *abridging* it. ■

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Gospel Rewrite: Jesus and Healthcare

by Michael McRay

In December, I began working for a non-profit law firm that provides free assistance to vulnerable Tennesseans trying to access affordable health care. One of our current challenges is fighting for the passage of Governor Bill Haslam's health care plan called Insure Tennessee. This plan would provide affordable health coverage to more than 280,000 people in our state who currently have no option for health insurance. It would bring over one billion Tennessee tax dollars back to our state every year, not costing the taxpayer a single extra dime, and saving 20,000 jobs by helping our more than 40 at-risk hospitals stay open. We have already had six hospitals close due to the overwhelming costs of uncompensated care. The governor has proposed a plan that would fix this. But two legislative sessions later, our legislators still have not passed it.

I care about Insure Tennessee because I'm a Tennessean and a Christian. Jesus said he came to proclaim good news to the poor. I believe this plan would be just that.

Recently, Bruce Parks, a 50-year-old with major heart issues and no health insurance, met with his state representative to ask him to support Insure Tennessee. His legislator expressed his sympathy but said he felt Tennesseans should be required to work at least part-time in order to get health coverage. The more I've paid attention to the news around Insure Tennessee, the more often it seems this argument appears from legislators: People must work to deserve health care. Never mind the fact that Bruce has worked his entire life until a massive heart attack almost killed

him and reduced his heart to 15% capacity. Doctors tell him that without a pacemaker, he may die if he returns to work. But without insurance, he can't get that pacemaker. The cycle is vicious, while the legislators remain indifferent.

Since a great many of these same legislators claim to be Christians—believers in that good news Jesus came to proclaim to the poor—I want to rewrite two familiar gospel stories to reflect these legislators' apparent values. I wonder how many people would

Doctors tell him that without a pacemaker, he may die if he returns to work. But without insurance, he can't get that pacemaker. The cycle is vicious, while the legislators remain indifferent.

follow Jesus if he had behaved like this.

Luke 18:35-43

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to

do for you?"

"Lord, I want to see," he replied.

Jesus said to him, "I am sure, but should you not have considered this before you began begging? Instead of spending your life on the side of the road asking for money, why not go to the businesses throughout Jericho and ask for work?"

"Lord," the man began, shocked at Jesus's response, "I would work if I were well, but employers believe me unable to perform any useful labor, for I am blind."

Jesus began to turn away. "I am sorry, my hands are tied. In order to heal you, I need you to work. Otherwise, you are just receiving handouts, and I am enabling laziness."

Jesus moved ahead of the crowd, while the blind man sat in silence, stunned, hoping never to encounter Jesus of Nazareth again.

Luke 6:6-10

[One] Sabbath Jesus went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there.

Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

He looked around at them

all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so. Then Jesus said, "Are you currently working?"

The man with the shriveled hand looked up in surprise.

"No," he said, "no one will hire me with my hand shriveled in this way."

So Jesus asked, "When was your last job?" The man replied that it had been some years since he could work. Then Jesus turned to the Pharisees and all those around and said, "Truly I say to you, unless a man works, he shall not be healed. The man who labors shall earn his due. The man who does not must go without."

The man with the shriveled hand recoiled from Jesus. "How can I work? No one will hire me with this hand! If you healed me, I could return to the fields or learn a new trade." Some

who had gathered began nodding in understanding, recognizing the poor circumstance of the man. Without healing, he could not work, but without work, he would not be healed. Yet Jesus remained unmoved.

"If I were to heal you now, would not word spread? Would not the multitudes begin ceasing their labor, having no reason to continue working when

I want to rewrite two familiar gospel stories to reflect these legislators' apparent values.

I might heal their ailments without condition? Will the masses not take advantage of my power? Instead I say to you, find means by which to earn some manner of living, and

then I will consider restoring your hand to you."

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were joyful and began to discuss with one another how they might include Jesus among their ranks.

I wonder how many people would follow this Jesus. I know I wouldn't. ■

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POLITICIZED PRAYER: National Day of Prayer has Roots in False History, Anti-Communist Fears

By Bruce Gourley

A fear surpassing all otherworldly horrors gripped the American nation in September 1949. The Soviet Union had just detonated its first atomic bomb, and suddenly planet Earth was imperiled with the prospect of annihilation.

In Los Angeles, Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham held his first large, multi-denominational crusade mere weeks after the Soviet atomic test. The crusade was the first carried by newspapers throughout America.

Throwing history to the wind, Graham gave voice to a mythological narrative, declaring that “Western culture and its fruits had its foundations in the Bible, the Word of God, and in the revivals of the 17th and 18th centuries.”

In reality, Western culture began in ancient Greece while in modern Western culture, America’s founding documents were shaped by Enlightenment principles rather than by religious revivals.

Bearing witness to the falseness of Graham’s claims, colonial Baptists — demanding religious liberty for all and church-state separation — played a pivotal role in shaping the formation of America as a secular nation.

Graham continued: “Communism, on the other hand, has decided against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion. Communism is not only an economic interpretation of life; communism is a religion that is inspired, directed and motivated by the devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God.”

With these words Graham pronounced godless communism as the enemy of Christian America.

An ardent ally of the anti-communist crusader Wisconsin U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, Graham in 1951 charged that some 1,100 “social-sounding organizations ... are Communist or Communist-oriented in this country. They control the minds of a great segment of the people.”

When McCarthy insisted that the U.S. Constitution be suspended in order to root out alleged communist sympathizers,

Graham pronounced godless communism as the enemy of Christian America.

Graham took to his Sunday *Hour of Decision* broadcast in support of the senator. And when the Senate ultimately condemned the witch-hunting McCarthy for denigrating the First Amendment, Graham called the Senate action disgraceful.

In the midst of the anti-communist, constitutional crisis, Billy Graham in early 1952 led a charge to scrub from history the nation’s secular roots by having Congress declare America a Christian nation. He began with what to some may have seemed an innocent enough vision, pronouncing at a Washington rally:

“What a thrilling, glorious thing it would be to see the leaders of our country today kneeling before Almighty God in prayer. What a thrill would sweep this country. What renewed hope and courage would grip the Americans at this hour of peril.”

Graham and other advocates falsely claimed that America’s founders had

prayed during the Constitutional Convention, that America was founded as a Christian nation, and that presidential proclamations of national days of prayer were common during the nation’s pre-Civil War years.

Fearful of godless Communism, legislators quickly pushed history aside and embraced Graham’s mythological narrative. On April 17, 1952, President Harry S. Truman, a Baptist, signed a bill proclaiming an annual National Day of Prayer.

Public Law 82-324 read: “Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the President shall set aside and proclaim a suitable day each year, other than Sunday, as a National Day of Prayer, on which the people of the United States may turn to God in prayer and meditation at churches, in groups, and as individuals.”

The resolution echoed a number of statements from an earlier would-be nation: the Confederate States of America.

Confederate officials often designated official national days of prayer, proclaiming God an unequivocal ally of a nation fighting a godless enemy (the abolitionist North), while ignoring the evils of white supremacy, black subjugation and racial terrorism embedded in law, culture, society and religious institutions.

Often with the blessing of white Christians, racial apartheid and terrorism yet remained in much of 1950s America. Further abetting the historical analogy, many of the nation’s leaders of the 1950s cast the Civil Rights Movement as communist, reminiscent of slave owners masking their own evilness by dismissing African slaves as dumb, inhuman brutes.

The first National Day of Prayer proclamation took place on June 17, 1952. Although supporters of the legislation pointed to an 1863 proclamation by Abraham Lincoln, the two statements were quite different.

On March 30, 1863, Lincoln signed a one-time act “Appointing a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer.” Lamenting that America had forgotten God due to many years of slave-labor-financed “peace and prosperity,” Lincoln asked Americans “to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness” and “restoration of our now divided and suffering country.”

Rather than criticizing the excesses of national prosperity, confessing national sins and asking for forgiveness, Truman in 1952 embraced prosperity as a sign of Christian faithfulness, affirming God’s “constant watchfulness over us in every hour of national prosperity and national peril” and imploring “divine support” for the “security” to “steadfastly” pursue the triumphant course of the godly American empire.

Having emasculated history, communist-fearing U.S. legislators quickly set about tearing into the “wall of separation” between church and state as envisioned by early Baptists and enacted by the nation’s founders.

In 1954 Congress and President Eisenhower rejected the secular nature of the 1892 Pledge of Allegiance, written by Baptist minister Francis Bellamy, by adding the words “under God” to the pledge. The following year Congress and Eisenhower added the words “In God We Trust” to currency, and in 1956 established the phrase as the national motto.

During this time some legislators attempted to add an amendment to the Constitution declaring America a Christian nation. A proposed Constitutional amendment read in part, “This nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Savior and Ruler of nations, through

whom are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God.” Congress never acted upon the amendment.

The proliferation of white, Protestant civil religious legislation in the 1950s opened a sustained campaign against church-state separation that yet continues.

In 1972, white Protestant evangelical leaders established the National Prayer Committee and Task Force to promote the National Day of Prayer and the mythological narrative of America’s Christian founding. Congress in 1988 established a particular day, the first Thursday in May, for the National Day of Prayer.

In 1989, the Task Force’s offices moved to Focus on the Family’s headquarters. Shirley Dobson, wife of the founder of Focus, James Dobson,

Lamenting that America had forgotten God due to many years of slave-labor-financed “peace and prosperity,” Lincoln asked Americans “to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness”

became chair of the organization. With Dobson’s prodding, President George W. Bush formally celebrated the annual event in the White House. The theocratic-leaning, evangelical Christian organization penned many annual proclamations read verbatim by President Bush, governors and other public officials.

Since 1952, the threat of Communism has faded, replaced now by evangelical fear and loathing of Islam. In addition, many evangelicals remain opposed to equal rights for all Americans.

The nation’s capitol and many states today formally observe annual

national days of prayer while, by some accounts, an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 simultaneous events take place, including prayer breakfasts, public school flag rallies and local church events.

A U.S. District Court ruled in 2010 that the 1952 federal legislation enabling a National Day of Prayer is unconstitutional. The ruling noted that any group of citizens may voluntarily pray on any given day, but that federal declarations creating official days of prayer are constitutionally invalid. Nonetheless, the federal legislation remains in place.

Although President Barack Obama revised the annual proclamation to highlight diverse faiths and champion equal religious liberty for all, the National Day of Prayer remains primarily a rallying point for evangelicals.

Countless prayers implore God to ensure the election of politicians who will grant more privileges to evangelical Christians, while discriminating against the LGBT community, Muslims, immigrants and persons of no faith.

Many knowledgeable Christians, however, prayed on May 5, not because of an official government proclamation or from a Christian nationalist agenda, but rather from a commitment to a gospel of inclusiveness and equality that supersedes human fears, religious dogma and the misguided politics of privilege.

Such a non-sectarian agenda honors America’s historical ideals and points the way to a better future. ■

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RACIAL JUSTICE AND THE COOPERATIVE BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP: A Crisis of Prophetic Courage in the 21st Century

By Wendell Griffen

This year, 2016, marks the 25th anniversary for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (known more popularly by the initials “CBF”). Organized in Atlanta, Georgia in 1991 by a group of white Baptist clergy and lay persons disaffected with the Southern Baptist Convention,¹ CBF celebrates its silver anniversary during its June 22-24, 2016 General Assembly in Greensboro, North Carolina, the birthplace of the non-violent sit-in protests against racial segregation during the civil rights movement during the 1960s.

The 25th anniversary is an appropriate occasion and Greensboro, North Carolina is a fitting place for critical reflection by CBF constituents about racial justice. However, racial justice is not a convenient or comfortable subject for analysis in the United States, whether the analysis is done by Cooperative Baptists or by others. In that sense, the following words of Michael Eric Dyson are profoundly true.

It is not overstating the case to suggest that, when it comes to race, we are living in the United States of Amnesia. America cannot solve its race problem because it cannot afford to remember what it has been through, or more accurately, what it has made its Black citizens endure: the horrible, cowardly, vicious legacy of racial domination stroked by religious belief and judicial mandate. The willed forgetfulness of our racial past continues to trap us. It makes Whites repeat harmful cycles of guilt, denial, hostility, and indifference. It makes Blacks cling desperately to victimization, White hatred, self-doubting, and self-loathing. It appears easier for Whites, and for many

Blacks, to reenact a pantomime of social civility through comfortable gestures of racial conciliation than it is to tell each other the story of the colossal breach of humane behavior and democratic practice that slavery represented.²

The challenge Cooperative Baptists face in attempting to talk about and engage in ministry efforts concerning racial justice demands, therefore, the courage to resist what Dyson terms as reenactment of “a pantomime of social civility through comfortable gestures of racial reconciliation.”

In his much-quoted *Letter From Birmingham City Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote words that are as true in 2016 as they were in 1963.

...I must confess that over the last few years I have been greatly disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;” who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait until “a more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunder-

standing from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: “All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.” All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes the ally of the forces of social stagnation.³ ...Let me rush on to mention my other disappointment. I have been greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership... In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation

of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say, “Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern,” and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.”⁴

Dr. King's dire assessment concerning the pervasive injustice within the United States is even more bluntly and eloquently documented in an essay titled *A Testament of Hope* that was posthumously published in the January 1969 issue of *Playboy Magazine*. I have not encountered many religious leaders who have read it. But like the clarion cry King uttered in his April 4, 1967 sermon at Riverside Church in New York City titled *A Time to Break Silence, A Testament of Hope* expresses a prophetic urgency that is unmistakably clear:

Why is the issue of equality still so far from solution in America, a nation that professes itself to be democratic, inventive, hospitable to new ideas, rich, productive, and awesomely powerful? The problem is so tenacious because, despite its virtues and attributes, America is deeply racist and its democracy is flawed both economically and socially. All too many Americans believe justice will unfold painlessly or that its absence for black people will be tolerated tranquilly.

...White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society. The comfortable, the entrenched, the privileged cannot continue to tremble at the prospect of change in the status quo.

Stephen Vincent Benet had a message for both white and black Americans in the title of a story, *Freedom Is a Hard Bought Thing*. When millions of people have been cheated for centuries, restitution is a costly process. Inferior education, poor hous-

ing, unemployment, inadequate health care—each is a bitter component of the oppression that has been our heritage. Each will require billions of dollars to correct. Justice so long deferred has accumulated interest and its cost for this society will be substantial in financial as well as human terms...

The price of progress would have been high enough at the best of times, but we are in an agonizing national crisis because a complex of profound problems has intersected in an explosive mixture. The black surge toward freedom has raised justifiable demands for racial justice in our major cities at a time when all the problems of city life have simultaneously erupted. Schools, transportation, water supply, traffic and crime would have been municipal agonies whether or not Negroes lived in our cities. The anarchy of unplanned city growth was destined to confound our confidence. What is unique to this period is our inability to arrange an order of priorities that promises solutions that are decent and just.

... If we look honestly at the realities of our national life, it is clear that we are not marching forward; we are groping and stumbling; we are divided and confused. Our moral values and our spiritual confidence sink, even as our material wealth ascends. In these trying circumstances, the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its inter-related flaws—racism, poverty, militarism and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.⁵

Now, Cooperative Baptists (whether

they attend the 2016 General Assembly in Greensboro or not) must decide whether to summon the prophetic courage to see clearly and speak honestly about racial justice (or, more accurately, racial injustice), the most consistently avoided subject in U.S. public and social discourse.

One questions whether the CBF constituency, predominately white, privileged, and lacking a history of prophetic involvement and sacrifice in the struggle against racial injustice (in the United States or elsewhere), has the moral insight and courage to do so. Like the priest and Levite Jesus mentioned in the Good Samaritan lesson in the gospel of Luke,⁶ Cooperative Baptists and other religionists “passed by on the other side of the road” after Rodney King was brutally beaten by Los Angeles, California police officers in 1991.⁷ Since then Cooperative Baptists have been consistently and predictably unspoken despite recurring evidence that police brutality, racial profiling, and racially disparate policies and practices are pervasive features of law enforcement in the United States.

When the votes of poor and minority voters were deliberately destroyed and otherwise not counted during the presidential election of 2000,⁸ white “goodwill Baptists” were conspicuously silent. Cooperative Baptists said nothing as black, poor white, aged, student, and previously incarcerated persons have been routinely disenfranchised since the 2000 presidential election. Apparently, our Bible studies on the Biblical commandment against stealing failed to awaken prophetic consciousness, not to mention to instill prophetic outrage, about blatant, ongoing and systemic efforts to deny marginalized people the right to vote.

One wonders whether Cooperative Baptists have the courage to confess and repent from their collective and institutionalized judgment to avoid becoming involved in prophetic struggles surrounding mass incarceration. As much as one should applaud CBF congregational actions to protest the predatory evils of payday lenders, no similar attention has been given by Cooperative

Baptists to the equally blatant and routine civil asset forfeiture practices that are ancillary features of the mis-defined “war against drugs” whereby the homes, money and other property of people accused of committing drug offenses are seized and declared forfeit without the suspected drug offenders being convicted of any crime.⁹

As U.S. military adventures continually cause death and disability to children of God in this society and wherever else the long-running “war on terror” is professed to be conducted while draining the national treasury of money desperately needed to address systemic poverty, income inequality, inadequate healthcare, homelessness and other social needs, Cooperative Baptists (and other religionists) must summon the courage to repent for willful indifference about those realities. Baptist platitudes and programs about global mission efforts, however well-intentioned those platitudes, programs, and global mission efforts may be, do not hide and cannot soften the painful and ugly reality that Baptists, including Cooperative Baptists, have “passed by on the other side of the road” throughout the fourteen year old and ongoing “war on terror.”

While Cooperative Baptists celebrate their 25th anniversary during the General Assembly in Greensboro, North Carolina, the voting rights of poor and black voters in that state are being systematically eroded and attacked. Efforts to protect the rights of workers from mistreatment are being politically undercut. The ability of North Carolina localities to enact measures protecting people from bigotry and discrimination has been legislatively eliminated. Persons who are transgender have been marked for state-sanctioned bigotry and discrimination.

These and other oppressive realities present Cooperative Baptists with a prophetic crisis. We must decide and our conduct will show whether we have the prophetic courage needed to exemplify the power of God’s liberating love. We must engage in the challenging effort to learn unpleasant truths, put aside comfortable and longstanding myths, and develop relationships with

prophetic people and entities we have not previously taken the risk to know, let alone join in collective efforts for justice. Doing so will require willingness to embrace the realities and uncertainties associated with prophetic living and interactions.

I hope that as Cooperative Baptists gather in Greensboro, we will affirm and rejoice in our call, mission, and Holy Spirit-given strength to “bear the cross” as agents of the inclusive and liberating love of God presented to us in the life and ministry of Jesus. We must be willing to ponder about and prepare for costly discipleship concerning racial justice, not indulge ourselves in the easy and attractive opportunity to engage in the talk and walk of “cheap grace.”

I hope we will affirm that Jesus and the other Biblical and post-Biblical prophets are compelling witnesses and guides for courageous and hopeful living that requires willingness on our part (as persons, congregations, ministry partners, mission field personnel, pastoral counselors and others) to endure the sacrifices of redemptive struggle against oppression and its many intersecting realities. If “there is a cross for everyone,” then CBF leaders, congregations, partners, mission field personnel and other constituents must understand that racial injustice is part of an intersecting chain of oppression.

This means, among other things, that CBF must resist the temptation to “ghettoize” racial injustice. As Haile Selassie of Ethiopia first said (followed years later by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” The evil of commercial red-lining of black and brown neighborhoods in the United States is a variation of the same evil that supports Israeli government actions to erect a wall separating Palestinians in the West Bank from Jerusalem. A threat that is constant everywhere cannot be met, let alone overcome, by an opposing force that is fearful and fitful.

I hope CBF will choose to meet “the intersectionality of oppression” with the unconquerable force of divine love by exhibiting a courageous determination to speak and live prophetic truth.

We should have learned long ago that the forces of oppression are represented by people willing to take bold unjust actions. That oppression and those forces must be met and overcome by people willing to be bolder, not timid.

Cooperative Baptists can choose to be bold, courageous, and prophetic agents at Greensboro and thereafter about racial justice, the intersectionality of oppression, and the liberating power of divine love. I hope we make that choice so the 2016 General Assembly will mark the beginning of a new and hopeful era about racial justice for CBF with unimaginable potential for justice, peace and joy to our oppression-weary United States and world. ■

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1 A succinct summary of the origin of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which includes discussion of the political and doctrinal disputes within the Southern Baptist Convention that resulted in formation of the progressive group known as the Alliance of Baptists and the moderate group which organized as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative_Baptist_Fellowship.

2 Michael Eric Dyson, *Introduction to WILLIAM A. OWENS, BLACK MUTINY* (Black Classic Press 1997) (1953).

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, in A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., (James Melvin Washington, ed.) 295, 296 (HarperOne 1986).

4 King, *supra* note 4, at 298, 299.

5 King, *supra* note 4, at 314, 315.

6 Luke 10:29-37.

7 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_King.

8 See <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/1-million-black-votes-didn-t-count-in-the-2000-2747895.php>.

9 See <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/05/the-glaring-injustice-of-civil-asset-forfeiture/392999/>.

A Christian Feminist Response to Baylor

By Kyndall Rae Rothaus

When the Pepper Hamilton summary report was released revealing major failures by Baylor University to comply with Title IX requirements, I read the entire document and was not at all surprised with its findings. It’s not that I thought Baylor was a terrible place. I love Baylor. I enjoyed seminary at Baylor. I continue to befriend faculty members whom I respect and admire.

I was not surprised to learn the extent of Baylor’s mishandling of sexual assault cases, however, because I have been a Christian feminist among Baptists in Texas for some time, and I am well aware of the culture that makes such egregious offenses (both the assaults themselves and the lack of appropriate response) not only possible but also prevalent and systemic. This is by no means a “Baylor” confined issue or a distinctly Baptist problem. One in four women across the nation experience sexual assault during college. (While it is important to remember that men experience assault too, women undeniably make up a majority of the victims.) We have a national epidemic on our hands.

But now that violence against women is hitting so close to home in undeniable ways, I want to make this comment on behalf of my fellow Baptist feminists: We weren’t crying wolf.

We have been trying to make it clear for ages that sexism is alive and well in our society and in our churches, and that sexism is not a mere annoyance to especially ambitious women or a false accusation women throw around because we are hormonal. Sexism is a serious danger to women, as well as to men (who end up with distorted ideas and standards of masculinity, which is harmful in a number of ways and in some cases fosters irrational violence). The findings of fact reported by the board of regents states, “Baylor

failed to consider patterns, trends or climate-related concerns that would enable the University to take prompt and responsive action to individual and community concerns,” which included “insufficient training and attention to sexual and gender-based harassment and violence ...” (pages 8-9).

I know that no one *likes* to hear the phrase, “We told you so,” and believe me, I derive no pleasure from the way these recent and horrifying events at Baylor confirm what we feminists have been saying for years. I speak

We have made it easy to prioritize athletic success over justice and safety. We have made it commonplace in Baptist life to dismiss women’s voices — whether they say, “I am called to preach,” or “Help, I’m being violated,” or “No, I don’t want to have sex with you.”

up, however, because I fear that if we don’t draw the connections between what has happened at Baylor and the unrelenting persistence of sexism in Baptist life, then most of us outside of Briles and Starr will be let off the hook. We won’t have to face our own culpability in creating, sustaining and preserving a culture that relegates women to a second-class status, thus making it possible to view women as property for the taking. We have made it easy to prioritize athletic success over justice and safety. We have made it commonplace in Baptist life to dismiss women’s voices — whether they say, “I am called to preach,” or

“Help, I’m being violated,” or “No, I don’t want to have sex with you.”

Women still make up less than 1 percent of Baptist pastors in Texas. Less than 1 percent! In 2010, women as senior pastors or co-pastors made up a mere 0.199 percent of Baptist pastors in the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and the numbers have barely budged since then. By contrast, women make up about 30 percent of pastors in mainline denominations, and in the Alliance of Baptists, 31 percent. American Baptists have 9.4 percent female pastors, and in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a denominational convention that cited “support of women in ministry” as one of its founding platitudes, has 5 percent female pastors.

I have been saying for a long time that the lack of women in leadership and violence against women are intrinsically connected. In my sermon at the Texas Baptist Women in Ministry Conference in February 2015, I said to the many women in the room called by God to be ministers:

Sexism is toxic, not only because it pushes you and me out of the pulpit, but because it twists the beauty of the gospel ministry into a power clash between genders rather than allowing it to be an open-armed, no holds barred proclamation of the love of Christ that is for everyone.

The same thread of sexism runs through all forms of oppression. The same evil that trafficks girls for sex is the same evil that keeps you silent. It is the same pernicious lie of inequality keeping you small that is keeping some men addicted to aggression and power.

Which means that when you stand in the pulpit, you are defying the degradation of women’s bodies in the bedroom. When you stand up and speak, you are opposing the lie that a woman who does not obey deserves to be beaten. When

you use your voice, you are giving a vulnerable girl a real-life example of how to stand up for herself. When you choose to be a full person in the world, rather than a subservient people-pleaser, you are confronting the powers that would sell your sister into slavery without a second thought as to her humanity. It is all connected.

It is not only right to use our voices; it is our duty. It is not just our prerogative; it is our calling.

Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, my alma mater, the place that loved me and supported me in my calling to become a minister, has only two female faculty out of 21 faculty members (and only two non-white faculty). Interestingly, recent attempts at Baylor to hire a chief diversity officer were opposed by a group of faculty. One professor was dismissive of the need for more diversity at Baylor, claiming that it was a "movement that aims to root out 'unconscious,' 'implicit,' or 'similarity' bias and other such under-the-radar offenses. Only in the contemporary world can we at once be unconscious of our actions and yet morally culpable for them," as if in days gone by ignorance and lack of awareness somehow preserved our morality. You're not guilty as long as you don't know, right?

Meanwhile, the Pepper Hamilton findings report that the approach of Baylor's judicial affairs "was not trauma-informed. . . . The investigations reviewed were wholly inadequate to fairly and reliably evaluate whether sexual violence had occurred. While individual administrators sought professional training opportunities, they were not adequately trained in the dynamics of sexual and gender-based harassment and violence, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, the neurobiological impacts of trauma, the evaluation of credibility, consent and the role of alcohol as it relates to consent and alcohol-facilitated

sexual assault. In addition, the investigations were conducted in the context of a broader culture and belief by many administrators that sexual violence 'doesn't happen here.' Administrators engaged in conduct that could be perceived as victim-blaming, focusing on the complainant's choices and actions, rather than robustly investigating the allegations, including the actions of the respondent" (pages 7-8).

I am not suggesting that more women in leadership will single-handedly solve the problem. In fact, sometimes women in leadership perpetuate the sexist environments in which they work. A female professor wrote the quote I cited above questioning the reality

It should not surprise us that administrators reportedly engaged in victim blaming. We've been blaming Eve since the beginning of time, and we have not yet repented of our slander.

of "unconscious bias."

What I am saying is that when we do not advocate for women in leadership in all areas of life, we are sending the message loud and clear that women's voices are of secondary value at best, unwanted and justifiably dismissed at worst. When we've barred women from the pulpit regardless of how passionately they tell us they are called, we should not be shocked when some of our sons do not regard a woman's sexual consent as necessary either. We have taught our sons and our daughters that women do not really know what they want, that their opinions are invalid, and that their voices are not worth hearing. It should not surprise us that administra-

tors reportedly engaged in victim blaming. We've been blaming Eve since the beginning of time, and we have not yet repented of our slander. We have taught ourselves to ignore the voices, stories, and desires of women, and such rejection of any woman's inherent worth and equality leads to devastating results. Baylor's own scandal is no exception. Women have been burned at the stake, ravaged by men and used as property for centuries.

It's time we stop calling feminism a dirty word. Feminism is the reason women now have the right to vote and the right to own property, but in an illogical sort of betrayal, there are women who benefit from the accomplishments of feminism while disparaging its ongoing work. When feminism attempts to point out the inequalities and injustices that still exist, it is accused of crying wolf. How much devastation will it take before we are willing to listen, to consider that perhaps we have not done enough to take seriously the concerns of those who have been telling us for years there is a serious problem?

Christian feminism was and still is a prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness, challenging the status quo, naming legitimate sins, and warning of impending doom if we do not instigate widespread societal change. Feminism is not an irrelevant voice in modern society — violence against women is startling proof that sexism is alive and well. Feminism is not a cultural accommodation; it is the call for equality, fair treatment and respect for all persons. Feminism is, at its core, a Christ-like approach to all humanity.

One of the oldest Christian practices is that of repentance. Before the word "Christian" was even coined, John the Baptist was out in the wilderness, calling God's people to repentance. He was out on the fringe of society, away from the

power structures, and many people thought he was crazy, but the ones who listened to his uncomfortable message were changed. That is what repentance is — change. In Greek, the word "repent," or *metanoia*, means to "turn around." It's not about feeling sorry or wallowing in guilt. It is about being transformed. Repentance, therefore, is incredibly hopeful — it means new life is rising up from the turbulent waters.

It is past time for Baptists to repent and change the tide of sexism. Fortunately for Baptists, God

Before the word "Christian" was even coined, John the Baptist was out in the wilderness, calling God's people to repentance.

always accepts latecomers. But let's not keep God waiting any longer, shall we? Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading? Sinner, O sinner, come home. ■

2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

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Hard Copy

Recently, for the first time in a while, I purchased a Sunday Edition of the *New York Times*. I spent the better part of that Sunday afternoon leafing through the hefty paper. I had forgotten how much pleasure there is in holding a newspaper in my hands, reading whatever catches my eye (which is a lot!), passing some things on to my wife, or just taking my time to savor the experience. Usually, I read the paper online. My daily routine is to read a variety of newspapers and other publications on my computer screen. But, to actually hold a publication in my hands, to see the entire publication at once, to pick and choose the things that I want to read. . . . that is a true pleasure.

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Thanks,

Patrick Anderson, editor

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

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption

by Bryan Stevenson (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015, \$16.00, paperback)
Reviewed by Fisher Humphreys

In America today there is bipartisan support for reforming our criminal justice system in general and our corrections institutions—prisons—in particular. Fiscal conservatives are troubled by the enormous costs of the prison-industrial complex. Social progressives are troubled by the fact that our laws and sentencing guidelines are such that we are now warehousing not just violent criminals but also non-violent offenders, drug addicts, mentally ill persons, innocent people, and children. Between 1990 and 2005, a new prison opened every 10 days (!) in the United States. Today, about 2,000,000 persons are incarcerated in America, by far the largest number of any country in the world. About 6,000,000 other persons are on parole or probation.

Many Americans feel antipathy toward these people. In a way, this is understandable. Some of them (not all, not most, but some) have committed horrific violence.

But, of course, antipathy towards people is not compatible with our Christian faith. Jesus loved all people without exception, and he taught his followers to do the same. In fact, he apparently went out of his way to express love for morally flawed lawbreakers—dishonest tax collectors, for example.

I assume that many readers of this journal are in the same position I am in: I don't know very many incarcerated persons very well. For those of us in this position, this book is a gift. Scattered throughout are the stories of more

than 20 incarcerated persons told in such a way that we can appreciate their humanity. These narratives are every bit as intriguing as the detective fiction that I enjoy reading and watching on television. Although the book is full of information I didn't know before, it is not didactic. It's a narrative with a lot of subplots.

The subplots are about incarcerated persons. The main plot is about Stevenson and his work. Here, briefly, is his story. He was born in 1959 and grew up in Delaware. When he was 16, his grandfather was murdered; so Stevenson has an insider's appreciation for the suffering of family members of murder victims, and he never forgets them. He was educated at Eastern University in Philadelphia and at Harvard Law School. During a legal internship in Atlanta, he developed a passion for providing legal assistance to poor people. In 1989 he founded the Equal Justice Initiative. EJI is located in Montgomery, Alabama, and much of its work is in Alabama, but it also provides help for incarcerated persons across our nation.

All these things are in the book. Now let me tell you two things that aren't in the book because Stevenson is too modest to mention them. First, he is a renaissance man. As a young man he was an athlete and served as organist at a church. He has given piano concerts. His TED talk has had almost 3,000,000 views. Yale and Harvard are among the 25 (!) universities that have awarded him an honorary doctorate. In 1995, he received a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Prize and, in 2016, he received a Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship. In 2014, *Time*

magazine designated *Just Mercy* one of the 10 most important non-fiction books of the year and, in 2015, *Time* named Stevenson one of the world's 100 most influential people.

Second, although Stevenson is careful not to wear his Christian faith on his sleeve, I suggest that he is a modern day saint—an Albert Schweitzer or a Dorothy Day or a Mother Teresa or a Václav Havel or a Paul Farmer for our time.

Soon after Stevenson moved to Montgomery, he became acquainted with the marvelous Rosa Parks of bus boycott fame and with some of her friends who also were pioneers of the civil rights movement. During an early visit, Ms. Parks asked him: “Bryan, tell me who you are and what you're doing.” Here is part of his reply: “I have a law project called the Equal Justice Initiative, and we're trying to help people on death row. We're trying to stop the death penalty, actually. We're trying to do something about prison conditions and excessive punishment. We want to free people who've been wrongly convicted.

We want to end unfair sentences in criminal cases and stop racial bias in criminal justice. We're trying to help the poor and do something about indigent defense and the fact that people don't get the legal help they need. We're trying to help people who are mentally ill. We're trying to stop them from putting children in adult jails and prisons. We're trying to do something about poverty and hopelessness that dominates poor communities. We want to see more diversity in decision-making roles in the justice system. We're trying to educate people about racial history and the need for racial justice. We're trying to confront abuse of power by the police and prosecutors.”

Rosa Parks responded: “Ooooh, honey, all that's going to make you tired, tired, tired.” They all laughed, and then Ms. Johnnie Carr, the organizer of the bus boycott in Montgomery, said to Stevenson: “That's why you've got to be brave, brave, brave.”

Stevenson has been brave. EJI has received multiple bomb threats. For years, financial support was iffy. Sometimes it has been difficult to recruit able lawyers for the modest salaries that EJI could afford to pay. The hours are long, and the work can be as soul-wrenching as it is rewarding.

And EJI is doing it really, really well. They have been very effective in bringing about change in America's criminal justice system. Several EJI appeals have reached the Supreme Court of the United States and have led to more humane treatment of children and mentally ill persons.

EJI is equally effective in providing direct help to their clients (for no fees, of course), both those on

death row and others. For example, they have won relief for more than 115 (!) persons on death row, many of them innocent and others of them given unjust trials or unjust sentences.

Stevenson writes beautifully about the persons whom he and EJI are serving so effectively. The person who receives most attention in the book is Walter McMillian, a black man from Monroeville, Alabama. Monroeville is the home of Harper Lee, author of the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the parallels between McMillian's experience and the experience of the novel's Tom Robinson are remarkable. Both are black men who are found guilty of capital crimes they did not commit, Robinson of the rape of a white girl and McMillian of the murder of a white girl.

The fictional Robinson was killed while trying to escape. McMillian was sent in 1987 to death row in Holman Prison in Alabama.

That's where Bryan Stevenson came onto the picture. After a

series of legal actions, he secured the exoneration and release of McMillian, who in fact was at a church fish fry with numerous other people at the time the awful murder was committed. Neither his mistreatment by prosecutors nor his unjust six-year imprisonment on death row seems to have deprived McMillian of his dignity or of his wonderful sense of humor. He forgave those who demonized and abused him.

I wish I had the narrative skill to help you feel the humanity of the incarcerated persons whom Stevenson and his EJI are helping. Let me put it this way. In Chapter 10, Stevenson tells the story of Avery Jenkins. I will buy a chocolate milkshake for the first six people who read the story of Jenkins and his corrections officer without a getting a lump in their throats and without tearing up. Just write me at <fisherhumphreys@gmail.com>. Seriously.

You're going to love this book. ■

Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution.

James P. Byrd. (2013) (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press) Pp. x + 244, \$27.95, ISBN 978-0-19-984349-7.

Reviewed by Michael D. Royster

Sacred Scripture, Sacred War provides an overview of Biblical themes and their applicability for combatants during times of war with the purpose of instilling courage, and a sense of assurance that they have “God on their side” for their actions of aggression and defense. The book stresses that soldiers during wartime face a moral dilemma of having to kill while in battle, which contravenes with civilian life norms. Byrd addresses primarily a North American audience as he references various wars ranging from the American

Revolution to the War on Terror with the U.S. as the protagonist. During war, the preacher's role entailed inspiring soldiers by appealing to their highest virtues in anticipating military battles and promoting communal values such that soldiers can transcend the confines of individualism, and provide a sense of purpose, unity and social identity. “War requires both violence and discourse, words to justify killing, to cope with destruction, and to give meaning to victory and defeat” (p. 20). The Bible often functions as an authoritative source to justify war, revolution, slavery and, to a lesser extent, abolition by colonists, the virtues of martyrdom and sacrifice. The book challenges the assumptions of theologically-based pacifism that the use of violence opposes divine aspirations of peace and goodwill.

Reading *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War* requires extra caution, because a misinterpretation of the author's

intention can result in falsely concluding that the dark side of war which often includes the loss of civilian life, war crimes and the depletion of essential resources becomes neutralized by the belief that God supports such a cause. At times, Biblical narratives from the ancient world about war can have theological implications for the present world. However, such narratives are intended to make moral points or to answer questions about God's relationship to humanity. Nevertheless, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War* demonstrates the challenge that both past and present military chaplains face in confronting the moral dissonance of both soldiers and commanders. Although absolute pacifism rests on “post-conventional morality” (term coined by Lawrence Kohlberg), Byrd's book attempts to resolve strain encountered when war or aggression become the least of the unfavorable options. Typically, pacifist purity falls

short of full by addressing the reality of the need to defend human rights, or to prevent further atrocities.

The book references the biblical Exodus account as a means to interpret the role of divine intervention during war as God becomes portrayed as actively fighting on the side of justice. Scholars within the sub-discipline of African American biblical hermeneutics should find sections of *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War* appealing. “Not surprisingly, when African Americans encountered the Bible, they often followed the revolutionary pattern of identifying with the Exodus narrative” (p. 56). Within the context of slavery in the U.S., black preachers used caution when back referencing the Exodus by finding creative ways of retelling the story in a subtle way in order to avoid accusations of provoking a rebellion which might result in consequences ranging from physical punishment to death by hanging. Nevertheless, the art of such coded storytelling has been safeguarded as a homiletic tool in today’s predominantly traditional black church settings. Beyond biblical hermeneutics,

the book contributes to the collection of literature that deals with theodicy, but specifically in the context of militaristic confrontation.

The author demonstrates that Biblical prophets condemned cowardice behavior by referencing texts that allude to divine chastisement for inadequate displays of faith in God. During the American Revolutionary War, the odds of victory were against the colonists based on their relative military strength in arms and funding with that of Great Britain. Such a scenario contains parallels to the story of David and Goliath as linkages between military and spiritual warfare (see p. 114).

In the New Testament, Peter confronts unjust religious leadership in contrast to unconditional obedience to kings. The author references the account of Peter’s incarceration for preaching as a transitional passage to the latter section of the book which focuses on the use of apocalyptic texts. During the American Revolution, preaching from apocalyptic texts focused primarily on America’s national eschatological destiny in

millennial role terms. “Overall, drawing on apocalyptic ideas, Americans have waged wars, pursued peace and health, found new movements, supported and refuted slavery, advocated and opposed religious liberty and launched terrorist attacks” (p. 143). Apocalyptic texts intend to encourage both soldiers and civilians during times of trial by directing the focus towards one’s individual and collective soul rather than their physical bodies.

By minimizing the use of jargon, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War* represents a scholarly work written in lay terminology which can easily appeal to a broad audience. As a religious historian, Byrd contributes to the study of both American civil religion and military history in capturing the critical role that preachers and selected passages from the Bible played in the American Revolutionary War and its present day implications. ■

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Seven things I’m learning about Transgender Persons

by Mark Wingfield

I don’t know much about transgender issues, but I’m trying to learn.

How about you? How much do you really know about this subject beyond all the screaming headlines and concerns about who goes to the bathroom where?

The truth is that I don’t know any transgender persons—at least I don’t think I do. But with the help of a pediatrician friend and a geneticist friend, I’m listening and trying to learn. This is hard though, because understanding the transgender experience seems so far outside what I have ever contemplated before. And the more I learn, the more theological questions I face as well. This is hard, even for a pastor.

Here’s some of what I’m learning from my friends who have experience as medical professionals dealing with real people and real families:

1. Even though LGBT gets lumped together in one tagline, the T is quite different than the LG and B. “Lesbian,” “gay” and “bisexual” describe sexual orientation. “Transgender” describes gender identity. These are not the same thing. Sexual orientation is about whom we feel an attraction to and want to mate with; gender identity is about whether we identify as male or female.
2. What you see is not always what you get. For the vast majority of humanity, the presence of male or female genitalia corresponds to whether a person is male or female. What you see is what you are. But for a small part of humanity (something less than one percent), the visible parts and the inner identity do not align. For example, it is possible to be born with male genitalia but have female chromosomes or

vice versa. And now brain research has demonstrated that it also is possible to be born with female genitalia and to have female chromosomes and yet have a male brain. Most of us hit the jackpot upon birth with all three factors lining up like cherries on a slot machine: Our anatomy, chromosomes and brain cells all correspond as either male or female. But some people are born with variations in one or two of these indicators.

3. Stuff happens at birth that most of us never know. It’s not an everyday occurrence; but it’s also not infrequent that babies are born with ambiguous or incomplete sexual anatomy. In the past, surgeons often made the decision about whether this child would be a boy or a girl, based on what was the easiest surgical fix. Today, much more thought is given to these life-changing decisions.

4. Transgender persons are not “transvestites.” Far too many of us make this mix-up—in part because the words sound similar and because we have no real knowledge of either. Cross-dressers, identified in slang as “transvestites,” are people (typically men) who are happy with their gender but who derive pleasure from occasionally dressing like the opposite gender. Cross-dressing is about something other than gender identity.

5. Transgender persons are not pedophiles. The typical profile of a pedophile is an adult male who identifies as heterosexual and most likely is even married. There is zero statistical evidence to link transgender persons to pedophilia.

6. Transgender persons hate all the attention they’re getting. The typical transgender person wants desperately not to attract attention. All this publicity and talk of bath-

room habits is highly disconcerting to people who have spent their lives trying not to stand out or become the center of attention.

7. Transgender persons are the product of nature much more than nurture. Debate the origins of homosexuality if you like and what role nature vs. nurture plays. But for those who are transgender, nature undeniably plays a primary role. According to medical science, chromosomal variances occur within moments of conception, and anatomical development happens within the nine months in the womb. There is no nature vs. nurture argument, except in cases of brain development, which is an emerging field of study.

This last point in particular raises the largest of theological questions. If Christians really believe every person is created in the image of God, how can we damn a baby who comes from the womb with gender dysphoria? My pediatrician friend puts it this way: “We must believe that even if some people got a lower dose of a chromosome, or an enzyme, or a hormonal effect, that does not mean that they got a lower dose of God’s image.”

I don’t know much about transgender issues, but I’m trying to learn—in part because I want to understand the way God has made us. For me, this is a theological quest as much as a biological inquiry or a political cause. How about you? ■

Mark Wingfield is Associate Pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, TX. This essay first appeared in Baptist News Global on May 13, 2016 and is reprinted here with permission. After posting on social media this essay was widely read.

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