

Christian Ethics Today

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

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The “Conservative Impulse:” Religious Liberty Misunderstood

By Aaron Weaver

Good Friday is the day that Christians around the world commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his death at Calvary. For Rev. Wendell Griffen, an African-American Baptist minister in Arkansas, Good Friday would be the beginning of an assault on religious freedom—his religious freedom and ours too.

Rev. Griffen, pastor of New Millennium Church in Little Rock, joined members of his congregation on the afternoon of April 14, 2017, in front of the Arkansas Governor’s mansion for a Good Friday prayer vigil. The vigil came as the Arkansas Department of Correction planned to execute eight men in 11 days as the state rushed the executions before the expiration of one of the drugs used in its lethal injection protocol.

As the small group held vigil, they offered prayers and sang songs—gospel tunes and favorite hymns such as *This Little Light of Mine* and *Amazing Grace*. They did so as Griffen laid on a cot silently and acted as a dead person to, as he wrote, express his “solidarity with Jesus who was condemned to death by crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor in Palestine.” He laid gripping a black, leather-bound KJV Bible, which his parents had taught him to read and love nearly 60 years ago.

Earlier in the day, Griffen, who also serves as an elected judge with the Pulaski County Circuit Court, had issued a temporary restraining order barring the Arkansas Department of Correction from proceeding with the execution because of a dispute over how the state obtained the drug vecuronium bromide. The pharmaceutical distributor, McKesson Medical-Surgical, requested the restraining

order, arguing that the state had misleadingly obtained the drug.

On April 17, the morning after Resurrection Sunday, the Arkansas Supreme Court issued an order barring Griffen from hearing future death penalty cases as well as cases involving the state’s execution protocol. The Court also referred Griffen to the Judicial Discipline and Disability Commission for possible sanctions and cases currently before Griffen were

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reassigned. The Court’s order implied that Griffen had acted improperly and betrayed his judicial commitment to be independent and impartial. With the *per curiam* order, the state threw the first punch in a coordinated, pernicious attack on one of its most influential African-American leaders.

Prior to the Arkansas Supreme Court’s action and just hours after Griffen issued the restraining order, a federal judge had issued a separate order staying the executions. United States District Judge Kristine G. Baker made her determination based on grounds related to the inmates’ potential lack of access to their attorney and also questioned the constitutionality

of the state’s lethal injection procedure.

“Property law is property law, no matter whether one supports or is opposed to capital punishment,” Griffen wrote two days later on his blog. “My job as a judge was to apply property law to the facts presented by the verified complaint and decide whether the medical supplier moving party was likely to succeed on its property law claim for return of the vecuronium bromide. If the medical supplier was not likely to succeed on its property law claim, it was not likely to succeed whether I support or am opposed to capital punishment. If the medical supplier was likely to succeed, but there was no proof that the vecuronium bromide was in imminent risk of being disposed of before a hearing, then there was no reason to issue a [temporary restraining order] whether I support or am opposed to capital punishment.

“And whether the medical supplier was entitled to a [temporary restraining order] or not, I was entitled to practice my religion on Good Friday. I was entitled to practice my religion if there was no [temporary restraining order] motion. I was entitled to practice my religion whether I granted the [temporary restraining order] or not. I was entitled to practice my religion as a follower of Jesus with other followers of Jesus from New Millennium Church. I was entitled to practice my religion as a follower of Jesus with other New Millennium followers of Jesus in front of the Arkansas Governor’s Mansion.”¹

Most notably, weeks later the Arkansas Supreme Court nor any person or entity had yet to explain why Griffen allegedly did not interpret and apply Arkansas property and

contract law when issuing the temporary restraining order. Nor had the Arkansas Supreme Court explained how Griffen could have possibly failed to follow the law when the judge who replaced him ruled the exact same way Griffen did.

The second swing at Griffen would come May 1 when Arkansas State Senator Trent Garner, a Republican from El Dorado, publicly called for the judge’s impeachment. Garner, a Southern Baptist layman and member of Calvary Baptist Church in East Camden, claimed the Griffen had “attacked the integrity of our legal system” and had on many occasions “shown that he is not fit to be on the bench.”

“He should never again be allowed to hold office of any sort in Arkansas,” Garner said. “We as the General Assembly can remove the stain that Griffen has left on our judicial integrity.”²

The question of Griffen’s fitness was a clear expression of disdain for the Baptist minister’s proven record advocating for justice—from support for civil rights for LGBT individuals to outspoken opposition to “bathroom bills” to his criticisms of racist voter ID legislation. Without a doubt, Griffen’s boldness and eagerness to challenge the white conservative establishment in Arkansas has attracted countless critics.

These critics would seize the opportunity to suppress Griffen’s religious freedom with the ultimate hope of silencing him. Just two days later, on May 3, the Arkansas House of Representatives passed a resolution amending rules to allow lawmakers to impeach an elected public official.

“Political officeholders have the right to disagree with what others say and do,” Griffen told local media in response. “We have no right to use our offices to punish or threaten people for exercising their right to disagree with us. Whenever that happens, the word we use is ‘tyranny.’”³

Tyranny, indeed. We all—Wendell Griffen included—are entitled to practice our faith as we see fit. Rev. Griffen was entitled to practice his religion on Good Friday. He was entitled to practice his religion as a follower of Jesus with other members of New Millennium Church. He was entitled to practice his religion even if others disapprove of the way he practices it.

The First Amendment—our nation’s first freedom—guarantees Wendell Griffen this right. The First Amendment guarantees Griffen’s freedom to express his religious beliefs. Sadly, this remains a beautiful but simple concept that so many in our society, Baptists included, can’t seem

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to fully grasp. One need not be an expert to recognize that Griffen has been and is being targeted for expressing religious convictions that politicians and other members of the (very white) power structure in Arkansas dislike.

Throughout history, attempts to punish individuals, including elected officials, for practicing their faith have failed to pass constitutional muster. The same is true here. Not only is this concerted effort a violation of Griffen’s religious freedom under the First Amendment, efforts to punish Griffen are in violation of Arkansas state law—specifically the Arkansas Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a law his white conservative critics had enthusiastically backed.

When adopting the act in 2015, the Arkansas General Assembly declared that “there is not a higher protection offered by the State than the protection of a person’s right to religious

freedom.”⁴ Clearly, there is no compelling state interest to prohibit Judge Griffen from praying and practicing his faith on his own time, outside the courtroom and with members of his congregation.

To support their ministry colleague, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas organized a religious freedom rally on June 9 on the front steps of the Arkansas State Capitol in Little Rock. Cooperative Baptist leaders and other faith and civil rights leaders from across the country participated in the rally and press conference, championing Rev. Griffen’s right to express his religious beliefs as both a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and as an elected official.

“Freedom of conscience isn’t a luxury,” said CBF Executive Coordinator Suzii Paynter. “It is a bedrock; it is the first freedom. . . . Those who serve in government are not disqualified from having religious beliefs and exercising their religious beliefs in ways that are protected by law.”⁵

Preston Clegg, senior pastor of Second Baptist Church in Little Rock, echoed Paynter, pointing to one of the founders of the Baptist tradition, Thomas Helwys, who reminded the tyrant King James that he had not authority over the soul before God. “Conviction of conscience and the rule of law are not enemies,” Clegg said at the rally. “One can be both convictional about the issues and impartial about how the law pertains to any person standing in a courtroom. Only a modicum of imagination is necessary to contemplate all the ways judges and juries must apply the law fairly and equitably regardless of their personal beliefs.”

“What does indeed stretch the imagination, however, is the realization of what judicial activity causes a stir amongst our legislators and what judicial misconduct goes unnamed and undisciplined by comparison,”

Clegg concluded.⁶

The irony is that the conservative legislators of Arkansas don't lack imagination when it comes to speculating ways in which their own Religious Freedom Restoration Act does not apply to the suppression of Rev. Griffen's right to practice his faith. State Senator Trent Garner made the audacious claim during an interview with a Little Rock newspaper that the religious freedom law somehow does not apply to Griffen because he's an elected official.

"That is a completely different situation than a government official, elected, with a position of power," Garner said.⁷

Garner's comments reflect the hypocrisy that all too often undergirds the *conservative impulse* in recent religious liberty conversations. Religious liberty for me but not for thee. Religious liberty for those who believe exactly as I do and vote like me, but not for those whose political ideology and theological convictions differ from my own. The First Amendment is no longer sufficient. This is what today's *conservative impulse* shows us with its words, deeds and conspicuous silence.

The "conscience" of a multi-billion dollar arts and crafts chain which refuses to provide reproductive health care insurance to its female employees *matters*. The conscience of the county clerk who refuses to sign a marriage license for a same-sex couple *matters*. The conscience of the pharmacist who refuses to dispense contraception to women patients *matters*. The conscience of the cake baker and the florist who refuse to extend its for-profit services for a same-sex wedding *matters*.

Yet, the conscience of Rev. Griffen, a progressive African-American pastor and elected judge, does not matter. We are told that Griffen's sheds his religious freedom because of his status as a government official. We are told that a new expansive law designed to purportedly protect the consciences of

the people of Arkansas does not apply to the pastor of New Millennium Church. This is what the *conservative impulse* on religious freedom looks like in action—dripping in hypocrisy and oozing with white privilege.

"A threat to anyone's religious liberty is a threat to everyone's religious liberty," as James Dunn, the late longtime executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, used to say—echoing Dr. King's powerful refrain "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

While we often give lip service to this statement, we must not take it for granted. We must believe it to be true and live fully into this truth. To do so

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requires giving voice to a broad vision of religious liberty that isn't encumbered by myopia. This vision must be rooted in the reality that religious liberty and social justice are inseparable, a theme found frequently in the Gospels. The gospel-centered goal of an unfettered conscience can only be ensured when we seek justice and pursue peace.

In his new book, *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope*, Rev. Griffen rightly identifies the *conservative impulse*, calling on evangelicals to "break from the morally and ethically indefensible and dwarfish practice of supporting 'soul liberty' while actively opposing the demands from others for life, liberty and equality."⁸

Griffen reminds us that this broad vision of religious liberty—one that is not detached from the biblical imper-

ative to seek justice—should reflect the Great Commandment, Christ's call to love God and love neighbor.

"The love of God about which we preach, study, sing, write, teach and pray demands that followers of Jesus love God enough to protect our neighbors, including our neighbors with divergent lives, beliefs, behaviors and struggles, as much as we cherish our own religious liberty," Griffen writes.⁹

We are called as Baptists and as Christians to defend conscience, seek justice and exalt and apply the love ethic of Christ. This is the broad vision of religious freedom that we must bear witness to. And when we witness threats to religious liberty—such as the ongoing attack on Rev. Wendell Griffen in Little Rock, Ark.—we must be bold advocates, putting our convictions to action.

I am thankful to have been able to assist with the effort of a courageous group of Baptists and other faith leaders to speak out on behalf of Rev. Wendell Griffen and champion and defend his religious freedom.

May we never be a silent people. ■

Dr. Aaron D. Weaver is Communications Director for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, where he serves as editor of *fellowship!* magazine. He is the author of several books, including *James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom*, *CBF at 25: Stories of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*, and the forthcoming *Different and Distinctive but Nevertheless Baptist: A History of Northminster Baptist Church*.

1 Wendell Griffen, "Let us Reason Together," April 19, 2017, Justice is a verb!, <http://wendellgriffen.blogspot.com/2017/04/let-us-reason-together.html> (accessed August 21, 2017).

2 John Lyon, "Arkansas state senator calls for judge's impeachment," Arkansas News Bureau, May 1, 2017, <http://www.arkansasnews.com/news/20170501/arkansas-state-senator-calls-for-judge8217s->

Freedom of Conscience Is Not a Luxury...It is Bedrock

By Suzii Paynter

Freedom of conscience isn't a luxury. It is a bedrock; it is the first freedom, the first sixteen words of the US Constitution, Bill of rights. This first freedom (Religious) provides protection for all.

Those who serve in government are not disqualified from having religious beliefs and exercising their religious beliefs in ways that are protected by law.

We all — Judge Griffen included — are entitled to practice our faith. Judge Griffen was entitled to practice his religion on Good Friday. He was entitled to practice his religion as a follower of Jesus with other members of New Millennium Church. He was entitled to practice his religion even if others disapprove of the way he practices it.

As individual Christians and just thankful Americans - we have inherited a legacy of religious freedom.

We rise today to stand with Reverend /Judge Wendell Griffen—our brother and fellow pastor who serves faithfully both his church as pastor and the state as an elected official.

We rise today as a positive witness

for religious freedom. We are proud of the contribution of Baptists in standing up to government, fighting to secure and protect our country's religious freedom, including by supporting federal and state religious freedom restoration acts such as Arkansas' RFRA.

(These laws apply broadly to treat all claims under the same standard – often claims that honor God's gift of life, at the beginning and at the

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end. Today there is a lot of confusion about religious liberty and what it means, but we are determined to con-

tinue to fight for the principle and its application to the broadest extent we can. Of course, that also means taking account of the interests of others.)

Arkansas' RFRA, like the federal law, protects against government burdens on religion's exercise unless such burdens are necessary -- justified by compelling government interests, narrowly tailored to meet those interests. Not all claims will or should succeed, but it provides broad protection with a careful balanced standard.

Courts will decide whether the complaint against Judge Griffen should be dismissed, but regardless of the particular claim or outcome of any cases, Baptists will continue to stand firm for religious freedom for all. And, we applaud the many ways Judge Griffen serves our state and our community. ■

Reverend Suzii Paynter is the Executive Coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and can be reached at: 512-789-5702, spaynter@cbf.net

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impeachment (accessed August 21, 2017).

3 Chris Hickey, "House approves impeachment procedures after judge's protest," KUAf, May 3, 2017, <http://kuaf.com/post/house-approves-impeachment-procedures-after-judges-protest#stream/0> (August 21, 2017).

4 Sunnive Brydum, "Arkansas Gov. Signs Revised 'Religious Freedom' Act," The Advocate, April 2, 2017, <https://www.advocate.com/politics/2015/04/02/arkansas-gov-signs-revised-religious-free->

dom-act (accessed August 21, 2017).

5 Ken Camp, "CBF leaders defend pastor/judge who protested death penalty," The Baptist Standard, June 12, 2017, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/baptist/20334-cbf-leaders-defend-pastor-judge-who-protested-death-penalty> (accessed August 21, 2017).

6 Aaron Weaver, "Cooperative Baptist Fellowship leaders show support for Arkansas Judge at religious freedom rally," CBFblog, June 9, 2017, <https://cbfblog.com/2017/06/09/cooperative-baptist->

fellowship-leaders-show-support-for-arkansas-judge-at-religious-freedom-rally/ (accessed August 21, 2017).

7 John Lyon, "Arkansas judge says religious freedom law protects him," Arkansas News Bureau, June 9, 2017, <http://www.arkansasnews.com/news/20170609/arkansas-judge-says-religious-freedom-law-protects-him> (accessed August 21, 2017).

8 Wendell L. Griffen, *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope* (King of Prussia, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2017), 41.

9 Ibid.

Convictional and Impartial: Judge Wendell Griffen

By Preston Clegg

Religious freedom has been a bed-rock virtue and firm conviction of Baptist life as long as there have been Baptists. In 1612, Baptist pastor Thomas Helwys reminded King James of England that the king was a man and not God, and therefore the king had no authority over the soul before God. This idea floated across the Atlantic with Baptists who experienced the dark and dangerous underbelly of a church buttressed by state authority. As surprising as this may be to some today, Baptists were a minority voice in the colonial days of this country, and were often treated as such. Thus, our forebears saw the necessity of religious freedom for all people, including the minority voices...*especially* the minority voices. Baptists have their fingerprints all over the First Amendment, promising freedom *from* religion, and freedom *for* it. This conviction is easily lost, however, when the minority voice becomes the majority one and those who were once out in the wilderness find themselves in positions of power.

Ironically, we gather today to stand *for* religious liberty and *with* our friend Wendell Griffen, who, though

both a pastor and a judge, is most often known for being a prophetic voice in the wilderness. He often speaks from the fringes of society because the people who live out there are his friends. He sees them and hears them. His faith leads him to convictions that are often not shared by those in the seats of power. That unique perspective, however, doesn't preclude him from sitting on the judicial bench, especially given the fact

Conviction of conscience and the rule of law are not enemies.

One need not cease being a fierce prophet in order to be a fair judge.

that the people of Central Arkansas elected him there...twice.

Conviction of conscience and the rule of law are not enemies. One can be BOTH convictional about the

issues and impartial about how the law pertains to any person standing in a courtroom. Only a modicum of imagination is necessary to contemplate *all* the ways judges and juries must apply the law fairly and equitably regardless of their personal beliefs. Judge Griffen's track record in the courtroom indicates that he has, does, and will apply the law justly to any and every case before him. What does indeed stretch the imagination, however, is the realization of what judicial activity causes a stir amongst our legislators and what judicial misconduct goes unnamed and undisciplined by comparison.

As a Baptist minister, I believe first amendment rights apply to ALL people. But they are especially pertinent to and protective of voices from the wilderness, even when that voice is wearing a judicial robe. One need not cease being a fierce prophet in order to be a fair judge. Wendell Griffen is both. ■

Rev. Dr. Preston Clegg is Senior Pastor of Second Baptist Church in Little Rock. He can be reached at pclegg@2bclcr.com

From our mailbag...

Dear Pat:

I continue to be totally impressed with Christian Ethics Today...If possible I would appreciate 2 or 3 more copies....

*Dr. Edward Fernald
Tallahassee, FL*

Now Is Not The Time For Complacency

By Tina Bailey

My name is Tina Bailey and I have served for more than 20 years in Bali, Indonesia under the auspices of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, where my husband, Jonathan, and I focus on spiritual expression through music, dance and visual arts both inside and outside the local Christian community.

While serving in Indonesia, I have seen first-hand the damage done by the death penalty. I held vigil with the family of Myuran Sukumaran as he was being executed. I saw the pain in the eyes of prison guards who grieved that a man who they had witnessed being transformed, and had helped others experience that same transformation was about to be executed. I saw the impact of those who lost hope — losing hope because they no longer believed there was any reason to change when such change clearly did not make a difference.

The death penalty creates many concentric circles of trauma that lasts long after the execution takes place. As one who shares my faith convictions, Pastor Griffen knows this. Many are condemned without proper evidence. Many truly reform their lives but find

no mercy. When we condone the death of another person, we take on the role of God. This should not be so.

From my experience walking the journey with a death row inmate, I came to firmly believe that Justice must be paired with Mercy. I hold deeply to the words from Micah 6:8 — “Do Justice, Love Mercy and Walk Humbly With Your God.” If any of those is missing, we run the risk of doing great harm to one another.

The death penalty creates many concentric circles of trauma that lasts long after the execution takes place.

I stand here today in support of my Baptist colleague and brother in Christ, Judge Wendell Griffen. I strongly support his right to religious freedom, to cling tightly to his religious convictions opposed to the taking of human life. Religious freedom is the bedrock principle upon which our society was built. It is our First

Freedom. It is the cornerstone of our Baptist beliefs.

As the popular saying goes, “When anyone's religious liberty is denied, everyone's is in jeopardy.” Judge Griffen's religious liberty is under attack at the hands of the Arkansas Judicial Discipline Commission — all because Judge Griffen had the audacity to participate in a prayer vigil on Good Friday in front of the Governor's Mansion as the state was planning to execute eight inmates. He did so in his role as a Baptist pastor and alongside his congregation, members of New Millennium Church.

Judge Griffen deserves our support and prayers. We are called do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. Judge Griffen's religious freedom is in jeopardy and so is ours. Now is not the time for complacency. It is time for the fierce urgency of prophetic hope. Our nation's First Freedom has never mattered more. ■

Tina Bailey is a representative of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. She lives in Denpasar, Bali in the nation of Indonesia and can be reached at: jona-than.tina.bailey@worldpersonnel.org

From our mailbag...

Thanks for the excellent articles. My late husband, Dr. William McBeath, always appreciated and carefully read each issue of Christian Ethics Today. He was such an admirer and friend of Foy Valentine.

*Sincerely,
Shirley McBeath
Rockville, MD*

Religious Liberty For Me but Not For Thee?

William D. Lindsey

Religious liberty for me — but not for thee? This is *not* how the founders of the American republic envisaged religious liberty. It is, however, what religious freedom has come to mean to some people of faith, who want to stand religious liberty on its head and make it the basis for discriminating against others, including other people of faith.

Religious liberty for me but not for thee: you may believe that same-sex couples should be allowed the marital rights that heterosexual couples enjoy. You may believe that women have a right to contraceptive coverage as part of their basic healthcare plan. You may believe that capital punishment is barbaric and immoral. But I intend to overrule you, and call that overruling “religious liberty” — for me. Not for thee.

The concept of religious liberty, which was precious to the founders of the American republic, is about something else. It’s about protecting the right of religious groups, especially non-dominant ones, to hold their beliefs and principles in peace, without molestation, without coercion. It’s about the right of religious bodies, on their side of the wall separating church and state, to hold their religious beliefs and live their religious lives freely, without interference from the state.

It is *not* about a presumed right of any religious group to dictate to the rest of society and to other religious bodies what it happens to believe as mandated policy for the entire nation. It is *not* about a presumed right of any religious group to silence members of other religious groups whose consciences and beliefs happen not to run in the channel dictated by the group appealing to religious liberty as a ground to coerce others — liberty for

The concept of religious liberty Judge Wendell Griffen is defending is foundational to American democracy.

me. Not for thee.

The founders of our republic must spin in their graves, I think, at this perversion of an idea they cherished because they knew what discord — bloodshed, even — developed in Europe when crown and altar united, and the power of the state was used to curb religious dissent and impose religious ideas. The founders of the republic built a wall to separate church and state *both* to protect the right of religious groups to believe and practice freely, in peace and without

coercion, *and* the right of the state to pursue its work without dictation from any religious body claiming a mandate to control what happens in the secular sphere.

The concept of religious liberty Judge Wendell Griffen is defending is foundational to American democracy. It is the concept of religious liberty cemented into the foundations of our republic by its founders. Without robust religious liberty protecting the rights of minority groups to hold their religious ideas freely, to speak freely what they believe, American democracy is diminished in the most radical way possible.

I stand with Judge Wendell Griffen in his defense of American democracy, against the perverted notion of religious liberty that stands religious liberty on its head by asserting a pseudo-right of dominant religious groups to silence dissenters and to use state power as a tool to impose their peculiar religious ideas on all citizens by coercion. This is not what democracy is about. Nor is it what the founders of the American democratic experiment envisaged for the republic they founded. ■

Dr. William D. Lindsey is a Catholic theologian living in Little Rock, Arkansas. He can be reached at wdlindsy@swbell.net

There Is Great Irony when a Judge of Justice Is Punished with Injustice

By Rizelle Aaron

Good afternoon, to the listening ears of the deaf, and to those in other countries that will hear these few words in their own languages. As the president of the Arkansas State Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, I bring you greetings on behalf of the greatest civil rights organization in America that has withstood the test of time.

Many movements have been created by martyrs. But this is not that type of movement. There are martyrs of religion and martyrs of liberty. But this is not that type of movement. Religious liberty is a legal concept guided by spiritual principle. Liberty is a right without negative consequence that is sometimes confused with freedom which is an option and which in some cases carries negative consequences.

There is great irony when a judge of justice is punished with injustice for exercising his legal right.

The recent attacks on the Honorable Judge and Pastor Wendell Griffen, a free man long before becoming a judge, are direct attacks on religious liberty. We have the right and the obligation to exercise our religious liberty. There are some who would prefer that Griffen were a professional martyr through the suffering caused by those that would inflict embarrassment and humiliation on him for exercising his religious liberty

to the extent of ending his career. There are some who may even prefer that he become a traditional type martyr. But this is not that type of movement. In fact this is not a martyr movement at all.

The movement for religious liberty is a movement of the living without respect of person. We will not allow the principalities and powers that be

A number of judges in this state have not only violated the code of conduct, but also violated criminal laws.

to create martyrs at will. Because it will allow it, the system of oppression can come for any of us at any time without resistance.

As a student of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I know there will be resistance, albeit nonviolent resistance, in practice and application. But there will none the less be resistance en masse to bring change en bloc.

A number of judges in this state have not only violated the code of conduct, but also violated criminal laws. Yet, those judges have been allowed due process extending over long periods of time. One judge, a male judge had sex with male defendants, but where were you then,

Supreme Court? Where were the impeachment legislators when another judge was arrested for manslaughter? Where were you Supreme Court? Where were you, impeachment legislators?

But you moved with Guinness book world record-breaking, lightning speed, forgoing due process to punish a judge who chose to participate in a religious display and exercise his religious liberty. Then we saw you, Supreme Court. Then we saw you, impeachment legislators.

And we recognize the one distinguishable difference between these judges.

We stand together in unity. We will not be silenced by the ole’ tactics of slavery that sought to silence the voices of the intelligent slaves to avoid infecting the other slaves with knowledge.

And if it be evil for the principalities and powers that be, to serve the Lord or even to support our service to the Lord, whether they choose to serve the gods of politics, or the gods of riches and gold we all have a choice to make; but choose you this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. ■

Rizelle Aaron is President of the Arkansas State Conference of the NAACP and can be reached at: P. O. Box 582 Jacksonville, AR 72078 (501) 940-4619

We Need More Moral Leadership In America, Not Less

By George Mason

Judge Wendell Griffen is like every other American, a man entitled to the protections of the law he himself has vowed to uphold. His right to protest the death penalty as a private citizen is unquestioned. Being a public servant and an officer of the court does not change that right. Every citizen has more than one role in life. Judge Griffen is no different. He is a man, a black man, a husband, a father, a judge, a preacher, an Arkansan and an American. The First Amendment to the Constitution, as well as Arkansas's Religious Freedom Restoration Act, guarantees that Judge Griffen does not have to deny being Reverend Griffen in order to carry out his public duties. He can carry his conscience to work, as long as he impartially carries out the law as a

Religiously motivated moral dissent should provoke reflection, not reaction or retaliation. This is how democracy works.

judge. When he deems a law unjust, he is permitted to bring his conscience to bear in protest as a Christian minister and as a moral agent like every other citizen.

Religious liberty is good for everyone, but it is easier in theory than in practice. When Judge Griffen exercised his religious freedom to protest the death penalty in a nonviolent way, he modeled for us precisely the kind

of dissent we must protect. That protest was his right, and the manner in which he protested was also right.

Religiously motivated moral dissent should provoke reflection, not reaction or retaliation. This is how democracy works. When any subject is off limits or any citizen is limited in exercising free speech, democracy does not work.

The proper path now is for the legislature and judicial commission to stand down, affirm Judge Griffen's conduct as both legal and ethical, and allow Arkansans to have a robust debate on the death penalty, if they so choose. ■

Rev. Dr. George A. Mason is Senior Pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas and can be reached at: gmason@wilshirebc.org (214) 803-8300

Judge Wendell Griffen: A Model for Us All

By Stephen K. Reeves

The original U.S. Constitution mentions religion only once - to prohibit a religious test for public office. Today it feels that Judge Griffen is being punished for being the wrong type of Christian. Of course the First Amendment to our Constitution went on to grant more complete religious liberty enshrining into law our God-given religious liberty - the ability to determine our faith for ourselves, without feeling pressure to conform to a state-preferred church and importantly, the ability to actually practice that faith largely free from government interference.

Rather than a reason to attack Judge Griffen, his faith should serve as a model for us all. This faith led him to a calling of public service. Despite deep convictions about our troubling history and concerns about many current practices of our government, he decided to not merely critique from

Judge Griffen has clearly demonstrated that he can preach biblical justice on Sunday and insure equal justice on Monday - and for that he should be praised, not punished.

afar but instead to engage, dedicating his career to practicing justice from within the system. As the late Justice Scalia held in the Republican Party of Minnesota v. White case "proof that a justice's mind at the time he joined the court was a complete blank slate would be evidence of lack of qualification, not lack of bias."

Today Judge Griffen is not asking for an exception to the law, for a special accommodation for his

convictions - all evidence shows he has followed the law - and has done so without sacrificing his faith. He should not be forced to do so today. Thanks to our Constitution Judge Griffen need not sacrifice his faith in order to be a dedicated public servant, nor should he be required to give up his other calling as pastor to New Millennium. In fact, we need more Christians and more elected officials that understand this distinction and live with similar dedication.

Judge Griffen has clearly demonstrated that he can preach biblical justice on Sunday and insure equal justice on Monday - and for that he should be praised, not punished. ■

Stephen K. Reeves, Esq. is Associate Coordinator of Partnerships & Advocacy at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Decatur, Georgia. He can be reached at sreeves@cbf.net 770-220-1606

Thank you for your gifts.

Contributions from faithful readers make

Christian Ethics Today possible.

Your help is greatly appreciated, and needed.

From our mailbag...

Pat,
It always makes my day to find Christian Ethics Today in the mail. Please keep sending it by mail—I like holding a hard copy and turning the pages.
Also, please include me to receive it by email. That will make it easier to share with friends and colleagues.
Thanks for all you do.

Bill McCann
Madisonville, KY

Religious Liberty for a Citizen, Pastor, and Judge

By Ray Higgins

Standing today with a pastor and judge in his exercise of religious liberty is a very Baptist thing to do.

Religious liberty is the signature personal, social and moral value for Baptists. Baptists have championed religious liberty from our beginnings in the early 1600s.

Three Baptist pastors in colonial America—Roger Williams, Isaac Backus and John Leland—spoke, wrote, preached and lobbied for religious liberty.

They were controversial. Political and religious leaders tried to imprison them.

Yet, their views of religious liberty, through the leadership of James Madison, became the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution.

Baptist pastors and ministers like them, and like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Will Campbell,

Religious liberty is the signature personal, social and moral value for Baptists. Baptists have championed religious liberty from our beginnings in the early 1600s.

have creatively and courageously exercised their religious liberty on many religious, moral and political issues.

Today, we highlight this principle of religious liberty in support of Judge and Pastor Wendell Griffen, who is one of our partner pastors, and a personal friend and colleague whom I have known for 20 years.

As a judge, pastor and citizen, who served in the United States Army achieving the rank of 1st Lieutenant

before his honorable discharge, Judge & Pastor Griffen's very expressions of his religion are exactly what the First Amendment and the Arkansas Religious Freedom Restoration Act are designed to protect and guarantee.

When Pastor Griffen silently prayed while lying on a cot in solidarity with Jesus on Good Friday, he did not impose his religious beliefs on others. He did not restrict the freedom of anyone else. He caused no physical harm. And, he created no legitimate reasons for being sanctioned or impeached.

This is why we stand with Judge & Pastor Griffen. ■

Ray Higgins, Ph.D., is Executive Coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas and can be reached at 501.223.8586 (o) www.cbfar.org

George Will on Football...

It has been said (by Thomas Babington Macaulay) that the Puritans banned bear baiting — unleashing fierce dogs on a bear chained in a pit — not because it gave pain to bears but because it gave pleasure to Puritans. But whatever the Puritans' motives, they understood that there are degrading enjoyments.

Football is becoming one, even though Michigan's \$9 million coach has called it "the last bastion of hope for toughness in America in men." That thought must amuse the Marines patrolling Afghanistan's Helmand Province.

George F. Will, "Football's enjoyment is on a fade pattern", September 1, 2017 *The Washington Post*

In Defense of the First Right: Religious Freedom

By Patrick R. Anderson

I have travelled here today to demonstrate my solidarity with Judge Wendell Griffen, and to speak in defense of religious freedom. The full complement of Arkansas state government (executive, legislative, judicial) is arrayed against Judge Griffen to punish him for exercising the basic fundamental right which all Americans enjoy...the First Amendment right of the FREE EXERCISE OF RELIGION. This should be shocking to all Americans.

Many in Arkansas' government are challenging a judge who, on one of the holiest days, if not the holiest day, in the Christian calendar, Good Friday, dramatically demonstrated the seminal miscarriage of justice in the Christian experience—that being the unjust execution of Jesus Christ by means of crucifixion. He did so, exercising his right to express his religious conviction in a nonverbal, moving way.

Now, the most radical politicians tell me and all of us assembled here today, that Judge Griffen should be punished, deprived of his duly-elected judgeship, disgraced, cast aside. Something is seriously amiss in Arkansas' government.

Further, when those same politicians attempt to attach their own religious

connotations to their un-Christian actions, I am reminded of the admonishment from Frederick Douglass, who said, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference."

The absurd allegation from the State's Attorney General, that Judge Griffen's religious expressions have rendered him incapable of fulfilling his duties as an impartial judge in

I am reminded of the admonishment from Frederick Douglass, who said, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference."

matters related to capital punishment in Arkansas is clearly false, and anyone taking time to examine Judge Griffen's professional record in jurisprudence would arrive at that conclusion.

The pretext cited by politicians to

punish this exemplary judge, is Judge Griffen's decision in the case *McKesson Medical-Surgical, Inc. vs. State of Arkansas*. In that well-reasoned decision, Judge Griffen granted a temporary restraining order for the use of fraudulently obtained property by the Arkansas Department of Corrections from McKesson. That ruling follows well-established Arkansas law. There is no disputing Judge Griffen's legal reasoning, no erroneous use of discretion or judicial decision-making. The elected judges, legislators, and executives who say the opposite are wrong and misstate the facts in the case.

The only true reasons for these personal and professional attacks against Judge Griffen can be traced to animus arising from those in Arkansas who disagree with and strongly oppose Judge Griffen's understanding of, adherence to, and expressions of the teachings of Jesus Christ. That is wrong.

I proudly stand with Judge Griffen, my brother, friend and colleague. ■

Patrick R. Anderson is editor, Christian Ethics Today and can be reached at: drpatanderson@gmail.com 863 207-2057 (cell) P.O. Box 1238 Banner Elk, NC 28604

From our mailbag...

Dear Editor,

I have just finished reading the very interesting story written by Tom Graves. My husband, Robert Green, was at the seminary during much of this time...he graduated in the January 1959 class and later received his Doctorate of Ministry in 1980.

Those seminary days were very special to us...I live alone now, as my husband passed away Oct. 2007.

Christian Ethics Today is very dear to me. Thank you.

Anne Green

Dahlongega, GA

I Rise: In Opposition to Governmental Overreach

By Valerie Bridgeman

I rise as a baptized Christian, baptized in 1967 at the Pine Grove Baptist Church in Odena, Alabama, a little country church that taught me the basics and foundations of my faith.

I rise as ordained clergy, having stood in this call for 40 years.

I rise as the leader of a nonprofit organization, WomanPreach! Inc., whose primary work is to amplify the voices of preachers who speak on behalf of marginalized persons, the dispossessed and disinherited about which Howard Thurman spoke.

I rise as a religious biblical scholar and professor of bible and preaching at Methodist Theological School in Ohio in Delaware, OH.

I rise as a citizen, born in this country, who votes in every election that comes up.

I rise as a black daughter of the blood-soaked soil of the Deep South of these United States, land stained with the blood of those Natives to this land and those brought here in bondage from Africa. I am a daughter of both of these peoples.

I rise to say “SHAME ON YOU” to those in Arkansas government and law enforcement and judicial branches who have falsely accused Judge Wendell Griffen of being biased. This accusation is inferred in your actions, and yet, in THIS country, we believe in the right of citizens to exercise

their rights of citizenship: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the right to peaceful assembly, all protected rights by our constitutions, both states’ constitutions and the arbitrating constitution of the United States of America.

As a religious person, I believe in the right of soul freedom and of the role of the conscience to, along with the sacred texts of our faith, guide our faith and the actions that follow.

I call on the state of Arkansas to acknowledge that Judge Wendell Griffen has neither broken any laws nor crossed any civil or religious protocol.

Arkansas lawmakers have a history of trumpeting their “Christian faith” as the source of their morality. But there is no doubt that they mean a particular form of Christian faith, not that faith that guides my friend. I know this is so because there are Arkansas judges who have publicly denounced abortions, that was deemed law by Roe v. Wade, but none of them have been permanently barred from ruling on women’s right. There have been judges who have publicly voiced opposition to LGBTQ rights on

their own time. They have not been so censured. So, Arkansas, you have crossed your own statements of “freedom of religion,” once again, showing you ONLY mean your form of Christianity. SHAME ON YOU.

Christianity consists of diverse traditions, precisely because of soul freedom. It is why Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, and the one who gave Baptists the strong stance of separation of church and state, insisted that civil servants are able to both obey laws and live their lives.

I call on the state of Arkansas to acknowledge that Judge Wendell Griffen has neither broken any laws nor crossed any civil or religious protocol. On his OWN time, as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he lived out HIS faith. And he should be hailed for it, not punished for it. I call on this state to be consistent—not just with your “brand” of Christianity. DO the RIGHT thing. Do the CONSTITUTIONAL thing. Leave Judge Griffen alone to serve his God and do his civil duties. ■

Rev. Valerie Bridgeman, Ph.D. is the Interim Dean and Associate Professor of Homiletics & Hebrew Bible at Methodist Theological School in Ohio. She is also Founding President & CEO of WomanPreach! Inc. www.woman-preach.org

Religious Liberty: “Hanging By a Thread?”

By Randy Hyde

In an article entitled “10 Things You Need to Know About Religious Liberty,” Sally Steenland points out that there are people who think religious liberty in this country “is hanging by a thread.” Such claims, she says, are apocalyptic and wrong. I agree. As long as we have the First Amendment to the Constitution, an amendment championed by 18th century Baptists, religious liberty is, and will remain, alive and well in our nation. And that is the reason we are here today, to do what we can to assure it remains so.

Those in our state government who are attempting to stifle the free religious expression of Rev. Griffen are targeting him for expressing his religious convictions, convictions they simply dislike. This is a matter of disagreement, not of his breeching the law or not keeping faith with his position as a circuit judge.

Wendell Griffen has the inalienable right to his religious views regardless of how unpopular they may be in some circles. And that is true even of judges. Rev. Griffen is in the unique position of being both a judge and a minister of the gospel. The fact that he is a judge does not preclude him from behaving like a preacher, which

is what he was doing on Good Friday.

The Arkansas Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 2015 declares that “there is not a higher protection offered by the State than the protection of a person’s right to religious freedom.” It is time to put that declaration into practice by providing Rev. Griffen the freedom of the Constitution to exercise his God-given right.

There are two basic elements to the

Those in our state government who are attempting to stifle the free religious expression of Rev. Griffen are targeting him for expressing his religious convictions, convictions they simply dislike.

First Amendment. One is the freedom to worship as one pleases. That is not at issue here, at least not directly. The second one is however. In this nation, people have the freedom to practice their faith as they see fit, apart from

government’s establishment of religion or the threat that comes when such practice is unpopular in the circles of governmental power.

In the case of Rev. Griffen, we, his colleagues in ministry, stand with him today and urge the state’s political alarmists to allow him to practice his faith freely.

Wendell Griffen, as a minister, shares his message from the prophetic perspective of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. His Good Friday demonstration, held with the presence and blessing of his congregation, was his attempt to express the religious theme of the day. Knowing Rev. Griffen is to be fully aware that his judicial objectivity is not tempered by his religious conviction, nor are his religious convictions governed by his judicial activity. He has the unique ability, necessarily so, to differentiate from the two. We stand in solidarity with our colleague this day and all the days to come as he exercises freely his religious rights. ■

Randy L. Hyde is Senior Pastor at Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas and can be reached at rhyde@phbclcr.com 501-766-1233

From our mailbag...

Thank you for sending Christian Ethics Today to my granddaughter, who is a young pastor in Connecticut. She used to get her grandfather’s (Dewey Hobbs) copy until his death.

Thank you for your kindness.

*Virginia Hobbs
Winston Salem, NC*

The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference Stands With Wendell Griffen

By Earl B. Mason, Sr.

I am Rev. Dr. Earl B. Mason, Sr., Pastor of the Bible-Based Fellowship Church of Temple Terrace, Tampa, FL, and Trustee of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference. I am here officially representing the Board of Trustees of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, an African American interdenominational network of clergy, congregations and lay leaders who are committed to be a voice for justice and freedom in this nation and the world. I bring greetings and affirmations from our chair, Rev. Dr. Frederick D. Haynes, Friendship West Baptist Church, Dallas, TX. and our General Secretary, Dr. Iva E. Carruthers. I also recognize the presence here of my fellow trustee, Rev. Dr. Valarie Bridgeman, Interim Dean of Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

Most especially, the Proctor Conference want to say to our fellow trustee, the Honorable Rev. Wendell Griffen, that we encircle you, your

family and congregation with our prayers and full support. We come to be with you and bear public witness that the Proctor Conference will not be silent in the face of blatant disregard of first amendment rights of religious freedom. As African American Christians, we know and appreciate, all too well, the value and cost of religious freedom. Our foreparents were brought to this nation in chains in its

His acts for which he is now being sanctioned by some are at the intersection of religious expression and America's racial history.

nascent period of formulating its principles of democracy. Early laws of this nation forbade religious education of the enslaved. Yet, risking death and beatings, our foreparents would steal away to the brush harbors, to faith-

fully exercise religious freedom.

Our brother's acts of pastoral and liturgical leadership during one of the most significant seasons of Christianity are borne in his understanding of what it means to be Christian and Black in this nation. His acts for which he is now being sanctioned by some are at the intersection of religious expression and America's racial history. Thus, we will also not be silent in the face of unprecedented efforts to sanction one who has stood for equal protection under the law, contesting systemic racial injustices.

We thank our brothers and sisters of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas who organized this righteous public stand in support of our beloved brother, The Honorable Rev. Wendell Griffen. Thank you. ■

Rev. Dr. Earl B. Mason, Sr. can be reached at ebmlexus1@mac.com (813)376-6004.

From our mailbag...

In the era of a Trump presidency, the world of fact and truth has shifted. I feel the need to support some grounded, "alternative" media because the usual sources have become strange. Please encourage Gary Moore not to retire completely. At least keep him writing for CET.

Sally Meredeth
North Redding, MA

Book Reviews

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

Phillip Luke Sinitiere. *Salvation with a Smile: Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church, and American Christianity.*

New York: New York University Press, 2015.
Reviewed by Randall Balmer

When Joel Osteen assumed the pulpit of Lakewood Church following his father's death in 1999—wearing his father's suit, tie, shoes and clutching his Bible—he did so with grand ambitions. Osteen had been the television producer for Lakewood and, according to Phillip Luke Sinitiere in this remarkably informative book, Joel Osteen's theological training derived almost entirely from editing his father's sermons.

Sinitiere doesn't pitch that observation as a criticism. Not at all. The author spends a great deal of time exploring John Osteen's "Texas Theology," which evolved from garden-variety Southern Baptist to neopentecostal, complete with divine healing and more than a dash of prosperity theology. The elder Osteen's belief in divine healing grew out of the healing of his daughter (now one of the pastors at Lakewood), but such convictions, of course, placed Osteen at odds with the Southern Baptists—his divorce from a youthful marriage didn't help, either—so he charted a more independent course. John Osteen's early affiliation with the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International provided him with both an expanding network of confederates as well as a national platform.

Once in the pulpit, the younger Osteen enlarged his list of influences to include John Maxwell and

Joyce Meyer, who in turn was influenced by Norman Vincent Peale—not exactly theological titans, but that, according to Sinitiere, is precisely the point. Osteen's theology is simple, which, together with his meticulously polished and multi-platformed presentation, accounts for its popularity. Sinitiere believes that Osteen's prosperity teaching can be distilled into four elements: "positive thinking, positive confession, positive providence, and finally, the promo-

The author spends a great deal of time exploring John Osteen's "Texas Theology," which evolved from garden-variety Southern Baptist to neopentecostal.

tion of the Christian body as a site of improvement" (61).

Sinitiere contends that, just as Peale's theology of positive thinking offered predictability in the perilous early years of the Cold War, so too Osteen's contemporary articulation of New Thought principles "provides predictability in an anxious age of global terror, late capitalism's ferocious economic uncertainty, and dizzying technological change" (96). That formula, the author argues, is much more attractive than "the historically combative cultural politics" of the Religious Right (105).

The book's most riveting chapter showcases what Sinitiere calls Osteen's "piety of resistance" to his critics. From E. W. Kenyon to the

present, prosperity theology has presented a broad and tempting target. Osteen's evangelical critics pounced on a 2005 interview on *Larry King Live*, in the course of which Osteen was not sufficiently condemnatory of non-Christians. The harshest criticism directed toward him, however, emanates from the phalanx of so called New Calvinists, principally Michael Horton, John MacArthur, and R. Albert Mohler. (The latter, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, comes from a denomination not known for its fidelity to Calvinism. Carey Newman, a fellow Baptist and longtime Mohler observer, characterizes Mohler's "conversion" as "recent and expedient"; he's a "calculated convert.")

These New Calvinists, self-styled guardians of orthodoxy (albeit a peculiar form of orthodoxy), prize theological certitude above all else—which, of course, is what draws them to Calvinism; once you accept Calvinistic presuppositions, you enter a theological vortex that explains everything, that supplies answers to every question. The New Calvinists have been blistering in their attacks on Osteen, accusing him of everything from Pelagianism and heresy to peddling a "cotton candy gospel" and functioning as "an agent for Satan" (189, 193).

For the most part, Osteen stands above the fray, refusing to engage his critics in the kinds of disputations they so adore. The eagle, after all, doesn't hunt flies; Osteen's success speaks for itself. Sinitiere finds a paradox here: "spiritual sensibilities at the root of the prosperity gospel tradition that Osteen represents have long frustrated those whose commitments to propositional theology produce a clamorous resistance

to change” (209). Osteen and his critics, in fact, are remarkably similar. “Osteen’s message of God’s favor and goodness,” Sinitiere concludes, “is in the end very similar to the predictability toward which his critics’ propositional theology has aspired” (209).

So where does Osteen belong on the landscape of American religion in the twenty-first century? Scholars dating back to the nineteenth century have talked about the Great Man theory,

an approach to history positing that certain individuals, through charisma, wisdom, intelligence, or political skill, embody the tensions, aspirations, and apprehensions of their age. In American religious history, Jonathan Edwards has been advanced as fitting that description, and Charles Grandison Finney must also be part of that conversation. There are perils aplenty to writing a biography of an individual still living, but

Sinitiere’s treatment of Joel Osteen suggests that the smiling preacher should be part of any larger conversation about religion in the twenty-first century. ■

Randall Balmer is the John Phillips Professor in Religion and Director of the Society of Fellows at Dartmouth College. This review first appeared in the Journal of Southern Religion (18) (2016): jsreligion.org/vol18/balmer

The Crescent Hill Hymn

by Paul Duke and Grady Nutt:

Not our choice the wind’s direction
Unforeseen the storm or gale.
Thy great ocean swells before us
And our boat is small and frail
Fierce and gleaming is thy mystery
Calling us to ports unknown.
Plunge us on with hope and courage
‘Til Thy harbor is our home.

Brand® New Theology: The Wal-Martization of T.D. Jakes and the New Black Church

by Paula L. McGee. Orbis Books, 2017.
Reviewed by Chris Caldwell

“T.D. Jakes is the Sam Walton of the New Black Church” (178). If that strikes you more as criticism than compliment, then you and Paula L. McGee are on similar pages as she weighs the good and bad of Bishop T.D. Jakes’s empire. “Empire” is an overused word, especially when it comes to religious leaders; but in the case of Jakes, the Italian leather shoe seems to fit.

Jakes grew from Baptist and Pentecostal roots, and McGee notes the contrast between the early years and now. There once was Jakes with off-the-rack suits and unsophisticated video production; now we have Bishop Jakes the brand, which is sophisticated, strategic, and profitable. As McGee puts it, “Like many prosperity preachers, Jakes has not only remade and repackaged his brands, he has also remade himself” (148). His ministry assets are estimated at 400 million dollars, and his ventures go far beyond church buildings or broadcasting worship services, to include books, talk shows, movie deals and more. Jakes wields tremendous influence among African Americans but also in mainstream culture and, indeed, in global culture.

Jakes is a central figure in what is called the “New Black Church,” and the tension between the New Black Church and the more traditional Black Church helps drive this book. The traditional Black Church focuses on the “liberation of the self and of the community,” while the New Black Church focuses on prosperity for “the individual over community” (15). Many are buying the New Black Church’s notion of liberation via free

market individual prosperity, but McGee is not one of them. While granting the need for financial education in our culture, she can’t go along with Jakes when he says, “Christ’s poverty is a religious myth,” or when he prays thanks to God for “giving me tips on stocks, bonds, annuities, people, places, and things” (125, 126). McGee (rightly, in my opinion) sides instead with the Black Church’s more traditional prophetic role, as it stands over against mainstream culture and reserves the right to offer an independent critique. One of the great strengths of African American churches and the schools they have spawned is that they uniquely are controlled

The traditional Black Church focuses on the “liberation of the self and of the community,” while the New Black Church focuses on prosperity for “the individual over community”

and funded by African Americans. McGee contends that Jakes loses too much as he has crossed over to a more mainstream ideology, message and funding stream.

McGee’s own story overlapped Bishop Jakes’s story about 15 years ago. A former WNBA star and an ordained minister, she was once on the speaking circuit among those associated with Jakes and the New Black Church. Over time, she became uncomfortable with the New Black Church and left that arena to focus her time on more traditional Black Churches and on higher education. This gives her a useful bit of an insider’s perspective, but she is careful not to overplay or over rely on it. Her writing from a female and womanist perspective strikes me as helpful

too, given the strong emphasis put on women in Jakes’s ministry.

Indeed, the signature part of the Jakes brand is *WTAL: “Woman Thou Art Loosed!”* The term comes from Jesus’ proclamation to the woman he healed as recorded in Luke 13. In Jakes’s hands, the metaphor is expanded to include other forms of healing and liberation, although this word “liberation” is tricky when it comes to Jakes and the New Black Church. McGee handles this issue carefully and deftly. Her work is published by Orbis, long a source of works of liberation theology. Some Orbis readers might refuse even to grant the label “theology” to the teaching of the New Black Church, and might be even more reluctant to associate the New Black Church with “liberation.” McGee, however, acknowledges that preachers and members in the New Black Church genuinely feel they possess a theological message of liberation. McGee is reluctant to dismiss the feelings of millions of adherents, but she has problems with their theology and the version of liberation offered.

In the book’s final chapter, “Wal-Martization: Keeping It Real,” McGee takes the gloves off a bit and details how “Bishop Jakes’s lifestyle and his *theology of empire* endorse a ‘preferential option for the rich’ rather than a ‘preferential option for the poor’” (184). From where I’m sitting, having formerly pastored an affluent predominantly white church, and now teaching at an HBCU (historic black college or university), it seems to me that confirmation bias—the tendency to affirm ideas that in turn affirm us and our status—is a sin we all need to guard against. We all have our blind spots, and so McGee’s thoughtful and balanced critique is a word we all need to hear. ■

Chris Caldwell is professor and chair, Department of Sociology, Simmons College of Kentucky which is a historic black college.

Lady Liberty: Humility, Kindness and Welcome

By David Jordan

Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor (Proverbs 21:21).

There is, in the American character, an exceedingly hopeful and optimistic spirit. I believe righteousness and kindness are embedded in the hopes and dreams of this nation. Though sometimes twisted in irrational ways or hidden behind today’s political climate, we continue to share, as Americans, a desire to *welcome the stranger*, to see the rejected of other lands as a new and potentially vital part of us. Yet, because of various pressures and difficulties, that vision—that hopeful trajectory of a positive future—is threatened. In some areas of our country where crime and illegal immigration have appeared to increase in tandem, it is tempting to leap to associative conclusions.

The complicated dynamics of our current time should not be minimized, nor should the legitimate concerns of the many caught up in the maelstrom of confusing policies and inappropriate behaviors on all sides diminish the power and necessity of welcoming the stranger. At the bedrock of our nation’s character (and inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty) are these words from Emma Lazarus’ “The New Colossus:”

***Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore;
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!***

These sentiments correspond well to what Jesus intoned in the face of

harsh opposition as he continued to reinforce his teaching: “Love the alien as you love yourself; for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt...” (Leviticus 19:34).

The tendency for many, and the constant temptation for all, is to blame problems on those who are new or different or on those we simply don’t understand. Yet, consistently in this country and throughout Christian history, we

Let’s face it—humility, kindness, righteousness and welcoming the stranger—these are tough sentiments in today’s political and social climate. They are also very biblical.

remember the legacy of the stranger, the heroic actions of the unwanted, the new insights and contributions of those who are disregarded and even despised.

Let us “pursue righteousness and kindness and find life and honor” and live out biblical wisdom—together—as we seek those new insights so necessary for our spiritual, intellectual and emotional growth. Watch carefully around you today—at the store, in the office, around the neighborhood, on the news—and look for positive signs of compassion, openness, courage, and new insights about living together in harmony. And as you do, consider another passage from the Bible:

But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit

(Isaiah 66:2).

Just as the Statue of Liberty represents the spirit of human hope and the ideal of this nation and democracy, this verse from Isaiah is a bold reminder of our biblical hope—and spiritual goal. God’s expectation is for our humility to exceed our suspicion. Though tempted to criticize and look down on those not in our circle of friends, the biblical calling is to bless, welcome and empower “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40).

Now, let’s look at the full text of Emma Lazarus’ poem. She, by the way, was from a Jewish immigrant family originating from Germany and Portugal. Notice in her sonnet the echo of this biblical theme of humility and welcome while alluding in comparison to the ancient Colossus of Rhodes:¹

The New Colossus

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

Let us together, with genuine humility, ponder what this means. In our churches and places of worship, and in our nation as a whole let us deliberate with mutual respect: How wide is the door? How humble and contrite is our spirit? Consider the role of a Christian regarding the various social issues of our day, whether the ongoing controversies with immigration, how we respond to refugees, the emotional debates surrounding LGBTQ concerns, relationships with

the Muslim community, concerns about the those without homes ... These and many other issues remain highly charged within and outside the Christian community. Without a coherent and well-articulated message from active citizens who are also committed Christians, all of us will continue to struggle.

Let’s face it—humility, kindness, righteousness and welcoming the stranger—these are tough sentiments in today’s political and social climate. They are also very biblical, and remain as necessary today as they have ever been. Let us work together and rise to the challenge.

“Lord, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.” —Reinhold Niebuhr ■

Dr. David Jordan is teaching pastor, Providence Baptist Church Charlotte, NC

¹*One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The statue stood over one hundred feet tall on a pedestal that was reported to have been over fifty feet tall. Built in 280 B.C., it was destroyed in an earthquake in 226 B.C.*

Well worth the read:

See Beth Shepherd’s new children’s book, *Ernie Gonzales: The Determined Dreamer*

Almost unbelievably, more than a million children are homeless in this land of unparalleled riches.

But financial poverty is just one aspect; there is also an entrenched poverty of vision, dreams and aspiration. This poverty of hope and belief for something bigger than us and the willingness to pursue it with determination and courage may be unseen, but it is at least as iniquitous in its effect as any material lack.

Suffering Exclusion for Including Others

By Robert Baird

News Release under the byline of Ken Stamp, the Baptist Standard, February 21, 2017: In February of this year, the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board declared three congregations, including Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, “outside of harmonious cooperation” with the state convention because of their views on same-sex relationships. Carrying out a policy adopted at the BGCT annual meeting last November, the board voted 63-6 to consider Lake Shore Baptist, Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas and First Baptist Church in Austin outside the bounds of harmonious cooperation.

We, the members of Lake Shore Baptist Church, knew it was coming, knew the Baptist General Convention of Texas was going to exclude us for including others. It was a price we were willing to pay for what we thought was the just and loving thing to do.

History is the story of the human struggle to be free. America was born from such a struggle. But freedom in America has always been an ideal in need of realization. So women pursued rights, as did blacks. In more recent years it has been gays and lesbians.

Responding positively to those who struggle for freedom is to enlarge the circle — to include the excluded. For years Lake Shore has welcomed gays into our community, including leadership roles. Our recent decision stamping this in our bylaws is our way of publicly affirming our gay members and welcoming them to every dimension of our communal life, including the sacrament of marriage.

In her book “Team of Rivals,” Doris Kearns Goodwin describes Abraham Lincoln as “possessing extraordinary

empathy, the gift or curse [because of the pain involved] of putting himself in the place of another, to experience what they were feeling, to understand their motives and desires.” This capacity to feel with the other is the foundation of movements for justice throughout time and place. In this time and place, it should give rise to justice for gays and lesbians.

Sexuality is a fundamental dimension of who we are. It is a given. I cannot

I cannot imagine any heterosexual recalling the time and place when he or she decided to be attracted to the opposite sex. For heterosexuals, it is a discovery, not a decision. Surely the same is true for gays and lesbians.

not imagine any heterosexual recalling the time and place when he or she decided to be attracted to the opposite sex. For heterosexuals, it is a discovery, not a *decision*. Surely the same is true for gays and lesbians.

We heterosexuals should try to put ourselves in their place. What would it be like to have the essence of our sexuality described as immoral? What would it be like to try to live our lives without sexual intimacy, as some would have us do?

To be sure, some sexual proclivities are immoral. There are sexual desires that if expressed violate the other — rape, for example. But as one leading Christian philosopher, Robert Adams,

has noted: “Homosexual practice is not essentially violative of persons.” The fundamental question we should ask of any human activity is: Does it violate the dignity of the other? Look and see and think.

Another leading Christian philosopher, Nick Wolterstorff, whom many of us at Baylor have met with frequently, admired tremendously and been strongly influenced by, recently went public in support of gay marriage. It was, he says, “through relatives, students and former students who were gay, as well as people in committed, same-sex relationships that caused me to reconsider the traditional views I had grown up with.” He adds, “I’ve listened to these people. To their agony. To their feelings of exclusion and oppression. To their longings. To their expressions of love. To their commitments. To their faith. So listening changed me.” Surely that is the key—listening to human stories.

Baptist minister and author Will Campbell, in a presentation at Baylor years ago, said a time would come when we Baptists would apologize for how we treated homosexuals as we now apologize for how we once treated blacks. But that time has not fully come and, till that day does come, churches such as Lake Shore in Waco, First Baptist in Austin and Wilshire Baptist in Dallas will bear the exclusion for what seems to us a matter of love and justice. ■

This first appeared as an opinion piece by Robert Baird, emeritus professor of philosophy at Baylor University, in the Waco Tribune Herald, February 26, 2017. It is reprinted here with permission of the author.

Special Address on Confederate Monuments

by Mitch Landrieu, Mayor of New Orleans, Louisiana May 19, 2017

Just hours before workers removed a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee — the fourth Confederate monument to be dismantled in New Orleans in a period of a few weeks — Mayor Mitch Landrieu gave a special address at historic Gallier Hall as follows:

Thank you for coming.

The soul of our beloved City is deeply rooted in a history that has evolved over thousands of years; rooted in a diverse people who have been here together every step of the way — for both good and for ill.

It is a history that holds in its heart the stories of Native Americans: the Choctaw, Houma Nation, the Chitimacha. Of Hernando de Soto, Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, the Acadians, the Islenos, the enslaved people from Senegambia, Free People of Color, the Haitians, the Germans, both the empires of France and Spain. The Italians, the Irish, the Cubans, the south and central Americans, the Vietnamese and so many more.

You see: New Orleans is truly a city of many nations, a melting pot, a bubbling cauldron of many cultures.

There is no other place quite like it in the world that so eloquently exemplifies the uniquely American motto: *e pluribus unum* — out of many we are one.

But there are also other truths about our city that we must confront. New Orleans was America’s largest slave market: a port where hundreds of thousands of souls were brought, sold and shipped up the Mississippi River to lives of forced labor, of misery, of rape, of torture.

America was the place where nearly 4,000 of our fellow citizens were lynched, 540 alone in Louisiana;

where the courts enshrined ‘separate but equal’; where Freedom riders coming to New Orleans were beaten to a bloody pulp.

So when people say to me that the monuments in question are history, well what I just described is real history as well, and it is the searing truth.

And it immediately begs the questions: why there are no slave ship monuments, no prominent markers on public land to remember the

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lynchings or the slave blocks; nothing to remember this long chapter of our lives; the pain, the sacrifice, the shame ... all of it happening on the soil of New Orleans.

So for those self-appointed defenders of history and the monuments, they are eerily silent on what amounts to this historical malfeasance, a lie by omission.

There is a difference between remembrance of history and reverence of it. For America and New Orleans, it has been a long, winding road, marked by great tragedy and great triumph. But we cannot be afraid of our truth.

As President George W. Bush said at the dedication ceremony for the National Museum of African

American History & Culture, “A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and corrects them.”

So today I want to speak about why we chose to remove these four monuments to the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, but also how and why this process can move us towards healing and understanding of each other.

So, let’s start with the facts.

The historic record is clear: the Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and P.G.T. Beauregard statues were not erected just to honor these men, but as part of the movement which became known as The Cult of the Lost Cause. This ‘cult’ had one goal — through monuments and through other means — to rewrite history to hide the truth, which is that the Confederacy was on the wrong side of humanity.

First erected over 166 years after the founding of our city and 19 years after the end of the Civil War, the monuments that we took down were meant to rebrand the history of our city and the ideals of a defeated Confederacy.

It is self-evident that these men did not fight for the United States of America, They fought against it. They may have been warriors, but in this cause they were not patriots.

These statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for.

After the Civil War, these statues were a part of that terrorism as much as a burning cross on someone’s lawn; they were erected purposefully to send a strong message to all who walked in

their shadows about who was still in charge in this city.

Should you have further doubt about the true goals of the Confederacy, in the very weeks before the war broke out, the Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, made it clear that the Confederate cause was about maintaining slavery and white supremacy.

He said in his now famous ‘Cornerstone speech’ that the Confederacy’s “cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery — subordination to the superior race — is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”

Now, with these shocking words still ringing in your ears, I want to try to gently peel from your hands the grip on a false narrative of our history that I think weakens us and make straight a wrong turn we made many years ago so we can more closely connect with integrity to the founding principles of our nation and forge a clearer and straighter path toward a better city and more perfect union.

Last year, President Barack Obama echoed these sentiments about the need to contextualize and remember all of our history. He recalled a piece of stone, a slave auction block engraved with a marker commemorating a single moment in 1830 when Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay stood and spoke from it.

President Obama said, “Consider what this artifact tells us about history ... on a stone where day after day for years, men and women ... bound and bought and sold and bid like cattle on a stone worn down by the tragedy of over a thousand bare feet. For a long time the only thing we considered important, the singular thing we once chose to commemorate as history with a plaque were the unmemorable speeches of two powerful men.”

A piece of stone — one stone. Both stories were history. One story told. One story forgotten or maybe even purposefully ignored.

As clear as it is for me today ... for a long time, even though I grew up in one of New Orleans’ most diverse neighborhoods, even with my family’s long proud history of fighting for civil rights ... I must have passed by those monuments a million times without giving them a second thought.

So I am not judging anybody, I am not judging people. We all take our own journey on race. I just hope people listen like I did when my dear friend Wynton Marsalis helped me see the truth. He asked me to think about

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all the people who have left New Orleans because of our exclusionary attitudes.

Another friend asked me to consider these four monuments from the perspective of an African American mother or father trying to explain to their fifth grade daughter who Robert E. Lee is and why he stands atop of our beautiful city. Can you do it?

Can you look into that young girl’s eyes and convince her that Robert E. Lee is there to encourage her? Do you think she will feel inspired and hopeful by that story? Do these monuments help her see a future with limitless potential? Have you ever thought that if her potential is limited, yours and mine are too?

We all know the answer to these very simple questions.

When you look into this child’s eyes is the moment when the searing truth comes into focus for us. This is the moment when we know what is right and what we must do. We can’t walk away from this truth.

And I knew that taking down the monuments was going to be tough, but you elected me to do the right thing, not the easy thing and this is what that looks like. So relocating these Confederate monuments is not about taking something away from someone else. This is not about politics, this is not about blame or retaliation. This is not a naïve quest to solve all our problems at once.

This is, however, about showing the whole world that we as a city and as a people are able to acknowledge, understand, reconcile and, most importantly, choose a better future for ourselves, making straight what has been crooked and making right what was wrong.

Otherwise, we will continue to pay a price with discord, with division, and yes, with violence.

To literally put the confederacy on a pedestal in our most prominent places of honor is an inaccurate recitation of our full past, it is an affront to our present, and it is a bad prescription for our future.

History cannot be changed. It cannot be moved like a statue. What is done is done. The Civil War is over, and the Confederacy lost and we are better for it. Surely we are far enough removed from this dark time to acknowledge that the cause of the Confederacy was wrong.

And in the second decade of the 21st century, asking African Americans — or anyone else — to drive by property that they own; occupied by reverential statues of men who fought to destroy the country and deny that person’s humanity seems perverse and absurd.

Centuries-old wounds are still raw because they never healed right in the first place.

Here is the essential truth: we are better together than we are apart. Indivisibility is our essence. Isn’t this the gift that the people of New Orleans have given to the world?

We radiate beauty and grace in our food, in our music, in our architecture, in our joy of life, in our celebration of death; in everything that we do. We gave the world this funky thing called jazz; the most uniquely American art form that is developed across the ages from different cultures.

Think about second lines, think about Mardi Gras, think about muffaletta, think about the Saints, gumbo, red beans and rice. By God, just think. All we hold dear is created by throwing everything in the pot; creating, producing something better; everything a product of our historic diversity.

We are proof that out of many we are one — and better for it! Out of many we are one — and we really do love it!

And yet, we still seem to find so many excuses for not doing the right thing. Again, remember President Bush’s words, “A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and corrects them.”

We forget, we deny how much we really depend on each other, how much we need each other. We justify our silence and inaction by manufacturing noble causes that marinate in historical denial. We still find a way to say “wait, not so fast.”

But like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “wait has almost always meant never.”

We can’t wait any longer. We need to change. And we need to change now. No more waiting. This is not just about statues, this is about our attitudes and behavior as well. If we take these statues down and don’t change to become a more open and inclusive society this would have all been in vain.

While some have driven by these monuments every day and either

revered their beauty or failed to see them at all, many of our neighbors and fellow Americans see them very clearly. Many are painfully aware of the long shadows their presence casts, not only literally but figuratively. And they clearly receive the message that the Confederacy and the cult of the lost cause intended to deliver.

Earlier this week, as the cult of the lost cause statue of P.G.T Beauregard came down, world renowned musician Terence Blanchard stood watch, his wife Robin and their two beautiful daughters at their side.

Terence went to a high school on the edge of City Park named after one of America’s greatest heroes and patri-

Centuries-old wounds are still raw because they never healed right in the first place.

Instead of revering a 4-year brief historical aberration that was called the Confederacy we can celebrate all 300 years of our rich, diverse history as a place named New Orleans and set the tone for the next 300 years.

ots, John F. Kennedy. But to get there he had to pass by this monument to a man who fought to deny him his humanity.

He said, “I’ve never looked at them as a source of pride ... it’s always made me feel as if they were put there by people who don’t respect us. This is something I never thought I’d see in my lifetime. It’s a sign that the world is changing.”

Yes, Terence, it is, and it is long

overdue.

Now is the time to send a new message to the next generation of New Orleanians who can follow in Terence and Robin’s remarkable footsteps.

A message about the future, about the next 300 years and beyond; let us not miss this opportunity, New Orleans, and let us help the rest of the country do the same. Because now is the time for choosing. Now is the time to actually make this the City we always should have been, had we gotten it right in the first place.

We should stop for a moment and ask ourselves — at this point in our history, after Katrina, after Rita, after Ike, after Gustav, after the national recession, after the BP oil catastrophe and after the tornado — if presented with the opportunity to build monuments that told our story or to curate these particular spaces ... would these monuments be what we want the world to see? Is this really our story?

We have not erased history; we are becoming part of the city’s history by righting the wrong image these monuments represent and crafting a better, more complete future for all our children and for future generations.

And unlike when these Confederate monuments were first erected as symbols of white supremacy, we now have a chance to create not only new symbols, but to do it together, as one people.

In our blessed land we all come to the table of democracy as equals.

We have to reaffirm our commitment to a future where each citizen is guaranteed the uniquely American gifts of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

That is what really makes America great and today it is more important than ever to hold fast to these values and together say a self-evident truth that out of many we are one. That is why today we reclaim these spaces for the United States of America.

Because we are one nation, not two; indivisible with liberty and justice for

all, not some. We all are part of one nation, all pledging allegiance to one flag, the flag of the United States of America. And New Orleanians are in, all of the way.

It is in this union and in this truth that real patriotism is rooted and flourishes.

Instead of revering a 4-year brief historical aberration that was called the Confederacy we can celebrate all 300 years of our rich, diverse history as a place named New Orleans and set the tone for the next 300 years.

After decades of public debate, of anger, of anxiety, of anticipation, of humiliation and of frustration. After public hearings and approvals from three separate community-led commissions. After two robust public hearings and a 6-1 vote by the duly elected New Orleans City Council. After review by 13 different federal and state judges. The full weight of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government has been brought to bear and the monuments in accordance with the law have been removed.

So now is the time to come together and heal and focus on our larger task. Not only building new symbols, but making this city a beautiful manifestation of what is possible and what we as

The Confederacy was on the wrong side of history and humanity. It sought to tear apart our nation and subjugate our fellow Americans to slavery. This is the history we should never forget and one that we should never again put on a pedestal to be revered.

a people can become.

Let us remember what the once exiled, imprisoned and now universally loved, Nelson Mandela, and what he said after the fall of apartheid. “If the pain has often been unbearable and the revelations shocking to all of us, it is because they indeed bring us the beginnings of a common understanding of what happened and a steady restoration of the nation’s humanity.”

So before we part let us again state the truth clearly.

The Confederacy was on the wrong side of history and humanity. It sought to tear apart our nation and subjugate

our fellow Americans to slavery. This is the history we should never forget and one that we should never again put on a pedestal to be revered.

As a community, we must recognize the significance of removing New Orleans’ Confederate monuments. It is our acknowledgment that now is the time to take stock of, and then move past, a painful part of our history. Anything less would render generations of courageous struggle and soul-searching a truly lost cause.

Anything less would fall short of the immortal words of our greatest President Abraham Lincoln, who with an open heart and clarity of purpose calls on us today to unite as one people when he said:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to do all which may achieve and cherish: a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Thank you. ■

Note: this address can be viewed as presented at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0jQTHis3f4>

“The world isn’t only a battlefield of groups; it’s also a World Wide Web of overlapping allegiances. You might be Black Lives Matter and he may be Make America Great Again, but you’re both Houstonians cruising the same boat down flooded streets.”

David Brooks, “In Praise of Equipoise”, *The New York Times*, September 1. 2017.

What I Saw in Charlottesville

By Brian McLaren

I accepted an invitation from the Charlottesville clergy to come to their city the weekend of the Unite the Right rally, to join them in witness against white supremacy, Neo-naziism, racism, and associated evils, which are counter to both the Christian gospel and American democracy. Free speech is a protected right and we were not protesting against the rally’s right to speak; rather, we were using our right to free speech to bear witness for a better message of conciliation and peace, and we were supporting the clergy of Charlottesville to stand against the incursion of white supremacists like Richard Spencer.

Here are some initial reflections based on my experience – on the white supremacists and their message, on the clergy and faith community, on the other anti-racism protestors, on the police, and on next steps.

On the White Supremacists, Neo-nazis, and their allies: First, I was impressed by their organization. They showed up in organized caravans of rented white vans, pick-up trucks, and other vehicles, and then quickly lined up with flags and started marching. I don’t know what app they were using, but it worked. (After the state of emergency was declared, the organization seemed less effective, with more confusion and milling around.) Second, they were young. The majority, it seemed to me, were in their twenties and thirties, mostly men, but a few women. I was told by one protestor that many of the older leaders were retired military.

Many came dressed in white shirts and khaki pants, reminding me of office workers or WalMart employees. Many wore helmets and carried hand-made shields. They looked like they

came expecting to fight, threaten, and intimidate. Some came in paramilitary garb, heavily armed. They carried an assortment of flags – mostly confederate, many representing their respective organizations, with a surprising number of Nazi flags. I’m 61, and before this weekend, I’ve never seen a single Nazi flag carried proudly in the United States. This weekend I saw many.

As has been widely reported, their

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chants included “You will not replace us,” “Jews will not replace us,” “White lives matter,” and the like. Their use of torches Fridaynight and slogans like “blood and soil” were clearly intended to evoke the KKK and Naziism. There was a good bit of “hail Trump” chanting with Nazi gestures.

Before and after the event, I have been checking a number of white supremacist websites and Facebook pages related to Unite the Right leaders and identified participants (a deeply disturbing experience). The unabashed racism, the seething hatred, the chest-thumping hubris, the anti-Semitism, the misogyny, the shameless desire to harm their opponents, the gushing love for Trump, Putin, and Stalin, of all people ... they speak for themselves. I was struck by how often the term “balls” comes up in their posts: these seem like insecure young men who are especially

eager to prove their manhood, recalling election season bragging about “hand size.”

Speaking of size, I haven’t been able to find any estimate on crowd size. I would guess around a thousand white supremacists, and I would guess that the total number of anti-racism/anti-facism protesters was equal or greater.

On the clergy and faith community response: I have participated in many protests and demonstrations over the years, but I have not seen the faith community come together in such a powerful and beautiful way as they did in Charlottesville. Brittany Caine-Conley and Seth Wispelwey deserve a lot of credit, as do the Congregate C-ville team they coordinated. I hesitate to name groups represented, as I will forget someone – so please forgive me in advance. But I met UCC, Episcopal, Methodist, Unitarian, Lutheran, Baptist (Alliance), Anglican, Presbyterian, and Jewish faith leaders, and the Quakers were out in large numbers, wearing bright yellow t-shirts. I met Catholic lay people, but I didn’t meet or see any Catholic priests. Two Episcopal bishops were present, and they had encouraged priests of their diocese to be involved. Along with those of us who participated in an organized way, it was clear that many ad-hoc groups of Christians and others came to protest, some with signs, some giving out water and snacks to anti-racist protestors.

Black, white, Latino, and Asian clergy worked and stood side by side; Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and others marched, prayed, and sang as allies.

The courage of the clergy present inspired me. In public gatherings and in private conversations before

Saturday, participating clergy were warned that there was a high possibility of suffering bodily harm. A group of clergy (pictured below) walked arm-in-arm into the very center of the storm, so to speak, delaying entry to the park as they stood, sang, and kneeled. (Lisa Sharon Harper shares her reflections here.) This symbolic act took a great deal of courage, and many who did so were spat on, subjected to slurs and insults, and exposed to tear gas. I hold them in the highest regard.

Other clergy and faith leaders (I was among this group) marched to a park, participated in a rally, and then dispersed to several locations, including a Methodist church a block from Emancipation Park, where we helped medics, sang and held signs as a message to white supremacist and Nazi marchers, and provided water and other support to anti-racism protesters.

When the rally was disbanded by the police, many of us responded to reports of skirmishes and sought to de-escalate tensions. When the white supremacist terrorist driver ran into anti-racism protestors, many of us were nearby, and we ran together to the scene where we ministered to the injured and supported their loved ones. Many of us helped at the parks that were designated as “safe spaces” for anti-racism protestors, and we provided pastoral care – asking people if they were OK, listening to their stories, assisting them with finding medics, and offering them encouragement. At least a dozen times, protestors said to me, “Thanks so much to you clergy for being here.” Our presence meant something to them.

I come from a tradition that doesn’t normally use vestments, but I was glad that clergy garb made faith leaders visible in this circumstance.

On the other Anti-Racism Protestors: Along with Congregate C’ville, there were other groups protesting the message of white

supremacy and Naziism. I was deeply impressed with the Black Lives Matter participants. They went into the middle of the fray and stood strong and resilient against vicious attacks, insults, spitting, pepper spray, tear gas, and hurled objects. It’s deeply disgusting to see BLM be vilified on Fox News and other conservative outlets after watching them comport themselves with courage in the face of vile hatred this weekend.

There were several anti-fascism groups whose exact affiliations were not easy to ascertain. I was moved by one young woman from one of these groups at the scene of the killing. She stood on a milk crate and shouted

On the Police: Considering the number of guns present, it is amazing that no shots were fired, and the various police forces gathered deserve a great deal of credit for this.

(this is a paraphrase): “People, this is hard. This is heartbreaking – to see our neighbors lying in the street, severely injured. But we must realize what’s at stake when Nazis and white supremacists want to take control of our country. We must not be intimidated, but be more committed than ever to stand against them.” There was no call to violence or revenge; only a call to resilient resistance.

I was also deeply impressed by UVA students I met. The group of young men and women that stood up to the torch-carrying marchers on Friday night had amazing courage. Their fellow students, their parents, and all of us, should be proud of these young leaders.

Not all of the groups shared a commitment to nonviolent resistance in

the tradition of Dr. King. I saw a few groups of protestors who, like the Nazis and white supremacists, came with hand-made shields and helmets, and I heard reports that some of these groups used pepper spray on the white supremacists, who were also using pepper spray, sticks, and fists on them.

On the Police: Considering the number of guns present, it is amazing that no shots were fired, and the various police forces gathered deserve a great deal of credit for this. The local and state police had a huge challenge on their hands, and their task was very difficult. In my fields of observation, they did not seem present to intervene quickly when skirmishes broke out. They seemed to stay back in the background. Perhaps this was intentional and strategic for reasons I don’t understand. Be that as it may, I couldn’t help but think about the contrast between the hands-off way heavily armed white supremacists were treated by police in Charlotte and how unarmed African Americans in other demonstrations have been beaten and arrested around the country over the years ... or how unarmed Native Americans were treated at Black Rock a few months ago. That contrast is haunting, itself an expression of white privilege.

On Next Steps: The young age of many of the white supremacists and Nazis suggests two things to me: first, that young white people are being radicalized in America today, radicalized to the point of using the ISIS tactic of killing people with a car; and second, that this problem isn’t going away fast – especially if radicalizing influences continue or increase their activities among younger generations.

What does this mean?

First, it means that white mothers, fathers, grandparents, wives, husbands, sisters, brothers, children, and pastors need to speak up when their loved ones are being radicalized. Every white American family needs to

realize that radicalization isn’t simply something that happens in the Middle East – it is happening today, in Ohio and Kentucky and Florida and Virginia. And make no mistake, these are radical groups, seeking to unite and fight together.

In addition, clergy around the country must prepare now for when an event like this comes to their area – which may be sooner than they think. (I understand that Richmond has already been targeted for another such rally in a few months.) Just as male mammals seek to “mark territory,” these human groups seem determined to maintain their markers of white supremacy – namely, statues and flags associated with the era and culture of slavery. Their oddly ambiguous slogan “You will not replace us” seems to mean, “You will not replace our white supremacy.”

All of us, especially people of faith, need to proclaim that white supremacy and white privilege and all other forms of racism and injustice must indeed be replaced with something better – the beloved community where all are welcome, all are safe, and all are free. White supremacist and Nazi dreams of apartheid must be replaced with a better dream – people of all tribes, races, creeds, and nations learning to live in peace, mutual

respect, and neighborliness. Such a better world is possible, but only if we set our hearts on realizing the possibility.

We Christians, in particular, need to face the degree to which white Christianity has failed – grievously, tragically, unarguably failed – to teach its white adherents to love their non-white neighbors as themselves. Congregations of all denominations need to make this an urgent priority – to acknowledge the degree to which white American Christianity has been a chaplaincy to white supremacy for centuries, and in that way, has betrayed the gospel.

Our Christian leaders need to face

This tense season of our history needs to be, quite literally, a come-to-Jesus moment for Christianity in America.

the deep roots of white Christian supremacy that go back to 1452 and the Doctrine of Discovery, and before that, to the tragic deals made by 4th Century Bishops with Emperor

Constantine, and before that, to the rise of Christian antisemitism mere decades after Jesus. This tense season of our history needs to be, quite literally, a come-to-Jesus moment for Christianity in America.

Along with this theological and spiritual work, we have very urgent practical work to do, including 1) pre-empting the continuing development of white supremacist, Nazi, and fascist groups through preventative measures, 2) building relationships among groups that oppose racism and Naziism – both religious and secular, 3) improving planning and coordinating among these groups, and 4) addressing the ways that white supremacists and Nazis are seeking to use us as foils to win over conservative people through fear and division (which is the strategy behind Unite the Right). What is needed in all these areas (and more) will be the subject of many conversations in the coming hours, days, and weeks. ■

Brian D. McLaren is an author, speaker, activist, and public theologian. He is the author of The Great Spiritual Migration and an Auburn Senior Fellow. This essay appeared in the August 16, 2017 posting of Auburn Voices found at www.auburnseminary.org and is reprinted with permission.

From our mailbag...

Dear Pat,

Here is something to support the work of Christian Ethics Today.

Keep up the good work!

Dr. Bob Lindner
Manhattan, KS

On Power and Its Uses

By James A. Langley

From man’s beginning he has been enthralled
By power, its myriad manifestations and uses,
That by reason should have both thrilled and appalled---
Power used for good, but oft’n turned to flagrant abuses.

Demon-driven, leading Cain to slay his brother,
Recurring in every subsequent generation,
Out of envy, revenge, or for riches, a patent cover,
The arrogation of power that issues in corruption.

Stalin ridiculed the pope’s unpreparedness for an armed fight,
Judging it weakness; by choice he could not see
The stratospheric power of spiritual might,
And brought upon his people utter catastrophe.

Life’s essence, according to Nietzsche, is the ‘will to power’;
But “power tends to corrupt,” declared Lord Acton, “and absolute
Power corrupts absolutely,” undermining the proud tower;
Countless abuses serve Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ to refute.

Among rulers and military conquerors, famed or infamous,
Napoleon offers lessons that profit us to evaluate,
Lording over Europe, domineering and vainglorious,
Yet he proclaimed the Christ the One truly great.

‘Shock and awe’ the conflict does not end,
Armed might may only make a peace compulsory,
Where injustice abides, nations will still contend,
Thine, *thine*, is the Kingdom, power and glory.

Continents are shaken by shifting tectonic plates,
A tsunami, unimpeded, leaves vast destruction in its wake,
Shaking contrived foundations governed only by the fates;
Atomic fission and fusion place humanity at stake.

By the Creator the worlds exist and cohere,
Innumerable galaxies He rules by creation right,
In all the universe the Lord has no peer,
He reigns now and forever in righteous might.

The Almighty wills and acts for man’s well-being,
Creating, sustaining, redeeming, soon resurrecting
His children, beyond man’s dreams conceiving,
Toward the divine goal of man’s perfecting.

Certain prerogatives the Christ laid down
On earth, though miraculous powers He still wielded,
Thus revealing Himself bearer of the Redeemer’s crown,
But to use these powers for self He never yielded.

While knowledge is gained from many sources,
Humility is the womb of wisdom; the seeds
Of wisdom originate in transcendence whose resources
Are freely offered to those with succoring leads.

The heart of evil is power subversion,
Reversing wholeness and healing aims divine
To malign ends in a pattern of perversion,
Robbing life of its intended ways sublime.

The origin of evil, wise lore surmises,
Traces to an angel challenging the Almighty;
The Arch-Deceiver connives with cunning surprises,
To traduce followers, not so much by denying the Deity,

But assuming divine power, to be as gods;
The Tempter-Deceiver offers powers not his own,
Turning good to evil, with satanic lures as prods,
Reaping a whirlwind and a crumbling throne.

The need of man was not a Brave New World;
That promise, appealing to our vanity, was deceiving,
Our rise was held certain if our power was hurled
Against all who opposed our goals achieving.

A new way was demanded: power from another realm,
Evidenced supremely in the Cross, turning evil to good
Against hatred and violence---power to overwhelm,
Men and nations transforming evil wherever they would.

How impotent, how insignificant, the little band
Of Christ-followers must have appeared to mighty Rome,
Inconceivable that the Caesars and the summit of the grand
Would fall, with Christ’s Kingdom the world over at home.

After Saul’s reversal, arguably the greatest in history,
The Apostle taught believers that in weakness lay their strength,
Leading them to rely on the Almighty’s power and glory;
With that spirit, they share God’s power at length.

Jesus’ focus in the widow’s importunate prayer,
Like water over time shaping the hardest stone,
Is the power of perseverance gained by those who dare---
Power open to all, but until tried remains unknown.

Wilberforce, frail and sickly, did lash himself
In Parliament to the mast of the ‘Freedom Ship’ a double decade,
Fighting slavery as doggedly as a medieval Guelph
Fought the Ghibellines,¹ ‘til Parliament outlawed the slave trade.²

Somerset Maugham lifted goodness as the greatest force
In the world, and made for this assessment
A strong case,³ yet neither claimed nor ventured a source;
The Master Teacher declares a single source in bold judgment.⁴

With surety confronted in this life is every man
By the measureless power of sin and death,
Therefore God set the Cross as the heart of His plan,
Christ’s Resurrection guarantees the coming death of death.

Far surpassing all norms, Christ crucified and risen,
Transforming the world by God’s all-conquering love,
Every other power, pre and post, is judged by this prism,
All godless might shall fail against the might above.

If a pebble thrown in can affect the widest sea,
When across two millennia a widow’s mites loom vast,
And the Almighty deigns to hear an earnest plea,
Let none say it matters not how life is cast,

Or that one is powerless to effect a change
For the better; a modicum of faith may move a mountain,
The ways to help and heal are a limitless range,
Wherefore let our faith and deeds rise like a fountain. ■

By James A. Langley

1In medieval Italy a strong faction known as the Guelphs supported papal rule of the city-states against the aristocratic Ghibellines who sought German imperial control of Italy.

2 A bill to end Britain’s slave trade, first introduced in Parliament by William Wilberforce in 1788, and re –introduced by him successively for 20 years, at long last was agreed to in 1807. Over those two decades, Wilberforce endured many threats against him, and was viciously opposed and ridiculed by the likes of Lord Nelson, the great English naval hero, and famed biographer James Boswell.

3 In his novel *The Razor’s Edge*

4 Mark 10:18

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A Journal of Christian Ethics

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

—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

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

PURPOSES

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

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

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

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