

Christian Ethics Today

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Spring Issue Overview

By Patrick R. Anderson

This issue of the journal begins with an op-ed piece written by the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, published by the Associated Press 32 years ago, expressing the orthodox judicial and legislative interpretation of the Second Amendment at that time. Chief Justice Burger was a conservative Republican nominated to the court by President Richard Nixon, a fact that helps us understand the broadly-held judicial view of the Constitutional limitations on the so-called “right to bear arms” back then.

Today’s new Republican orthodoxy, expressed by the modern Supreme Court as well as by many state legislatures and the U.S. Congress, stands in stark contrast to the earlier orthodoxy. That dramatic change should be understood as a contributor to the rapid increase of mass murders in America.

Wendell Griffen’s address, recently presented at the James and Marilyn Dunn Lecture Series at Wake Forest University Divinity School, is perhaps his most salient argument for racial reparations based on the encounters Jesus had with Zacchaeus and the Rich Young Ruler as recorded in the New Testament.

In the article written by retired American Baptist Pastor Charles Kiker, he issues a personal call for formal, state-sponsored reparations based on his own experiences which plainly show how white privilege has benefitted his family for generations and how all white Americans and descendants of land-grabbing followers of Manifest Destiny, have debts to pay. We

are not responsible FOR those sins, he tells us, but we are responsible TO the descendants of those dispossessed multitudes who have played on an unlevel playing field while we benefitted from the sins of our forefathers.

Mark Osler describes the ways COVID and other social factors have presented many churches with the choice of either comforting the remnant or taking risks for the sake of those outside the church, with only the latter choice being the Christian one.

The “He Gets Us” ads on television and elsewhere have been viewed by millions of people. Kristen Thomason describes how, while the assumed purpose of these ads was seen as an effort to introduce Jesus and his teachings to the modern world, they are more about re-branding Christianity, data gathering and targeting vulnerable individuals in order to manipulate them into supporting far-right candidates and causes.

Thomas Graves is someone who is well-known among moderate Baptists as a pastor, theologian and seminary president. In 1983, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. In this very personal account, he describes his own journey with the disease and offers a theological treatise on natural evil, stemming from primordial chaos, as the root of all existence, and the incomplete, on-going creation in which we are called to join God. ■

Patrick R. Anderson, editor

Incoming....From our mailbag

I enclose my modest check payable to Christian Ethics Today. I wish you to know that your regularly crafted journal is at the top of my reading material!....My comments as to the relevancy and brilliance of your Journal are not token statements. Your journal is really good!

James (Jim) Miller, Bristol, RI

The Second Amendment Has Been Distorted

The Second Amendment does not guarantee every person the unfettered constitutional right to have a machine gun.

By Warren E. Burger

The Second Amendment very briefly provides that since a “well regulated militia” is necessary to the security of the state, the people’s right to “keep and bear arms” is guaranteed.

Few things have been more vigorously debated—and distorted—in recent times than the meaning of this clause, and very few subjects have been as cluttered and confused by calculated disinformation circulated by special interest groups.

To really understand what was intended, it is necessary to look back and recall that in those days people had a great fear of a standing national army. They knew that the monarchs of Europe had held power at the expense of the people by having standing armies to preserve the status quo.

In addition, before the Constitution the 13 colonies were not really the “united states” we know today but 13 wholly independent, sovereign nations. For example, the state of Virginia was virtually as independent of the other states and the union established by the Articles of Confederation as France was independent of all the other countries of Europe. Before the adoption of the Constitution, each state could and did have its own army, and each state could also maintain its own navy, as some of the seaboard states did.

The real purpose of the Second Amendment was to ensure that the “state armies”—“the militia”—would be maintained for the defense of the state.

In order to do that, it was necessary to grant each citizen the right to maintain arms. Of course, 200 years ago, the musket—which was the principal military weapon in use—was a common fixture in most American households, because many Americans depended on hunting game for food. Today the “state armies” that were prevalent in the 18th century have effectively been replaced by the National Guard, and hunting has basically become a recreational activity.

The very language of the Second Amendment refutes any argument that it was intended to guarantee every citizen an unfettered right to any kind of weapon he or she desires. In referring to “a well regulated militia” the Framers clearly intended to secure the right to bear arms essentially for military purposes. In the late 18th century, the “militia” was the aggregate of all able-bodied men, and the word “militia” was defined as “a body of troops, soldiers collectively.” Moreover, even where the militia was concerned, it is clear that the framers contemplated that the use of the arms could be “well regulated.”

If an 18th century militia was intended to be “well-regulated”, surely the Second Amendment does not remotely guarantee every person the constitutional right to have a “Saturday Night Special” or a machine gun without any regulation whatsoever. There is no support in the Constitution for the argument that federal and state governments are powerless to regulate the purchase of such firearms so that they do not get into the hands of persons with significant criminal records or mental impairments, or people who are engaged in criminal activity.

By analogy, although there is not a word or a hint in the Constitution about automobiles or motorcycles, no one would seriously argue that a state cannot regulate the use of motor vehicles by imposing licensing restrictions and speed limits based on such factors as a driver’s age, health condition, and driving record, and by recording every purchase or change of ownership.

Of course, some of these observations will be challenged by weapons and ammunition manufacturers and other members of the so-called “gun lobby.” That there should be a vigorous debate on this subject is a tribute to our freedom of speech and press, but the American people should have a firm understanding of the true origin and purpose of the Second Amendment. ■

Published December 11, 1991 this is one of a series of Associated Press articles on the Bill of Rights and other Constitutional Amendments by Warren Burger, the retired chief justice of the United States who became the chairman of the Commission on the Bicentennial of the US Constitution.

What Will Christians Do about Jesus?

By Wendell Griffen

What will Christians—notably theologians, pastors, religious educators and other expositors of the religion of Jesus—do about the Jesus who strolled into Jericho on his final trip to Jerusalem to observe Passover, and invited himself to dine at the home of a fellow named Zacchaeus. Before you answer, allow me to put my question in a context you may find interesting and, hopefully, challenging.

In her Preface to *The 1619 Project*, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones observed that historian and journalist Lerone Bennett, Jr. documented that African people had lived “on the land that in 1776 would become the United States” since 1619, when a ship named the White Lion arrived at Jamestown, Virginia, a year before the Mayflower arrived at Plymouth Rock.

For the next 246 years, Black people in this society were enslaved, kidnapped, transported, sold, whipped, raped, castrated, terrorized and abused in other ways. Their descendants have received nothing to repay, repair or otherwise account for the legion of wrongs they suffered. That is a colossal moral, ethical, social, political, economic and humanitarian issue. Yet, it is one on which theologians, pastors, preachers and other commentators about the religion of Jesus have seldom commented.

I have been a follower of the religion of Jesus since my parents and other Black elders introduced me to it during my childhood. My faith, like that of my Black parents, elders and ancestors was forged by the religion of Jesus, taught and preached from the Bible, set to music in Negro spirituals and gospel songs, and pondered in Black congregations.

I turned away from Eurocentric Christianity almost 40 years ago when I dropped out of seminary extension studies sponsored by Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The prospect of being credentialed by the religious system that gave moral, ecclesial and ethical approval to the invasion of indigenous societies, land theft, genocide, chattel slavery, imperialism, white supremacy, militarism, wealth privilege, patriarchy, sexism, bigotry and terrorism of LGBTQI persons, techno-centrism and xenophobia was intellectually, morally and ethically disgusting to me.

Instead, my theological perspective is bottomed on how the religion of Jesus has been interpreted by Negro spirituals and gospel songs. My theological

luminaries are Howard Thurman, James H. Cone and South African liberation theologian Allan Boesak.

My ethics is inspired by Henry Highland Garnett, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Katie Cannon, Emilie Townes, Kelly Brown Douglas and Cornel West.

My pastoral theology is guided by writings from Peter Paris and the examples of Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., J. Alfred Smith and Amos Brown.

My hermeneutics and homiletics are built on the writings by Walter Bruggemann, Walter Rauschenbusch, William Sloan Coffin, William Augustus Jones and by the work of Gardner Taylor,

In Scripture, “righteous” and “righteousness” are words about honesty, truth and justice. So, when Jesus pronounced a blessing on people who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” in Matthew 5:6 he was commending people who have a passion for honesty, truth and justice.

Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Henry and Ella Mitchell.

These people rescued my faith in the religion of Jesus from Eurocentric Christianity with its devotion to personal, commercial, social and geopolitical empire. I mention their names to emphasize that my exposure to their work and ministries happened outside any seminary context.

In Scripture, “righteous” and “righteousness” are words about honesty, truth and justice. So, when Jesus pronounced a blessing on people who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” in Matthew 5:6 he was commending people who have a passion for honesty, truth and justice.

He was not commending people who cheat, steal, lie and misuse power to oppress others. The encounter between Jesus and the chief revenue commissioner of Jericho named Zacchaeus recorded in Luke 19 clearly

makes this point. People remember Luke's account of that encounter for different reasons. Some people are impressed by the fact that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so much that he – a wealthy man – went to the trouble (and humiliation) of climbing a tree. Allan Boesak has written that Zacchaeus was so despised that being in a tree was probably the one place he felt safe. It was not just because he was a man of small stature. The people knew him. He knew he would not be welcomed by them. Why would anyone give up their place in the crowd, and their chance to see Jesus, for someone like him? Amongst the crowd, the hostility would have been palpable and perhaps physical. That tree was the safest place for him. It is also a symbol of his isolation. Amongst the poor and oppressed, those extorted by men like Zacchaeus every day of their lives, but expectant and hopeful that day, Zacchaeus would not have been made to feel welcome.¹

Some people point to the fact that Jesus addressed Zacchaeus by name, invited himself to dine with Zacchaeus, and was welcomed into the home of this rich fellow. How did Jesus know Zacchaeus? The narrative is silent on those points. We also don't know how long the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus lasted.

But Luke's narrative indicates that Jesus and Zacchaeus talked long enough and deeply enough for Zacchaeus to reconsider how he became so wealthy. Zacchaeus promised to refund four times the value of any of his wealth obtained through fraud – meaning through dishonest means. And Zacchaeus promised to give half of his possessions to the poor. Zacchaeus committed to transfer half of his wealth to impoverished people. The result of the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus was that the rich man voluntarily pledged to divest himself of half of his wealth and redistribute it to people who were poor.

Zacchaeus wasn't talking about making a charitable donation to the Salvation Army. He wasn't talking about setting up a Zacchaeus Foundation for the study of poverty. He was talking about giving away half of what he owned so that he and his poor neighbors would know income security.

The pledge to give half his wealth to the poor demonstrates what Bryan Stevenson (founder of the Equal Justice Institute) has said about poverty. According to Stevenson, the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.

Justice is always about the fair use and distribution of power and resources. A society where some people are extraordinarily wealthy while others are poor is unjust because resources – including but not limited to money and other possessions – are unfairly with-

held by the wealthy few and not redistributed for the numerous poor.

It is unjust for wealthy people to have much more than they need while poor people suffer because they do not have what they need. It is unjust for wealthy people to use their extraordinary wealth to enrich themselves rather than redistribute wealth to benefit their impoverished neighbors.

It is unjust for wealthy people to control land and refuse to share land with poor people who need housing. But that was not all. Zacchaeus also pledged to refund four times the value of anything he obtained by dishonest means. In doing so, Zacchaeus demonstrated another truth: Wealth obtained through injustice can never be justly retained; instead, it produces damage that must be repaired and wrong that must be remedied. Zacchaeus admitted that some of his wealth – including the comfortable lifestyle and the lavish hospitality he could extend to Jesus – was based on dishonest gain. To hold onto that wealth was to persist in dishonesty. To trade that wealth for more wealth

Both the pledge to divest and the pledge to make reparations resulted from the deliberate encounter Jesus had with Zacchaeus.

amounted to earning a profit on dishonesty.

When Zacchaeus pledged to pay back four times the value of anything he had obtained through fraudulent (meaning dishonest) means, he was pledging to make reparations! Both the pledge to divest and the pledge to make reparations resulted from the deliberate encounter Jesus had with Zacchaeus.

Jesus did not go to Jericho on a whim. Jesus did not invite himself to dine with Zacchaeus for personal privilege. Jesus did not invite himself to dine with Zacchaeus to be featured in the society section of the Jericho News. Jesus went to Jericho and invited himself to dine with Zacchaeus – the chief revenue commissioner in the prosperous Jericho region – because Jesus was hungry and thirsty for justice!

Jesus shows that hunger and thirst for justice requires that we challenge the ways that wealthy people have come to control so much. What unjust conduct, policies, and practices are in place that produced the land holdings of a few and the homelessness of so many? What unjust labor practices result in so many people working so hard and remaining in pov-

erty while a few people live in luxury without lifting a finger?

What labor was stolen? What land was obtained through oppressive methods? What water rights are held because people were cheated, or because wealthy people preyed on the vulnerability of their less fortunate neighbors? How much should be returned because it should never have been taken? How much should be restored?

What Zacchaeus said about restoring four times what he had obtained through dishonest means was based on principles of restitution and reparation. Consider these passages from the Hebrew Testament:

Exodus 22:1 *When someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. The thief shall make restitution, but if unable to do so, shall be sold for the theft.*

Leviticus 6:5
...or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realize your guilt.

Numbers 5:6-7 *6 Speak to the Israelites: When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with the LORD, that person incurs guilt and shall confess the sin that has been committed. The person shall make full restitution for the wrong, adding one fifth to it, and giving it to the one who was wronged.*

We are finally witnessing people wrestling with racial injustice in ways they have not done before. However, Zacchaeus shows that, like people in a desert, they need help. They need prophetic people to show up like Jesus did and challenge them.

Jesus, the itinerant preacher from Galilee, showed up in Jericho to confront the chief revenue commissioner about being unjustly wealthy. Jesus showed up to confront Zacchaeus about having twice as much as he needed to have aplenty. Jesus showed up to confront Zacchaeus about being wealthy through dishonest gain. Jesus showed up to challenge Zacchaeus to take on a life of economic repentance that involved downsizing, restitution and wealth redistribution.

This shows that people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, like Jesus, should confront the holders of unjust wealth. In obedience to the example of Jesus, we should challenge people like Zacchaeus to divest themselves of wealth obtained through dishonest

means. That includes challenging Zacchaeus people to understand that holding onto unjustly obtained wealth is a sign of moral and ethical depravity, not financial health.

In the racial justice context, this means that people who hunger and thirst for righteousness will challenge Zacchaeus people with the imperatives of restitution and reparation. That requires admitting that the wealth of our society was built on racial injustice, the original sin of this society that is embedded in its moral, ethical, religious, commercial, political and social DNA.

It also requires that prophetic people be forthright – whether they are clergy or not – about the debt created by that injustice. Relief and rescue from the moral desert of racial injustice will not come without the kind of prophetic intervention and interaction Jesus had with Zacchaeus. It is up to prophetic people to recognize this truth and live into it.

First, we should understand the difference between “restitution” and “reparation.” Restitution refers to an obligation owed by a person or party to repay a debt

Jesus, the itinerant preacher from Galilee, showed up in Jericho to confront the chief revenue commissioner about being unjustly wealthy.

owed to or repair a wrong inflicted on another person or party. Reparation refers to an obligation owed by a society or government to repay a debt owed or repair a wrong inflicted on persons or parties. At the heart of both ideas – restitution and reparation – is the fact that wrongful conduct has caused harm, loss, injury or suffering to another person or party (restitution) or to a group of people (reparation). Then why has no reparation been made to Black people for slavery and the racial injustice that continues from it?

One reason is explained at Isaiah 59:1-11:

See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness. No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, conceiving mis-

chief and begetting iniquity. They hatch adders' eggs, and weave the spider's web; whoever eats their eggs dies, and the crushed egg hatches out a viper. Their webs cannot serve as clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their high-ways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace. Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.

White supremacy – the actual theology followed by this society – has shamelessly condoned and justified the greed, robbery, violence, deceit and other injustices associated with slavery and racialized oppression of Black people since its inception. When European colonizers cheated, lied and robbed the indigenous people in this land of their land, water and wages, white supremacy sacralized the operation. European governments set up colonial governments that licensed land theft, cheating and the murdering of indigenous people. People who called themselves followers of Jesus condoned it and supported it.

Then the colonizers kidnapped Africans. They set up shipping companies to transport and trade enslaved Africans. Insurance companies and banks financed the whole operation. Slavery of Black people was continued openly in this society for 246 years. People who called themselves followers of Jesus condoned it and supported it.

The cover story in the June 28, 2020, issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, written by Nikole Hannah Jones is titled “What Is Owed.” She begins the story with these words: “If true justice and equality are ever to be achieved in the United States, the country must take seriously what it owes Black Americans.” With that introductory statement, Hannah-Jones argued that this nation must move beyond slogans and undertake deep conversation about reparations for Black Americans and added this truth: “A truly great country does not ignore or excuse its sins. It confronts them and then works to make them right.”

One job of religion is to challenge society to confront its sins and work to do right by people who have been wronged. However, religious people have shown no interest in engaging in conversations about reparations.

For example, the Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845. During its 150th anniversary meeting at Atlanta, Georgia in 1995 – almost 30 years ago – Southern Baptist messengers adopted an eloquent resolution admitting that slavery played a role in the formation of the Convention. The resolution admits that Southern Baptists “defended the right to own slaves, and either participated in, supported, or acquiesced in the particularly inhumane nature of American slavery.” The resolution also laments that racism and “historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest ... [have] separated us from our African American brothers and sisters” and resolves to apologize “to all African Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime...”²

Slavery of Black people was continued openly in this society for 246 years. People who called themselves followers of Jesus condoned it and supported it

Yet, the 1995 resolution, that was drafted and presented by some of the leading theologians of the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, was conspicuously – and suspiciously – silent about healing the damage, injury and harm African Americans suffered from 246 years of chattel slavery, another century of legalized segregation, and continued systemic practices and policies in every aspect of American society that are the legacy of that wicked history. The 1995 resolution did not contain a word about reparations to people whose ancestors were enslaved, dehumanized, defrauded, terrorized and marginalized, and who continue to suffer from that blatant violation of divine love, truth and justice.

Baylor University, the largest Baptist institution of higher education in the world, was also organized, founded and funded in 1845 – almost 185 years ago – by white men who owned enslaved persons. Baylor is home to the George Truett Theological Seminary. But when the Baylor Board of Regents issued a unanimous resolution admitting its slaveholder sponsorship and

purporting to apologize for it, the resolution did not mention anything about reparations.³

Greed and robbery are root causes of racism and racial injustice. Slaveholder religion did not create the greed, robbery and racism. Slaveholder religion, including religion practiced by white people who called themselves followers of Jesus, was developed to justify kidnapping, robbery, rape, torture, lynching, terrorism, human trafficking and the other evils associated with slavery.

We will never have a serious conversation about racial justice in this society until we talk about reparation for the moral, ethical, political and monetary debt this society owes descendants of African people who were enslaved, robbed, raped, cheated, terrorized, kept illiterate and dehumanized. But we will not have that conversation about reparation until and unless prophetic people insist on it.

The second reason reparations have never been paid to the descendants of enslaved Black people is that we who are Black have been timid about demanding reparations. Black deference to white privilege and fear of white terrorism has produced Black self-censorship about reparations.

Black people demonstrated, protested, preached and engaged in active measures to desegregate schools, restaurants, hotels, theatres and other establishments. Black religious leaders joined similar efforts concerning voting rights. But Black religious leaders have not talked, boycotted, protested, demonstrated or otherwise made demands for reparation. Religious and fraternal organizations have not made reparations a subject at local, state and national meetings. In the same way that white religious leaders deserve criticism for failing and refusing to address reparations, intellectual honesty requires that we charge Black religious leaders for being prophetically derelict on that subject.

Randall Robinson is a notable exception. In his book titled *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, Randall Robinson makes this point unmistakably clear. The issue here is not whether we [Black people] can, or will win reparations. The issue is whether we will fight for reparations, because we have decided for ourselves that they are our due...Let me try to drive the point home here: through keloids of suffering, through coarse veils of damaged self-belief, lost direction, misplaced compasses, shit-faced resignation, racial transmutation, Black people worked long, hard, killing days, years, centuries—and they were never paid. The value of their labor went into others' pockets—plantation owners, northern entrepreneurs, state treasuries, the United States government.

Where was the money?

Where is the money?

There is a debt here.

Jews have asked this question of countries and banks and corporations and collectors and any who had been discovered at the end of the slimy line holding in secret places the gold, the art, the money that was the rightful property of European Jews before the Nazi terror. Jews have demanded what was their due and received a fair measure of it.

Clearly, how Blacks respond to the challenge surrounding the simple demand for restitution [reparations] will say a lot more about us and do a lot more for us than the demand itself would suggest. We would show ourselves to be responding as any normal people would, to victimization were we to assert in our demands for restitution that, for 246 years and with the complicity of the United States government, hundreds of millions of Black people endured unimaginable cruelties—kidnapping, sale as livestock, deaths in the millions during terror-filled sea voyages, backbreaking toil, beatings, rapes, castrations, maimings, murders.

That is what makes the encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus so hermeneutically compelling. Jesus did not shirk his moral and ethical duty to confront Zacchaeus about his greed.

We would begin a healing of our psyches were the most public case made that whole peoples lost religions, languages, customs, histories, cultures, children, mothers, fathers... And they were never made whole. And never compensated. Not one red cent. [Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, (Dutton, 2000, the Penguin Group, pp. 206-208)]

That is what makes the encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus so hermeneutically compelling. Jesus did not shirk his moral and ethical duty to confront Zacchaeus about his greed. Jesus was not afraid to call Zacchaeus out. Jesus refused to pass through Jericho without meeting Zacchaeus, confronting Zacchaeus, and calling on him to make restitution for anything he had obtained by dishonest means.

Jesus refused to practice a religion that turned a blind eye to robbery. What about us? Jesus refused to practice a religion that condoned wage theft. What about us? Jesus refused to back down. What about us? What are followers of Jesus doing to confront this society about the unpaid and constantly mounting debt owed

to the descendants of people whose lives and labor and culture and language and ancestry and religion were robbed?

What are the descendants of those robbed workers doing in God's name to make this society face its moral and ethical duty to make reparations for 246 years of stolen labor, another 100 years of legalized segregation, and the ongoing harms and losses associated with racial injustice?

In the summer of 2020, I preached about reparations to Black people for harms, losses and injuries caused by this society, intentionally, persistently, and openly, because of 246 years of legalized chattel slavery, another 100 years of legalized segregation, and ongoing violations of God's love and justice from effects of that injustice. Beginning with Luke's account about the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, the rich chief revenue commissioner of Jericho, I emphasized that the divine imperative that we love God with our whole being and love one another as neighbors requires that this society make reparation for the harms, losses and injuries inflicted by this society upon Black people. And I argued that followers of Jesus have a moral and ethical duty to lead the call for reparations.

One sermon in that series pondered reparations by looking at Mark's account about the encounter between an un-named wealthy man and Jesus that is found in the Gospels of Matthew (Mt. 19:16-30) and Luke (Lk. 18:18-30). People have termed this the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler." However, one of the early Christian theologians (Origen of Alexandria) recorded in his commentary on Matthew that two rich men approached Jesus as he traveled.

The lesson has several remarkable features. The passage states that a man of wealth and influence (ruler) approached Jesus, humbly knelt before him, and addressed him as "Good Teacher" before asking, "what must I do to inherit eternal life." The man did not appear discouraged when Jesus rejected his flattery. When Jesus reminded him about the obligation to honor God in inter-personal relationships ("You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother") the young man declared that he had faithfully kept those requirements from his youth.

Then Mark 10:21 reads, Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Before that comment, the man seemed serious about being identified with Jesus.

But when he heard that direction from Jesus, "he was

shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions" (Mk. 10:22).

At that point, Jesus remarked to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples were perplexed (the J.B. Phillips translation reads staggered), so Jesus repeated the point and drove it home with the proverb that "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk.10:25).

Jesus told the young ruler to "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor... then come, follow me." Jesus did not welcome the man and "disciple him" to use his wealth to "sow" into his ministry. Origen of Alexandria wrote in his Commentary on Matthew that Jesus said to the perplexed rich man: "How can you say 'I have fulfilled the Law and the Prophets when it is written in the Law: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' and many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are covered with filth, dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things, none

That is what makes the encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus so hermeneutically compelling. Jesus did not shirk his moral and ethical duty to confront Zacchaeus about his greed.

of which goes out to them?"

What does this have to do with reparation and following Jesus? Jesus refused to allow flattery to blind him to the dramatic inequality between the rich ruler and the rest of society. He directed the man to quote "push back" from his wealth, to divest himself of it, and become one of the common people. Jesus directed this man to share his wealth with impoverished people. Instead, the man preferred to hold on to his possessions. The Gospels do not suggest that he ever returned to follow Jesus, despite having initially indicated he respected Jesus.

Like the rich young ruler, white Baptists who founded the Southern Baptist Convention were enthusiastic about "eternal life" and preaching the gospel of Jesus. But they refused to give up owning enslaved Africans. They refused to pay Africans for their work. They refused to treat Africans as neighbors. To justify their greed, wage theft, human trafficking, kidnapping, rape and the other violations of love and justice associated with chattel slavery, "rich rulers" in this society estab-

lished the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. That was also the year that slaveholding Bible quoting and preaching white Baptists who claimed to follow Jesus established Baylor University, the oldest and largest continually operating Baptist institution of higher education in the world.

Less than 20 years later, slaveholding, Bible-quoting, and hymn-singing white Baptists were at the forefront of what would become the deadliest war ever fought by the United States, and the last war waged on U.S. soil, because they, like the rich young ruler, would not “push back” from slaveholder religion, slaveholder economics and slaveholder social relationships. Let us be clear: Like the “rich ruler” who approached Jesus and called him “Good Teacher,” church folks stole the lives, labor and livelihood of millions of their siblings for centuries.

Like the “rich ruler,” church folks were saddened about the thought of pushing back from that stolen wealth. Like the “rich ruler,” church folks since that time have tried to associate themselves with Jesus without redressing the poverty, sickness and other results of systemic racism, slavery and ongoing discrimination. Sadly, people who call themselves followers of Jesus court favor from “rich ruler” types to the point that congregations would rather not do what Jesus did and tell people who trust in wealth to divest and share with those who are poor. Unlike Jesus, who taught that it is hard for people who trust in wealth “to enter the kingdom of God,” people who claim to follow Jesus in this nation do not tell wealthy people to “push back,” divest their wealth, re-distribute its value to those who are poor, and live in solidarity with those who are not affluent.

On April 16, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act, a law that called for one million dollars in reparations to be paid for emancipated Africans who had been enslaved in the District of Columbia – but the money was to go to the white people who enslaved them, worked them without pay, and kept the proceeds from their work. I do not know how many slaveowners received “reparations” from the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862. However, I have no information that any of the emancipated Africans received a penny.

The District of Columbia Emancipation Act included up to \$100,000 to resettle formerly enslaved persons – but the resettlement was to be in Haiti and Liberia, not in the United States. Then, as now, church people with “rich ruler” religion weren’t told to “push back” from the stolen wealth this nation and its institutions garnered from enslaved persons.

Instead of following the example of Jesus, who confronted the unnamed “rich ruler” and later confronted the rich tax collector named Zacchaeus, church people who claim they are followers of Jesus refuse to challenge “rich ruler” religionists who do not “push back.” Perhaps that is why church folks are not “stepping up” about reparations. Perhaps we have people with “rich ruler” religion that pretends to follow Jesus while trusting wealth – even when the wealth has been obtained and is being held because of theft, not thrift. And perhaps “rich ruler religion” explains why the religion of Jesus is associated with concern for the wealthy rather than concern for the poor.

“Rich ruler religion” – religion that does not push back from unjustly obtained and held wealth – should not be associated with Jesus. And unless followers of Jesus confront “rich ruler religion,” “rich rulers” like the unnamed man in this passage and like Zacchaeus will never become people who embrace the divine imperative of reparations for the stolen lives, stolen labor and fraud that continue to haunt our society.

I contend that the love and justice of God require that followers of Jesus join the demands for reparations for Black children of God who descended from enslaved Africans.

I contend that the love and justice of God require that followers of Jesus join the demands for reparations for Black children of God who descended from enslaved Africans. Torah, the writings of the Hebrew prophets, and the teachings of Jesus – especially the narrative in the Gospel of Luke about the encounter Jesus had with Zacchaeus, the chief revenue commissioner of Jericho – support the demand for racial reparations. I now must stress several things.

First, we must remember that reparation is a moral, ethical and social requirement from God. Unpaid debts, unrepaired injuries and unrequited harms and losses separate people from God and each other. That reality requires that we understand reparation for racial injustice to be a theological imperative. Wealth, privilege and status based on violence, theft, deceit, hate, hypocrisy and fear are never based on justice and peace. When wealth, privilege and status are grabbed by those means the people who grab it must always depend on and resort to more violence, deceit, hate, hypocrisy and fear to hold onto it. The Biblical lesson

about Cain and Abel recorded in Genesis 3 and the lesson about Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3 prove this point.

When Cain murdered Abel, he did not escape God. When the Egyptians enslaved and oppressed Hebrew workers, they did not escape God. In both instances, the Biblical message is that God witnessed the violence. God witnessed the theft of life and labor. God witnessed the willful disregard for God and others. And God confronted Cain and the Egyptian empire (through Moses) about that willful defiance of divine sovereignty, love and justice.

Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said that the moral arc of the universe sweeps wide yet always bends towards justice. Justice requires that wrongs we inflict on others be made right. Justice requires that debts be repaid. Justice requires reparation. Because the arc of the universe “bends towards justice,” the universe bends toward reparation whether people like it or not. And until reparation is made, the relationship between wrongdoers and their victims is skewed, unbalanced and untrue. Until reparation is made, wrongdoers must constantly fear vengeance from victims who have been robbed, brutalized, deceived and otherwise wronged.

Until reparation is made, that fear drives wrongdoers to defend their wrongful privilege, status and wealth by force. Violence begets more violence. The moral and ethical history of what we today call policing and law enforcement towards indigenous people in this society, African Americans and Latino children of God is rooted in centuries of sacralized and legalized violence perpetrated by white children of God against people of color and the stolen wealth obtained and distributed on racial grounds across generations. White violence, theft, deceit, hate and hypocrisy against people of color produced the racial inequities that ravage our society and account for white privilege. White people sanction the use of violence by law enforcement to protect property more than Black, brown and red lives because white wealth is bottomed on violence against Black, brown and red children of God.

The messages with which God confronted Cain about murdering Abel and which sent Moses to confront the Egyptian Empire about enslaving and oppressing Hebrew immigrants, teach that wrongdoers cannot escape divine scrutiny. And those messages teach that God knows the truth wrongdoers try to deny. God knows the debt owed for taking lives. God knows the debt owed by stealing labor and land. God knows and requires that the debts be repaid, the wrongs be remedied, and the injuries be healed. Reparation is a moral, ethical and social imperative from God—not an elective. Those who deny that truth defy the sover-

eignty and justice of God.

People whose greed drives them to lust after and violently grab wealth, privilege and status must use violence to hold onto it. In a moral universe, that means they must somehow manufacture explanations to justify that violence. Greed and lust are not morally justifiable explanations for premeditated and otherwise indefensible violence.

Hence, throughout history and in every society, humans have tried to justify premeditated and indefensible violence by claiming that religion, law, manifest destiny, science (including education and commerce) uphold it. Racism and white supremacy are perversions used to justify the greed and lust of perverted religion, perverted law, perverted science, perverted history and perverted public policy.

We should remember these things whenever we confront racial inequities and white supremacy. Religion, law, commerce, science and every other institution have been perverted and corrupted by greed and lust for power, wealth and status. Perverted religion, sci-

Perverted religion, science, law and other institutions operate to maintain and expand racism and white supremacy across generations, across cultures and across political players.

ence, law and other institutions operate to maintain and expand racism and white supremacy across generations, across cultures and across political players.

Perverted religion, science, law and other institutions are the “principalities and powers of spiritual darkness in high places” that followers of Jesus have wrestled in every era and place. In the context of racial justice (both in the U.S. and across the world), perverted religion, law, education, science, politics and economics have always been used to justify greed and covetousness for the lives, land and other resources of people from Africa, Asia, America and Australia and they continue to be religiously blessed and sanctioned.

This not only gives wrongdoers a false sense of merit, it tempts oppressed people to question the goodness and justice of God.

When we speak of reparation being a requirement, we should also emphasize that it is morally, ethically and socially required. This means there must be financial reparation, legal reparation, political reparation, educational reparation, cultural reparation, religious,

medical and emotional reparation for the harm, loss and trauma inflicted across 400 years to Africans who were enslaved and their descendants. Remember that financial, legal, political, educational, cultural, religious, scientific, medical and mental health institutions were complicit in and enabled the harm, loss and trauma African Americans suffer. They must also repair the damage, harm and loss associated with their premeditated and indefensible violations of divine love and justice.

But societal institutions will not meet, let alone fulfill, the moral, ethical and public imperative for reparation without prophetic leadership. Notice that I said prophetic rather than religious leadership. Religious institutions and their leaders are so corrupted by idolatry to greed and empire that most pastors, religious educators and religious bodies are morally, ethically and institutionally compromised by white supremacy and racism. This is what Robert P. Jones meant when he wrote that white Christians are Cain and have been “white too long.”

We need look no further than Al Mohler and the trustees of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the president and regents of Baylor University to see that leaders of white religious institutions have served greed, covetousness and white supremacy, racism and empire too long to speak prophetically about racism and white supremacy, let alone provide prophetic leadership about reparation for the harm, loss and debt associated with it.

When it comes to racial injustice, most white religious leaders (including pastors, religious educators and denominational leaders) are “blind guides.” They should not be followed.

The so-called Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and the passage involving Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) highlight that reparation is resisted and that prophetic efforts toward reparation are resented. In both passages, religious people who suffered from systemic wrongs perpetrated by the “tax collectors and sinners” “grumbled” because Jesus socialized with them. We should remember that Jesus did not dismiss those “sinners” as moral monsters beyond the reach and power of prophetic influence. It is easy to criticize white people for being opposed to reparations, and we should do so. But it is somewhat disingenuous to criticize white people for opposing reparations by terming them moral monsters. Moral monsters should not be expected to tolerate demands for reparations, let alone consider themselves morally, ethically and socially obligated to meet such demands. It is self-contradictory – if not unfair – to denounce people as inhuman and then blame them for not

responding humanely to moral and ethical demands for justice.

Jesus illustrated in the Parable of the Gracious Father (Prodigal Son) and his encounter with Zacchaeus that God delights in restoring broken relationships. That was the point Jesus stressed in the lessons about the widow who swept her house to find one lost coin and the shepherd who left 99 sheep to find one lost sheep and the father who welcomed a wayward son back with a feast and party.

God is obsessed with Oneness. In the divine economy, all things add up to equal One. All things are part of the One. God is One wonderful Creator over all creation, One wonderful progenitor over all beings, and One who does not rest while anything violates the relationship of oneness between God and everything and everyone else. Jesus summed up this idea in Luke 19:10 in these words: “For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.”

We should remember that reparation is about repairing a broken relationship. Something has happened to

Jesus did not treat Zacchaeus and other tax collectors as moral monsters beyond redemption. Instead, he included Matthew, a tax collector, among his first followers.

damage a relationship. In the Prodigal Son parable, a son broke ties with his family of origin. In the lesson about Jesus and Zacchaeus, the Jericho revenue commissioner had become the tool used by Roman colonizers to exact taxes from the indigenous Palestinians of Judea.

What chance did Zacchaeus have to come to his moral and ethical senses about reparations for the unjust wealth he gained from dishonest tax collecting if Jesus had not invited himself to dinner? What chance did the people who had been victimized by Zacchaeus have to get reparations if Jesus had joined the grumbling church folks who snubbed Zacchaeus? And what chance did Jesus have to prophetically challenge Zacchaeus unless Jesus met Zacchaeus where Zacchaeus was both comfortable yet also vulnerable – in the house Zacchaeus occupied because of unjust tax collecting? Jesus did not treat Zacchaeus and other tax collectors as moral monsters beyond redemption. Instead, he included Matthew, a tax collector, among his first followers.

Reparation can be demanded from privileged people only by people willing to make the demand. However, we will not demand reparation so long as we think privileged people are moral monsters, incapable of realizing their wrongful conduct and making amends for it. Grumbling about privileged people will not present them with a moral and ethical demand for reparation. This does prevent criticizing people who hold onto white privilege. Nor does it prevent us from denouncing white privileged people who refuse to support reparation demands. We should criticize and denounce white privileged people who pretend to be innocent or ignorant concerning racial inequities long suffered by Black and other people of color. But it is illogical to condemn white privileged people as moral monsters yet expect them to honor moral demands for reparations.

In Luke 15:1-2, we read that religious critics of Jesus “were grumbling” because Jesus socialized with “tax collectors and sinners....” In the parable involving the Generous Father who welcomed a wayward son, the elder brother grumbled and refused to join the feast and celebration the joyful father hosted for his returned son. And in Luke 19:7, we read that people “began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’” as they saw Jesus go have dinner with Zacchaeus.

Are prophetic people guilty of “grumbling” about the notion that the same love and justice of God that upholds the demand that reparations be paid to descendants of formerly enslaved persons and which also commands us to obey the example of Jesus regarding white people who enjoy undeserved privilege and the fruit of generations of societally approved oppression?

Are we guilty of writing them off as moral monsters? Are we the folks God must beg to rejoice when privileged people come to themselves and become agents of justice rather than hoarders of privilege? Are we following the example of Jesus or the “church folks” who grumbled about him socializing with “tax collectors and sinners?” We do not have a transcript of what Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about when Zacchaeus hosted Jesus for dinner at his house. But judging from the pledge Zacchaeus made about giving half his wealth to the poor and restoring four times the value of anything he had obtained dishonestly, it is fair to surmise that Jesus didn’t spend the day talking with Zacchaeus about sports. Jesus talked with Zacchaeus about justice, love and the reason Zacchaeus was scorned and considered an outcast by the Palestinian community. Jesus talked with Zacchaeus about the “great chasm” that existed between his affluence and privilege and the oppression and suffering experienced

by other Palestinian Jews.

Jesus went to dinner with Zacchaeus as a prophet, not to obtain a personal favor or advantage. From that moral and ethical vantage point, Jesus pressed Zacchaeus to “come to himself” to use the words in the Parable of the Gracious Father (Prodigal Son). And like the father in that parable who restored the wayward son, and the shepherd who found the lost sheep, and the widow who found the lost coin, Jesus pursued Zacchaeus in the spirit of seeking community.

But the grumbling “church folks” behaved like the pouting elder brother in the Parable of the Gracious Father. They grumbled as Jesus dined with tax collectors like Matthew and Zacchaeus. They grumbled about Jesus. They grumbled about Zacchaeus. Their grumbling did not induce Zacchaeus to pledge to give half his wealth to the poor and restore four times what he had unjustly taken.

We do not know if people who are “lost” because of their idolatry to white supremacy and privilege will follow the example of Zacchaeus or not in any given

Jesus went to dinner with Zacchaeus as a prophet, not to obtain a personal favor or advantage.

instance. What Jesus teaches in these passages, however, is that we who live according to the love and justice of God have no excuse for treating them as if they are moral monsters and beyond redemption. They are children of God as we are. God wants them to be in right relationship with God, with people of color, and with themselves.

The “Son of Man” came to seek and to save those who are “lost” due to idolatry to white supremacy, racism, and white privilege. Followers of Jesus have no excuse for failing to follow his prophetic example. We have no excuse for behaving as if we cannot or should not behave towards white privileged people the way Jesus did with Zacchaeus.

And we certainly have no reason to believe privileged people are going to behave as Zacchaeus did when we treat them as if they are moral monsters.

CONCLUSION

We should be encouraged by the Biblical lessons about how God confronted Cain about murdering Abel, how God directed Moses to go to Egypt and lead the liberation of Hebrew immigrants from bondage, how the Gracious Father welcomed a wayward son in

Luke 15, and about Jesus who went out of his way to schedule a prophetic confrontation and dinner invitation with an oppressive Palestinian tax collector named Zacchaeus.

Taken together, these lessons teach us that God works on behalf of oppressed people. God works to confront oppressors like Cain and Zacchaeus. God treats them as moral beings, not monsters. And with God, they are not beyond redemption, restoration and reclamation. With God, reparation is not only possible, but also required. With God, the lost can be found. The wayward can return. And the wicked can be confronted.

God believes in reparation. Do we? God believes that prophetic people can make a reparatory difference by confronting privileged oppressors. Do we? God believes that suffering people can be reconciled with people like Zacchaeus when people like Zacchaeus engage in reparations. Do we believe? Do we believe God can do through us what God did through Jesus with Zacchaeus?

Do we believe in God that much? If so, we should follow the example of Jesus with Zacchaeus. We should make a prophetic demand for reparation to privileged people like Zacchaeus. Like Jesus, we should make reparations part of the conversation and then watch what God does with our faithfulness to the example of Jesus.

But if we don't believe in God that much, we should stop calling ourselves followers of the Jesus who deliberately stopped in Jericho, invited himself to dine with Zacchaeus, and stayed until Zacchaeus came to himself and resolved to make restitution for his wrongfully obtained and enjoyed wealth. If we are against reparations, then we are against Jesus, and Zacchaeus, no matter what we call ourselves. So, I ask you, what will Christians do about that Jesus? ■

1 Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and*

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Christian Quietism (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 66.

2 See, <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention/>,
3 See, <https://www.baylor.edu/boardofregents/news.php?action=story&story=219403#:~:text=BE%20IT%20RESOLVED%20that%20the%20Baylor%20University%20Board,conversations%20about%20this%20aspect%20of%20the%20insti>

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White Privilege? Who? Me?

by Charles Kiker

I have seen and heard negative reaction to the concept of white privilege, such as, “Any privilege I have is not based on race or color but on hard work and careful management.” So, I ask myself, “Am I privileged?”

Born on a farm in the Texas Panhandle during the depression and dust bowl, I am an unlikely candidate to be considered privileged. We did not have indoor plumbing until I was 13-years-old. I did my homework by the dim light of a kerosene lamp until FDR and the REA brought us electricity. I did barnyard chores morning and evening, cleaned out the chicken house on Saturdays, and went to school at a two-teacher country school. The quality of our education depended on whether we had an excellent, good, mediocre or downright sorry teacher any particular school year. I had some of each category.

Studies show a wide disparity between the net worth of white families and families of people of color. One study shows the median wealth of white families as about \$184,000, Black families about \$23,000, and non-white Hispanics \$38,000. That means black families have about 12 cents, and non-white Hispanics about 21 cents, where whites have a dollar. A major contributor to wealth is real estate, including the family home. After World War II, many returning veterans purchased small homes on the GI bill. “Red lining” by real estate agents and lending companies relegated Blacks and other people of color to homes in less desirable neighborhoods, and many could not buy anywhere. Real estate consistently appreciated so that those who bought homes in good neighborhoods sold and bought new homes after a few years and by the time those returning veterans retired, they had accumulated considerable net worth, which was passed on to their descendants. No real estate meant no accumulated wealth from appreciation. And, by the way, the freed slaves never got their 40 acres and a mule!

“White Privilege? Who, Me?” I’m going to get personal. How am I, in 2023, privileged above my brothers and sisters of color? For the next several paragraphs I’m going on a little genealogical and chronological journey taking us back from the 18th century to the present time.

My great-great grandfather George Adam Keicher was born of German immigrant parents in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1754, before there was a

United States of America. By 1776, he was 22-years-old, old enough to fight in the Revolutionary army, which he did. After the war, he moved, along with other people of German descent from Pennsylvania to North Carolina. In 1791, his son Charles Kiker, my great grandfather, was born. He was old enough to fight in the War of 1812, which he did. Family lore has it that Charles received a tract of land in Mecklenburg County as mustering out pay for his services.

In the early 1800s the Cherokee Nation occupied much of North Georgia. White settlers wanted that land. The Supreme Court ruled that the State of Georgia had no jurisdiction over lands occupied by the Cherokee. Reportedly, President Andrew Jackson said,

The 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule for Gordon County, Georgia, shows three slaves in the household of Charles Postell Kiker, my grand uncle and son of my great grandfather Charles Kiker, who died in 1869.

in effect, “Let the Supreme Court enforce their ruling.” They did not, and President Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, and native peoples went on a forced march westward on the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma Territory. North Georgia was now open for white settlers at the expense of the Cherokees

Great-great grandfather George Adam and great grandfather Charles left North Carolina and settled on formerly Cherokee land in what is now Gordon County, Georgia. The Kikers were not wealthy. But they had land and land is wealth. White Kikers had land. Red Cherokees did not. White privilege.

My branch of the Kikers lived in North Georgia which was not cotton country, so they were not major slaveowners. But they did own slaves. The 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule for Gordon County, Georgia, shows three slaves in the household of Charles Postell Kiker, my grand uncle and son of my great grandfather Charles Kiker, who died in 1869. My great grandmother, Amelia Minyard Kiker, was

a resident of the 1860 Charles Kiker household; so that household may have effectively been the actual household of great grandmother Amelia; but in 1860, women were not often listed as heads of household. The three slaves in that household, listed by age, color and gender, were a 25-year-old Black female, a five-year-old *mulatto* male, and a five-month-old Black male. Why was that little boy a mulatto in the Kiker household?

My paternal grandmother was a Wesson from Laurens County, South Carolina, and her ancestors had more slaves. Deed records from Laurens County show that triple great grandfather Henry Wesson deeded in 1821 an approximately 13-year-old slave girl called (not named) “Fanny” to his favored son Edward “to have and to hold.”

George Adam died in 1844, and Charles in 1859. My grandfather, George Kiker, and his family still lived in Gordon County. When the Civil War came along Grandfather George’s son, Robert Postell Kiker (my Uncle Bob), born in 1844, was old enough to fight. And he did. But he didn’t wear a gray coat. He dressed in blue. He was a Union patriot, but a Confederate traitor.

Unfortunately, wars come; fortunately, they go. When this one went, it left a bitter taste. Not everyone in Gordon County was happy that Uncle Bob had been a Union soldier.

My father, James Watt Kiker, was born in Gordon County in 1866. When he was a little boy, Grandfather George divested himself of his land in Gordon County, and moved to DeKalb County in Northeast Alabama. Deed records show that they were able to purchase land there. They didn’t stay long in DeKalb County, moving to Kennedale in Tarrant County, Texas, in the 1870s. They were not wealthy, but they had a small farm, and land is wealth.

Grandfather George died in 1883, when my father was just 17-years-old. Census records for 1890 were destroyed by fire; so I am not sure where James Watt was in 1890; but by 1900, he showed up in the census in Throckmorton County, Texas, as James Riker. But the given names of his wife and children indicate that the name “Riker” was a misreading of the handwritten script. In Throckmorton County, he was a farmer and cattleman. By 1902, James Watt decided to go west to Swisher County, where he was able to purchase a section of land northeast of a small town, Tulia, Texas.

Just 28 years earlier, General Ranald McKenzie surprised an encampment of Comanche Indians in Palo Duro Canyon. The Indians escaped, but McKenzie captured their horses and drove them 20 miles south to Tule Canyon, where he had his soldiers shoot

the horses, leaving the Comanches to walk back to Fort Sill, a miniature Trail of Tears. McKenzie had accomplished his mission of clearing the Comanches out of Texas, and opening the Panhandle for settlers. Once again, land hungry whites benefited at the expense of the Red Man.

In 1902, First National Bank of Tulia was chartered. James Watt Kiker was a charter depositor. He walked in, made a small deposit, and got First National Bank’s help to purchase that section of land. I wonder what would have happened if a Black man had walked through those doors in 1902 seeking the same mortgage loan for property.

My father got his section of land. I grew up there. We were not wealthy, but land is wealth. We took care of the land, and the land took care of us. That section of land contributed to my well-being.

White Privilege? Who? Me? Yes, me! That’s my story. And many of my generation and our descendants could tell a similar story. We are not responsible FOR the wrongs done by our white ancestors to

We are not responsible FOR the wrongs done by our white ancestors to people of color: Native Americans, Black slaves, and defrauded Hispanics. But we are responsible TO their descendants who have played on an unlevel playing field. Reparations are in order.

people of color: Native Americans, Black slaves, and defrauded Hispanics. But we are responsible TO their descendants who have played on an unlevel playing field. Reparations are in order. A bill simply to study reparations has long languished in the U.S. House of Representatives. In California, there is a commission to study reparations and the city council in Boston has approved a similar commission. Public support of those efforts is in order.

It is not enough to acknowledge white privilege. Centuries of slavery, Manifest Destiny, and Jim Crow have rendered the playing field unfairly tipped so that people of color are always playing uphill. We must level the playing field or at least even tip it a bit in the other direction to help make amends for centuries of an unlevel field! Let’s consider reparations—repair to the aforementioned disparity in wealth.

Two major factors contribute to accumulation of wealth: education and owning real estate, including a family home.

In 2002, my wife Patricia and I were privileged to spend a few months in interim ministry on the Crow Reservation in Montana. We were privileged to teach and learn and to love and be loved by the Crow people. Our experience there has influenced us to make regular contributions to a school in Southeast Montana for Crow and Northern Cheyenne children. But individual reparations will not suffice. Affirmative action has fallen out of favor with SCOTUS and many state legislatures. Concerted public efforts can usher it back in.

Let's now consider reparations in the area of real estate ownership to address wealth inequality.

Following Emancipation, there were sporadic efforts for "Forty Acres and a Mule" to be given to freed slaves as a means for their participation as citizens of the United States. It never happened. Sadly, the only Civil War reparations were given to the former slave owners for the loss of their human property.

Following World War II, the *GI Bill* made it possible for veterans to purchase homes with little or no down payment and with favorable interest rates. FHA loans were said to be available to all veterans and non-veterans alike. But "redlining" on the part of real estate companies and lending institutions meant that these loans were effectively given to whites only, resulting in the continued impoverishment and lost opportunities for children and grandchildren of former slaves.

Section 8 rental subsidies are available to some citizens; but subsidized rent only provides housing; it does nothing toward relieving poverty. The private

non-profit Habitat for Humanity organization makes home ownership available to some low-income people on a relatively small scale. I envision a Section 9 home purchase program, with provisions to forbid racial discrimination, making home ownership possible to all lower income people.

The current political climate is not favorable for public reparations. Faith-based, justice-focused organizations preaching and singing and marching can change the climate.

The hour is late, but the time is right to awake to the admonition to do justice and love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. ■

Charles Kiker is a retired American Baptist Church USA minister, a former member of the Board of Directors of ACLU Texas, and a founding member of Friends of Justice. He and his wife Patricia currently reside in Arlington, Texas. They are members of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth. He and Patricia are 90- years-old.

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Churches and The Death of Third Places

By Mark Osler

I live in Minneapolis, where many of us enjoy the short summer by ditching the car and commuting to work on our bikes. My own bike route downtown takes me around the shore of a glacial lake, along an old rail line, and through a variety of residential neighborhoods with big houses and small. My meandering lets me get a better sense of the community and how it is doing as I pass new restaurants, failed businesses, street parties, and thousands of people out walking, canoeing, biking and just hanging out.

Last summer, I saw a city coming back from both a pandemic and a terrifying spate of destruction after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 (an event that occurred not far from my bike route). New apartments were being built. The parks were sparkling clean. My fellow bikers seemed to be everywhere. But I noticed something else, too: Churches that had closed their doors for good, or seemed to have nothing going on in the evenings—even Wednesday evenings—when I passed.

It was near dusk when I passed one of them, not far from Lake Harriett. The church was a handsome brick building in a prized corner location on the border between Minneapolis and Edina, a neighboring suburb. What caught my eye was an anomaly out front. The sign there said “Sunday Worship 10 am, Education Hour 11:30 am/Pastor _____.” I rode a little further, thinking that they might be between ministers, but something told me to circle back. I did, and noticed a yellow sheet tacked to the sign. Pulling close enough to read it, my heart sank: it was a demolition notice. It was going to become a “mixed-use development.”

I stood there, astride my bike, and imagined the little playground full of children and parents coming out to claim them after the education hour. These are the buildings that house our Sunday schools, our AA meetings, the Cub Scouts, the pre-school, the after-church potluck, the Wednesday night lectures, the book clubs. But no longer. After generations found kindness (and other forms of connection) there, the pandemic saw its death. No stone would be left upon another; every one will be thrown down.

And, of course, it is not just that church. In 2019, about 4,500 Protestant churches closed (while only 3,000 opened), and that was before the pandemic hit. We don’t have good data yet, but it certainly looks like the pandemic was a death blow to hundreds of congregations.

Make no mistake: The death of a church is a *death*. My friend and mentor, the Baylor professor Bob Darden, once told me that churches have a soul, something that lives beyond the lives of any one minister or congregant. As I’ve gotten to know churches, I’ve seen the deep truth in that, and the tragedy in the passing from this world of that soul.

However, it’s not just churches that are failing. Shopping malls, fraternal organizations, and other places where people gather were struggling before the pandemic and decimated during it. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the phrase “Third Places” three decades ago to describe those locations other than work and home where we gather and socialize; and it is these places that are dying as home becomes the

Part of the downfall of third places, and churches especially, has been exclusion. Those third places that have suffered the most—churches and fraternal organizations, for example—are those that are perceived as excluding some people based on belief or background.

workplace and the internet replaces pretty much everything—trends accelerated by the pandemic.

Some writers have acknowledged the importance of churches as third places, and the Aspen Group, a church design company, has even proposed reconfiguring churches to better serve as third places by creating “nooks, edges, hot spots and perches” near the lobby to encourage informal socializing. It’s a good idea, but hard to implement for aging congregations who are disinclined to reimagine their spaces in such a radical way—and no help at all to those like the little church by Lake Harriett that have already passed from this world.

Part of the downfall of third places, and churches especially, has been exclusion. Those third places that have suffered the most—churches and fraternal organizations, for example—are those that are perceived as

excluding some people based on belief or background. Meanwhile, those with low levels of exclusion like a coffeehouse (where all it takes to get in is the price of a cup of joe) seem to be thriving. This comports with the reasons we know that young people reject church and faith—that they perceive it (often, but not always, correctly) as excluding LGBT people, people of color, or at least people who aren't already certain in their beliefs. The Pew Research Center has convincingly found that the most common switch in faith is from identifying as Christian to not identifying with faith at all, and part of the reason is exclusion. The decline in churches reflects the decline of faith in the United States, as reflected in Pew polling data that shows only 64 percent of Americans have any kind of Christian identity (a striking drop from the 90 percent rate in 1972).

That may suggest a way out of this wave of dying churches: These congregations could transform themselves by opening up to new people and groups, by choosing openness over exclusion. That is a hard road, though. Over the past several years, I've spoken to several ministers facing the same conundrum. Their parishioners aged and young people stopped coming. In some places, they made efforts to attract young families; in others they just complained about 'how young people are today.' Looking out at a sea of gray, these ministers contemplated two choices: some kind of transformative effort that would re-birth the church, or to minister to the people who were left. Those considering transformative efforts faced a daunting challenge: If they changed too much, it would likely drive away those families who most consistently funded the church. If they did nothing, they would minister over a slow death of the congregation, and if they attempted a transformation, they risked a fast death.

Of those two choices—comfort for the remnant or risk-taking for the sake of those outside the church—the latter seems more Christian. Christ's example was never one of comfort or of risk-avoidance. Still, how is that re-invention done? There are precious few sustained stories of success. In his book, *Reinvention: Stories from an Urban Church*, pastor Mark Whittall describes building up a successful church in a 145-old building in Ottawa. There, though, the project is described as a church plant in a congregational home that had been emptied out, rather than saving an existing congregation.

My own experience here in Minneapolis has shown me the hardships of reinvention. I became involved with First Covenant Church of Minneapolis, which was a historically significant congregation within the Covenant denomination. Founded by immigrants from

Sweden, the church has a large building across from U.S. Bank Stadium (home of the Minnesota Vikings). Hollowed out as members moved to the suburbs, it faced extinction in the 21st century.

Many of the remaining members, however, committed to a re-invention led by music ministers from a suburban megachurch. In some ways, for a while, it worked: The old sanctuary became full of bold ideas and new people... well, to be honest it was full of bold ideas and half-full of new people.

Those changes jarred some remaining members of the church, and some left even as new members came in. The choice to include LGBTQ people fully in the life of the church led to more tumult and ultimately to being thrown out of the denomination. The church cycled through people coming in and out and then a disastrous transition of ministers. Today, the church has the same soul, but less of a physical presence-- a small group on Sundays relying on one another for liturgy and support in the absence of any clergy at all. It is surviving, but as something very different than it was and far from the scale that was hoped for. Now, we are in a "brooding period" as we consider who we are and what we will be.

I don't have an answer to this wave of church deaths. I do know that we have to honestly appraise the truth of this moment, and bring to bear the resources of Christ's followers to consider and address what is happening. A worthwhile project would be to collect the tales of success to serve as role models for those churches considering transformation.

It's important to recognize what is at stake. When I travel, I often visit churches in other places. I usually find the same thing: a thinning, graying congregation listening to a sermon that affirms their comfort but never challenges them in a meaningful way. I often love the music. I look around and see people who look like the ones I grew up with, in my generation and the one that raised us. The service ends, and I stand alone for a long minute, as people chat with those they have known for decades in little groups. I pretend to read the bulletin for a moment. No one approaches me. And then I walk outside into the sunshine on God's day, out of a church that probably will not be there in a decade or two. And that is a deep tragedy; there will be no service of remembrance for those who die after the church does, because no one knew them in the coffeehouse that outlived that church. ■

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“He Gets Us” Is Feeding Information to Data Analysts and, Ultimately, Conservative Political Groups

By Kristen Thomason

“He Gets Us,” the “biggest faith-related campaign in history,” showcased two commercials at this year’s Super Bowl. But it’s what’s happening after the ads that really matters for the campaign’s creators and backers.

While capturing the attention of 113.1 million viewers was vital, converting that attention into website traffic is the real goal.

The big donors behind the multi-billion-dollar *He Gets Us* campaign, primarily members of the Servant Foundation, claim to be just a collection of “Jesus fans and followers” who can’t understand how his message of peace and love became associated with “hate and oppression.” They insist their purpose is to use “the authentic Jesus of the Bible” to unite a country divided by culture wars.

However, behind the website lurks another agenda — one that relies on the cooperation of churches.

Reminder of the back story

Previously, Baptist News Global published part one in this series, explaining the people behind the campaign. One of those is Bill McKendry, whose company designed *He Gets Us*. McKendry was approached by members of the Servant Foundation who said they were concerned that the Southern Poverty Law Center was “labeling Christian groups” like Focus on the Family and Alliance Defending Freedom as “hate groups because of their stances on same-sex marriage.”

Jason Vanderground, a spokesman for the campaign, confirmed this: “Influential Christians were becoming concerned ... that there was an association there with white Christian nationalism. And what’s happening is that dynamic is creating a lot of negative cultural public policy legal implications.”

The Southern Poverty Law Center has not labeled Focus on the Family a hate group. This is an untruth spread by those who want to accuse the SPLC of being “anti-Christian.” The Alliance Defending Freedom, however, has been labeled a hate group for supporting recriminalizing same-sex relations and promoting anti-transgender legislation.

In 2021, the Servant Foundation donated almost \$17 million to ADF and more than \$50 million to the National Christian Foundation, a donor-advised fund that in 2019 gave to 23 organizations listed as hate groups by the SPLC. Foundation member David Green, co-founder of Hobby Lobby, is a known Christian nationalist who independently gives to the National Christian Foundation on top of his contributions through the Servant Foundation.

It appears these influential Christians want the right to hate without publicly being labeled a hate group by

Rather than examine their actions and beliefs and how these may have hurt others and negatively influenced Americans’ opinion of Christianity, the donors behind He Gets Us want to change how evangelical conservatives, such as themselves, are perceived. Thus, the campaign appears to be more about rebranding than repentance.

the SPLC, an organization McKendry acknowledges is “the standard for Facebook, Instagram, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, all major media, all major academia on who is a hate group and who isn’t.”

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Joining ‘the movement’

This rebranding is directed first at individuals in cri-

sis looking for answers and second at churches motivated to join “the movement.”

When it comes to appealing to individuals, the campaign is targeting religious skeptics and cultural Christians. Together these audiences comprise 54 percent of the country’s population.

That’s enough to move public perception, Vanderground explained. “Here we have 54 percent that can be persuaded to one side or the other.” Those behind *He Gets Us* hope the commercials featuring a modern, relatable Jesus will lure what Vanderground calls the “movable middle” to the website where they can connect with churches and organizations that agree with the Servant Foundation’s theological, cultural and political worldview.

Website visitors, referred to as “explorers,” have several options for connecting with the campaign through hegetsus.com. There is an option to pray or chat in real time with volunteers, opportunities to join a group Bible study organized by Alpha USA, and devotional readings offered through YouVersion, a popular devotional app developed by Life.Church.

“Explorers” seeking in-person connections can fill out an online form, which is then forwarded to a local partnering church. According to a presentation from 2022 for the Assemblies of God churches in Montana, *He Gets Us* has received more than 10 million prayer requests and connected more than 99,000 people with churches.

A church, network, individual or denomination can become a “partner” at the campaign’s companion website, hegetsuspartners.com. A presentation for Methodist leaders in North Texas boasted that partnering is like “having an outreach minister on staff without having to hire new staff.”

Overwhelmed and under-resourced pastors and laity no longer need to worry about journeying out into the community to be “fishers of men.” *He Gets Us* promises to deliver the catch directly to them. And they do this through a data management company called Gloo. According to Vanderground, if *He Gets Us* is the “air game,” then Gloo is the “ground game.”

How it works

When a pastor logs in as a partner, he or she is routed from hegetsuspartners.com to Gloo’s website. There, *He Gets Us* is just one of many outreach campaigns churches can join that will send potential members their way. In what’s known as “cooperative advertising,” Gloo posts the various campaign ads on social media and then distributes the responses to partner churches based on their ZIP Codes.

Gloo founder Scott Beck explains it this way: “If

someone searches for divorce, rather than having an ad for a divorce lawyer appear, there will be an ad that says, ‘Restore Your Marriage’ along with an invitation to connect to a church.”

Gloo’s partner churches, sometimes referred to as “champions,” can track the progress of campaigns in their communities and discover what’s on “explorers” minds. After uploading member information, pastors can use Gloo to send church-wide texts soliciting prayer requests or email members a “Couples Check-In” assessment by Barna Group.

In addition to Barna, Gloo also provides resources from organizations it designates “outreach partners” and “equipping partners,” such as Cru, Church Fuel, the American Bible Society, Alpha, and Harper Collins. Normally technology like this would be beyond the budget of the average church, but thanks to “scholarships” provided by “kingdom-minded donors” these services from Gloo are free, at least for the moment.

With in-person attendance in decline and so many

A closer look reveals that behind the websites is a web of interconnected individuals and organizations intent on transforming church attendance into political gain.

churches struggling, resources like these could be a real boon to ministry. But as with all online services that are offered free of charge, it is well worth exploring what Gloo does with all this personal data and who has access to it.

And other questions arise: Who are these “kingdom-minded donors?” And where does the Servant Foundation fit in? A closer look reveals that behind the websites is a web of interconnected individuals and organizations intent on transforming church attendance into political gain.

The money trail

The money trail begins with the Philanthropy Roundtable, a conservative organization that doles out donations to right-wing causes and works tirelessly to keep dark money in the dark. Contributors include the Mercer family, Koch Brothers, and the Bradley Foundation, one of the biggest backers of Donald Trump’s Big Lie.

Philanthropy Roundtable also supports the National

Christian Foundation. In 2014, Philanthropy Roundtable created the Culture of Freedom Initiative under the leadership of its then-Executive Vice President J.P. DeGance. DeGance worked as a self-described “political hack” for the Koch brothers on special projects using data to find people who were persuadable voters. The COO of Culture of Freedom Initiative, William Hild, also worked for the Kochs in a political capacity.

COFI provided some of the funding to develop Gloo with the approval of Chairman of the Board Mike Leven, who was impressed with Scott Beck’s commitment to stopping “the secularization that’s been going on and destroying our country from the inside.” Leven also is an Advisory Council member at Turning Point USA and was Republican megadonor Sheldon Adelson’s right-hand man. Other board members include Sean Fieler, a big donor to conservative Catholic causes, especially around anti-abortion and anti-trans issues, and Republican campaigner Toby Neugebauer.

Together, COFI and Gloo created the Insights data platform for churches, following in the path Cambridge Analytica pioneered using demographic data, combined with psychographic data, to create behavior profiles based on an individual’s personality, beliefs, fears and longings as expressed by “likes” on Facebook. Studies show that with a data set of 300 “likes,” artificial intelligence can predict a person’s personality as well as a spouse or better than friends, colleagues and family.

Cambridge Analytica — which closed in 2018 amid scandal— used this process to create specialized online ads tailored to the personality profiles of voters. If a voter was fearful of immigrants, that person would see an anti-immigration ad on Facebook, playing up that fear. Additional data for Insights came from i360, a Koch owned and subsidized data company that is the go-to for microtargeting voters among Republican campaigns, conservative nonprofits and groups like the National Rifle Association. Companies like these have anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 points of data on each of the millions of people in their databases.

Jacksonville a test market

To give Insights a trial run, COFI launched a faith-based marriage program with the help of Baptist churches and Catholic churches in Jacksonville, Florida. COFI’s target audience was cultural Christians experiencing marital stress.

“If you could model swing voters, (then) what would it look like if you found the predictors that indicated people were on the verge of divorce?” asked DeGance.

This process of modeling is called “predictive analytics,” and it’s the foundation of modern marketing, whether an organization is selling marriage counseling, a car or a candidate.

Predictive analytics uses data to create a model and then applies that model to a large audience to find other people with similar data profiles. In the Jacksonville trial, Gloo acquired the data of 30,000 divorced couples from a third-party data company. The company then determined what these couples had in common by looking at things such as rate of credit card use, purchases and travel bookings. If a subset of couples all did A, B and C, and then divorced, then other couples who have also done A, B and C are likely at risk for divorce. Gloo applied the model to its own database of 266 million Americans and determined 33 million of them were potentially heading for divorce.

Partner churches in Jacksonville then used Insights to filter that data by location or other factors like financial insecurity, ethnicity or anxiety. COFI financed

The CNP is the most secretive political organization in the nation’s capital, according to the Washington Post. It was founded in 1981 by evangelical leaders, far-right conservatives and wealthy Republican donors to bring about a “moral rebirth” in American society. The group’s money and members are enmeshed in every facet of conservative politics and culture.

highly tailored ads targeting the at-risk couples based on their profiles. These social media ads invited couples to the churches’ marriage programs, where members would befriend and mentor them.

Insight’s trial run in Jacksonville was deemed a success, and Gloo rolled out the platform in other cities across the country. COFI changed its name to Communio, installed DeGance as president, and now helps individual churches and diocese do relationship ministry using Big Data. After COFI’s success, DeGance also was made a Gold Circle Member of the Council on National Policy.

Feeding conservative politics

The CNP is the most secretive political organization in the nation's capital, according to the *Washington Post*. It was founded in 1981 by evangelical leaders, far-right conservatives and wealthy Republican donors to bring about a "moral rebirth" in American society. The group's money and members are enmeshed in every facet of conservative politics and culture.

According to leaked membership lists, Mike Pence is a member, as are Ginni Thomas, Steve Bannon, Charlie Kirk (the founder of Turning Point USA), Tony Perkins (president of Family Research Council), the SBC's Paul Pressler, Conservative Baptist Network founder Rod Martin, Richard Graber (president of the Bradley Foundation), Marjorie Dannenfelser of the anti-abortion Susan B Anthony List, and the president of the ADF, Michael Farris. The Servant Foundation contributes financially to the organization as well.

One other member is Bill Dallas, who heads the non-profit United in Purpose and was the organizer behind the 2016 closed-door conservative conclave at a Times Square hotel where evangelical leaders swung their support behind candidate Donald Trump.

Dallas, with help from evangelical pollster and Gloo partner George Barna, created UIP to collect data from conservative churches and then used that data to drum up support for "pro-family, limited government candidates in swing states" by targeting potential Republican voters. In 2020, UIP focused its energy on a strategy to increase Trump support among conservative Catholic voters and "dormant evangelicals," those oft-targeted cultural Christians.

United in Purpose partner and CNP member Brian Burch is co-founder and president of CatholicVote, a pro-Trump Catholic group that worked with Steve Bannon to harvest cell phone data from churchgoers attending mass in 2018. COFI board member Sean HYPERLINK "<https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/magazine/interview-with-sean-fieler/>" Fieler is a major donor to CatholicVote and responsible for building up its database. He also funded a pro-Trump campaign app that, with users' consent, sends the phone numbers and email addresses of their contacts list to a "third-party vendor, which looks for matches to existing voter file information" to find persuadable voters. In August 2022, J.P. DeGance created a video for CatholicVote's education wing EDIFY that referenced Gloom's Jacksonville trial. Since Fieler and DeGance both were involved in the trial run of Gloom's Insights platform, it's troubling that CatholicVote is also using Gloom to strategically target Catholic voters with its conservative messaging.

When Alexander Nix, founder of Cambridge Analytica, testified before the UK's House of

Commons, the chairman asked if it would be possible to run an ad tailored to likely Republican voters with "strong religious beliefs." He replied, "Hypothetically it would be possible, if you had enough data, say, on evangelical Christians in America, to have a look at that audience and see if there's a correlation between that and some political agenda. ... There are very large church organizations and religious organizations that might have access to these types of data."

Marketing to churches as partners

Gloom's representatives are hard at work promoting their platform to churches, denominations and religious organizations — creating just such a trove of data on Christians in America. In 2021, 30,000 churches, or 10 percent of the churches in the nation, were using Gloom. Now that the Super Bowl ads have aired and *He Gets Us* has begun its outreach campaign, that number is sure to be higher.

The United Methodist church highlighted Gloom's free service on its podcast and featured it as a resource

Data on demographics, contact information, search history, sexual orientation, health information, and "information regarding your specific concerns or needs ... interests, views, opinions, perspectives, traits or characteristics" are all collected by the company.

for churches. The SBC Executive Committee created a prayer toolkit for its pastors that relies on Gloom's texting service and attractive templates to reach out to members. Baptist associations from Arizona to Wisconsin are also partnering with Gloom, as is the Georgia Baptist Mission Board. The Evangelical Presbyterians also have their own resources on Gloom. Other churches and denominations have no idea they're really interacting with Gloom when they participate in one of the Barna Group's surveys like State of the Church, Barna Cities, Barna Church Pulse, or the Reveal Spiritual Life Survey.

All these services and surveys generate data about church members, which then becomes Gloom's property. Data on demographics, contact information, search history, sexual orientation, health information, and "information regarding your specific concerns or needs

... interests, views, opinions, perspectives, traits or characteristics” are all collected by the company.

So, too, is data on the spiritual struggles of and questions from “explorers” reaching out to connect with churches through campaigns like *He Gets Us*. Gloo then shares this data with its partners. Not just ministry partners, but also “scholarship partners or donors,” including perhaps the Servant Foundation and those unnamed “kingdom-minded donors.”

In addition to this storehouse of data, Gloo licenses data (for example, the spending habits of at-risk couples) from third-party vendors that it uses to “enrich” its internal profiles of individuals.

“These other groups like United in Purpose already have so much data. They can tell who is likely to be a drug addict, who is going through a divorce. What they don’t have is what church you go to,” DeGance said. However, with all the data provided by partner churches and denominations using the Gloo platform, they now will have access to that information as well.

Insights is available for churches who are interested in doing even more with their data. Like the churches in COFI’s trial run, customers may analyze data about their community and target residents with relevant advertising.

In a video for the “Gloo Pro Tip of the Week,” a bubbly staffer named Brittany instructs users how to build an audience in the platform by selecting a locale and then filtering the population there based on “propensity for addiction.” Ostensibly, this is to help churches know where to locate a drug treatment ministry or how to target those who might need to see an ad for that ministry. But it also reflects a penchant at Gloo, *Communio* and *He Gets Us* for targeting vulnerable populations.

Targeting vulnerable communities?

In a 2021 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Beck said Gloo had stopped using data related to mental health and addiction, but the company’s focus on these issues remains, as does the ability to filter audiences by these categories.

He Gets Us created commercials about Jesus feeling lonely and anxious when research showed potential viewers had these concerns. Jason Vanderground suggests churches reach out to the skeptics who saw those ads by creating connection through “side doors, those felt needs like toxic relationships or anxiety.”

One of the campaigns churches can partner with for free is Gloo’s own Churches Care, which posts ads on Facebook, Instagram and Google aimed at those suffering from depression, loneliness, anxiety or grief. In fact, Gloo recently partnered with the American

Association of Christian Counselors to equip churches to handle all the people “who are dealing with things like depression, anxiety, loneliness, addiction,” who need “psychological, emotional and spiritual help,” and whom Gloo promises to “deliver directly to you.”

According to Matt Engel, Gloo’s director of ministry innovation, the company can track search terms like “body dysmorphia, depression and anxiety” and then “intersect people in these moments where they are at a place of desperation, that they’re searching for answers.”

Engel seems sincere in his desire to help people but blind to the ethical implications of targeting people who are in a mental health crisis and easily manipulated.

A more troubling scenario would be targeting vulnerable individuals with the intent to manipulate them into voting for far-right candidates and causes. Given the political associations of those involved with *He Gets Us* and Gloo, and their past, documented use of data for political targeting, there is reason for concern.

A more troubling scenario would be targeting vulnerable individuals with the intent to manipulate them into voting for far-right candidates and causes.

Relationships and politics

In a fundraising presentation to COFI’s donors, DeGance included slides illustrating a strong connection between church attendance and voting Republican, which may be one reason the group wanted to increase church attendance in Jacksonville by 30%.

“Life changes through personal relationships and churches have the most people passionate about forming relationships,” DeGance said. Gloo, *Communio* and *He Gets Us* all facilitate relationship building through communication and data manipulation.

When a church signs up to be a partner, they are encouraged to have members on hand ready to connect and mentor. “The church has the one thing that most companies are absolutely desperate for, and that is relationship,” Engel said.

It’s not just companies that are desperate for relationship, but political organizations as well.

Once the digital marketing has drawn “explorers” to churches, it’s the relationships that will keep them

there. And there, at church, is where right-wing groups need that “movable middle” to be inculcated into conservative beliefs and motivated to vote for conservative causes.

Gloo makes clear it does not allow the use of its data “for the advancement of political parties or election campaigns,” but groups like CNP and UIP are not considered “political.” They are nonprofits whose stated purposes are intentionally vague, such as “to educate on conservative policy” or “bring a biblical worldview to America.”

That’s the fine line that allows churches to distribute voter guides in their bulletins and remain tax-exempt.

Education or politics?

According to Chad Connelly, speaking at the Council for National Policy, the benefit of 501(c)3 nonprofits like these is “they could mask the true nature of a highly political organization through non-disclosure.” It’s possible these nonprofit partners and donors could create microtargeted ads promoting right-wing positions under the guise of being “educational” without violating Gloo’s policy.

Another tactic proposed by Connelly, who is the founder of Faith Wins, one of those nonprofits, is church voter registration drives. Once members are registered to vote, their contact information becomes part of the state voter rolls and thereby directly accessible to the political campaigns. Elections depend on individuals casting individual votes. Utilizing voter rolls and additional data from UIP or i360, candidates can craft messages designed to stoke an individual’s fears or confirm their biases. In the case of Ohio Sen. Rob Portman’s re-election campaign, the ads were so tailored by i360 that no matter where the voter stood on an issue, they saw an ad implying Portman agreed.

Are these conservative groups and donors conspiring to create more conservative voters by targeting vulnerable people in order to mobilize them for the next election? It’s difficult to say with any certainty. Secrecy and obfuscation are par for the course in politics, especially in the age of SuperPACs and dark money.

Perhaps it’s just a coincidence that *He Gets Us* included “midterms” along with Thanksgiving and Christmas on its planning calendar. However, in a country so narrowly divided, when all it takes to potentially swing an election is a few thousand votes in a few strategic areas, the votes of conservative churchgoers could make a significant difference.

The effort by Gloo’s partners, the platform’s amazing capabilities, and even the Super Bowl expenditure could be a wonderful thing if these were offered in good faith and if the theology behind *He Gets Us* were as welcoming as the rebranding leads audiences to believe.

Having been taken to the highest mountain and shown all the potential new members, glitzy resources and extensive data on all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, churches and pastors will have to decide if they will succumb to temptation to use Gloo’s platform.

Whatever they decide, they should know full well that Gloo and its associates are definitely using them.



Kristen Thomason is a freelance writer with a background in media studies and production. She has worked with national and international religious organizations and for public television. Currently based in Scotland, she has organized worship arts at churches in Metro D.C. and Toronto. In addition to writing for Baptist News Global, Kristen blogs on matters of faith and social justice at viaexmachina.com.

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My Journey with Multiple Sclerosis

By Thomas H. Graves

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a disease of the brain and spinal cord in which the immune system attacks the myelin or protective sheath covering the nerve fibers. Picture this as the fraying of insulation on an electric wire. This causes communication difficulties within the brain and between the brain and the rest of the body. Eventually the disease can cause permanent damage because of the deterioration of nerve fibers. The symptoms of MS can vary widely depending on the amount of nerve damage and which nerves are affected. Until recently the sclerosis in my brain was not as widespread as that of other MS patients, but it was found at some crucial spots affecting a great deal. My most recent MRI shows a significant progression. Some people with MS, as in my case early on, can function with little discernible malfunction. People with a more developed case of MS, such as my current situation, can lose the ability to walk, stand and may even lose control of their hands and arms. Until recently, there was no cure for multiple sclerosis although medicines are available to speed recovery from attacks, to manage symptoms and to slow the progression of the disease.

The Mayo Clinic website dealing with the symptoms of multiple sclerosis supplies a thorough list of expected malfunctions caused by the disease. Except for slurred speech, I have experienced every one of those symptoms: numbness and weakness in one's limbs and trunk, electric shock sensations, tremors, prolonged double vision, fatigue, dizziness, tingling and pain in parts of the body, and problems with sexual, bowel and bladder function. I would add to that list spasticity, rigidity, lack of peripheral vision and, strangely, a loss of bodily awareness – without looking I cannot tell the location of my arms and legs. I appreciated the way one friend described a situation of disability: We need to remember that all the dysfunction that is visible is also going on inside the body and unknown except to the patient.

My experience with MS tracks through the full course of the disease, though I have not yet reached the stage of total quadriplegic disability. When first diagnosed, my disease was classified as benign, manifesting little in outward signs. At the beginning, I can remember friends commenting upon seeing me, "But I thought you had MS." Then I progressed to the stage

of relapsing-remitting where an onset of the disease was followed by quiet periods of remission that could last for months and even years. Even a minor increase in body temperature caused by an infection or environmental factors can worsen the symptoms of MS. Like 50 percent of those with MS, my relapsing-remitting form of the disease eventually developed into secondary-progressive MS characterized by a steady progression of increasing symptoms. The rate of disease progression varies widely among persons with MS.

Luckily my experience did not follow the pattern of some whose initial diagnosis preceded a dramatic downward spiraling of the disease without any remissions. This is known as primary-progressive MS.

My experience with MS tracks through the full course of the disease, though I have not yet reached the stage of total quadriplegic disability.

There is no set pattern for how MS will be manifest in every patient. As I have fought against the onslaught of MS with medicine and exercise, I have been continually reminded by my therapists: "You do recognize that MS is a progressive disease?"

I have found a study of the risk factors causing MS to be fascinating. The usual suspects of toxic chemicals, lax hygiene, or pharmaceutical side effects do not seem to have an important effect. Instead, geographical location at the time of one's conception plays a significant role. MS is far more common in temperate climates such as Canada and the northern United States, southern Australia, New Zealand, or in northern Europe. It is almost unknown in equatorial regions of our globe. Islands north of Scotland in the North Sea have the largest population of MS patients in the world. MS scientists have concluded that low levels of vitamin D and low exposure to sunlight are associated with a greater risk of MS. Other risk factors include gender, where women are three times more likely than men to contract the disease. Age is also a factor. Though both younger and older people can contract

MS, usually the onset occurs between 20 and 40 years of age, which certainly describes my case.

Race can also be a risk factor as white people, particularly those of northern European descent, like me, are at the highest risk of contracting MS. A family history of MS can make one a two percent higher risk of developing the disease, which haunts my daughters. In like manner, if a person has contracted other autoimmune disorders such as thyroid disease, which I have, you are at a higher risk of having MS. Certain infections such as Epstein-Barr have also been linked to a higher risk for MS.

Having said all this, none of these risk factors is determinative. There is still a great deal of mystery as to the causes of multiple sclerosis. Like many other things, there is a great deal of randomness in the field of human disease.

A diagnosis of MS need not be a terminal sentence. There are many people affected by the disease who die *with* MS and not directly *because* of MS. I have been hospitalized on three separate occasions because urinary tract infections went septic. On the first of those occasions my blood pressure plummeted to 60/30 and I could see the nurse put her hand across her mouth. I remember clearly my doctor saying to me later, “If you had not gone to the hospital when you did, you would be dead.” The UTI infections are a side effect of my MS medication, Ocrevus, which dramatically diminishes my immune system.

When I was first diagnosed in 1983, someone commented that I could expect MS to reduce my life expectancy by 15 percent. Those numbers have shrunk in the intervening years. The Chief Medical Officer of the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America wrote recently, “... the gap in life expectancy between people with MS and people of the same age who were unaffected by the disease is thought to be seven years or less – and continues to decline.” Of course, the length of one’s life is only part of the issue. The added problem is the person’s functionality when the disease progression interferes significantly with one’s ability to work.

For me, I resigned from my administrative position in 2007 at the age of 60. I delayed this retirement decision longer than I should have, but when I finally made the decision, I was surprised how easy it was in many aspects. I appeared before the proper disability insurance and Social Security agents with a letter from my neurologist and a disk containing the latest MRI of my brain. Nothing else was needed and few questions were asked. Upon hearing the 15 percent loss of life span and recognizing that I would be facing increasing disability, I began living from that point on with a

sense of having a limited time to live with meaningful functionality.

Multiple Sclerosis: A Personal Narrative

I was not diagnosed with MS until 1983 at the age of 36, however, in retrospect there were earlier events that seem related to my later diagnosis. When I was in the 10th grade in 1963, I spent a week in Louisville’s Methodist Hospital due to severe headaches, the source of which they were never able to determine. I also had a fainting spell in 1968, the fall semester of my senior year in college. I regained consciousness in the hallway of my apartment without knowing how long I was passed out. The next events occurred while serving as a pastor in Palm Beach County Florida in 1977-79. I developed a noticeable limp and unsteady gait, appearing to be drunk—not a good look for a Baptist minister. I was treated by an orthopedist who prescribed a medical neck collar and instructed me to work standing up. I followed that procedure for a few months until the false drunkenness disappeared. Later,

A diagnosis of MS need not be a terminal sentence. There are many people affected by the disease who die with MS and not directly because of MS.

while preparing for a church softball game, I was engaging in some stretching exercises when I felt powerful electrical shocks running down my right leg.

In 1982 I was playing tennis with friends I had taught in college and now taught as students at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. I began dragging my foot, tripping and falling down a few times. My friends encouraged me to see the campus doctor who quickly referred me to an orthopedic specialist in Raleigh. The orthopedist focused on the numbness and weakness I was having in my left hand and arm. After extensive tests, he performed a cervical laminectomy to remove a bone spur. When that operation did nothing to diminish my symptoms, I was referred to a neurologist, Dr. Mitch Freedman. Mitch became a dear friend and we stayed in contact through the years.

Without modern diagnostic tools such as an MRI, a diagnosis of MS was in large part the process of excluding other causes. I went through a lengthy series of tests and examinations including a botched myelo-

gram, which resulted in the worst pain I ever experienced. Mitch was investigating a variety of problems, one of which was a possible brain tumor. That possibility focused my attention on the fact that this could be more than a minor problem. I found myself terrified that I might not live long enough to teach my young daughters how to ride a bicycle. Thinking that this could be a terminal prognosis, I was so wrought with worry when Mitch finally offered his diagnosis of MS, I thanked him. Stunned by my response, he asked me why I would thank him for telling me I had MS. I quickly answered, "Because I knew what else you were looking for!"

My initial response, of course, was to inform my wife, Wendy, and then I went to tell the seminary dean, Morris Ashcraft. The following moments were some of the most precious times of my life. Ash expressed his deep comfort and care, but then took me to the office of Randall Lolley, the seminary president. Upon hearing the news, Randall started crying and quickly came to me and grasped my hand. Standing in a small circle and holding hands, Randall had a prayer mixed with sobs and many tears. I certainly knew I would not be in this battle alone. That same response was multiplied as I informed my parents and my siblings. My sister, Cannan, immediately responded while crying on the phone, "I wish it were me and not you, I wish it were me."

Except for a loss of athletic prowess (I was not that skillful anyway), my MS was not plainly visible to those who saw me. I do remember answering the door when a neighbor's child came to the house one afternoon when I had a massive headache. The whites of my eyes had turned bright red and when the poor girl looked at me, she ran screaming back to her home. Except for family and close friends, I did not share my diagnosis freely with others. I can remember persons noticing I was limping late in the day, and I would just respond that I was very tired.

For the next 12 years, I followed a policy of being honest with my employers and closest friends concerning my disease. In going to St. John's Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, as pastor and then becoming the founding president of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR), I shared with the appropriate governing bodies a letter prepared by Mitch Freedman about my diagnosis of benign MS. Mitch stated in that letter, "The overwhelming majority of patients who have MS lead full lives and are employed without difficulty." Only after my first major exacerbation in 1995 did I begin to share my MS experience freely. Recognizing that MS can affect one's mental acuity, after 1995 I adopted the practice of being regularly

assessed to determine if my mental condition was deteriorating. I found the testing process fascinating, and I shared those findings with the Board of Trustees at BTSR.

In 1995, Wendy and I celebrated our 25th anniversary with a trip to a resort near Cape Cod. While on that trip, I stupidly spent a long time in a hot Jacuzzi and even took a steam bath. Extreme heat and extreme cold can dramatically induce a variety of MS symptoms. Such a thing had never happened to me before and I was oblivious to the dire consequences of hot water and steam. After returning to Richmond, I suffered my first major MS exacerbation. I lost my ability to climb stairs, to walk without assistance and my vision was dramatically distorted. I remember sobbing and saying to Wendy, "I knew this would happen someday, but not now!" My doctor responded with IVs containing the steroid prednisone. After two weeks of treatment, I recovered most of my abilities. It was strange and difficult to preach that weekend at both morning services of the First Baptist Church in Richmond. With an IV port in my arm and needing to hold tightly to the pulpit to keep standing, I made it through the morning until the young daughter of a friend came running up after the services and knocked me over.

Another major onset of my MS occurred while attending a denominational meeting in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The heat of the city and the strenuous schedule of the conference led to another exacerbation. This time, the main effect was in my eyesight. It became weirdly unstable as if the horizontal hold of an old-time TV set were now disconcerting my field of vision. Everything was rotating; my eyes became my enemies leading me to distrust everything around me. With the care of a doctor friend, and the added help of a close colleague, Tommy McDearis, arrangements were made for me to take a direct flight from DFW to Richmond. The American Airlines flight personnel could not have been more attentive, ushering me to a first-class seat, which I had not paid for, and then getting me to the door of the plane in Richmond where I was greeted by Wendy and my daughter Jennie. That was my second scary exacerbation and the one that was most public. Even Wendy had not seen me in such a sorry state. Again, a treatment of steroids helped in calming this MS flareup. This was to be the pattern for the next several years as I moved from a benign diagnosis to a relapsing-remitting form of MS.

The advancing appearance of my disability would soon become visible as my limping was unavoidable; then I walked with a cane, advanced to using a walker, then to a small red scooter. I was still able to walk and drive and could even travel by plane if necessary.

Obviously, the increasing disability was affecting my presidential duties and I resigned my position in 2007. During this time, I also quit driving because of a frightful experience. I was approaching a tollbooth and my right foot became lodged under the brake pedal. At the last moment I was able to use my hand and jerk my foot free, finally able to stop before hitting another car. I needed no convincing when arriving home. I put my keys on the kitchen counter and told Wendy I will never drive again.

Following a colonoscopy in May of 2012, I suffered my worst MS exacerbation. I was placed in a hospital for observation and when my condition worsened, I was transferred to a rehabilitation hospital for therapy; but my condition continued to deteriorate. After a few weeks, I was sent to a nursing home, unable to walk, stand or even sit. Relegated to a bed, I feared I would spend the rest of my life lying on my back in a hospital bed. I was contacted by a childhood friend, George Brooks, and by a former associate, Tommy McDearis. They emailed some others and, in a few days, I had several persons praying for my recovery. I also had a skilled group of therapists helping to teach me to stand and walk again. Wendy saved my email message the day I cried out, "I can walk; I can walk again." It took several months but when I was discharged, I was able to walk 20 steps. From that time until Wendy's retirement, we hired a caregiver to prepare my lunch and to help me exercise each day. In fact, on a good day I was able to walk over 100 steps. The episode did leave me with a severely impaired left arm, and my left hand continually remains in a clenched fist. I now live with a fear that I will lose my right hand in the same fashion. Over time, I have lost the ability to stand and walk; so, I am now confined to my Permobil power chair and the bed. Transfers from one to the other are facilitated by a wooden transfer board. Other transfers onto the toilet and to a shower chair are made possible with an electrified Hoyer lift. (It helps to have a caring brother-in-law in the medical appliance business.)

Throughout my journey with MS, I have been blessed with excellent medical care. Mitch Freedman was the doctor who originally diagnosed my MS and for many years, I was able to stay in touch with him through frequent phone calls. I remember asking for his advice on taking a new job or starting a new medicine. I clearly recall seeking his advice before beginning treatment with a new drug, Tysabri. It had frightening side effects (PML, described by some as mad cow disease), which caused my daughter Anne to raise a serious objection. I agreed to take the drug with Mitch's approval, but for no more than two years. Mitch also occasionally spoke at MS conferences in

Richmond, which enabled us to renew our friendship.

With the help and encouragement of our daughter Anne, who was serving her medical residency at Johns Hopkins hospitals, I was able in 2009 to schedule an appointment with Dr. Peter A. Calabresi, one of the top MS specialists in the United States. His evaluation resulted in my being placed on the new medication, Tysabri; but more importantly, he referred me to an exercise therapist. Calabresi told me that the best thing I could do as an MS patient was to set up a regular exercise routine. Since that meeting, I have tried to follow his advice by exercising regularly at our local YMCA, then at a wellness center for disabled persons, and finally buying a recumbent stepper to use daily in my own home.

Since moving to Richmond in 1991, I was under the care of a neurologist, Dr. John O'Bannon. More than a doctor, John became a dear friend. He was an active member of our church, so I saw him regularly outside his office. I also spoke in a series of meetings in Woodville, VA, where John grew up, and I had the privilege of getting to know well his mother and sister. John gave me his personal cell phone number and became extremely upset when I did not contact him during a medical crisis. Wendy and I were amazed by how quickly John returned my phone calls, usually within minutes. I cannot imagine a more trusting relationship between doctor and patient. Understandably, when John retired in the fall of 2022 it was a sad transition as I sought to find another neurologist.

My daughter Anne had long advocated that I should receive care from a person affiliated with a research hospital. I used the opportunity of John's retirement to place myself in the care of Dr. Unsung Oh, an MS specialist in the neurology department of Virginia Commonwealth University, located in downtown Richmond. After a thorough analysis of my frequent urinary tract infections (eight in six months), he concluded the infections were the side effect of my major MS medication, Ocrevus. Finding a new treatment would be an important next step in my treatment.

In all my comments, I have neglected to focus on the one person who has made my life possible, and that is my wife, Wendy. Her constant love and her willingness to perform the most menial chores are amazing. Her strength in facilitating my transfers is phenomenal as attested by the nurses and therapists who have observed her. All this goes far beyond what anyone has in mind when saying in their marriage vows, "for better or for worse ... in sickness and in health." She is the one who has insisted on my staying at home when I would consider going to a nursing home. In fact, she helped design our present home to accommodate my

disability for as long as possible. My major fear is for Wendy's health and well-being. I do not want her care for me to cause an injury to her or to degrade her health in any way. Our care and love for one another is aided in large part by our faith and by a healthy sense of humor. A great deal of prayer and a great deal of laughter have seen us through many a crisis.

Multiple Sclerosis: Disease and Faith

I received my PhD in the field of philosophy of religion and throughout my career, I focused much of my writing and research on the problem of evil. So, the way I came to interpret my own disease is important and intriguing. How does one who suffers from a clear instance of natural evil understand the provenance of that evil? I define natural evil as suffering resulting from natural occurrences rather than maladies caused by human choice. Examples of natural evil would be a disease or a natural disaster. Voltaire's *Candide* proposed the classic case of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755.

In dealing with the issue of natural evil, I would begin with two presuppositions. First, the environment out of which God created was a realm of primordial chaos. Genesis 1:1-2 states, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos and darkness covered the face of the deep" (NRSVUE). The Hebrew language of Genesis refers to an unformed realm of chaotic existence from which God calls forth a divinely created order. That is to say, the process of creation is one of bringing order, intensity and harmony out of a realm of chaos. In part, natural evil persists because of the chaotic root of all existence.

Second, creation is not completed, but an ongoing process. Genesis 1:26-28 speaks of persons being created in the image and likeness of God and then given dominion over all that was formed. Persons were charged with the responsibility of caring for the earth, bringing all creation to a fuller expression. Persons are called to join with God in an "eighth day of creation."

As Henri Nouwen commented, the most radical teaching of Jesus was to call us to strive to be like God. Our vocation as persons of faith is to express as fully as possible our likeness to God through our acts of love and creativity. God's creation awaits its fulfillment as persons realize their own destiny as co-creators.

An unfinished creation provides the necessary arena for human creativity. The formation of free personal beings presupposes an unfinished creation, and that means a natural world where evil is possible. The presence of natural evil demonstrates that divine creation

allows for elements of contingency and irrationality in nature. Only in such an unfinished world can persons express their personal creative freedom and develop true personhood. This is what John Hick means when he talks about how our world provides what is necessary for the process of making souls. The same unfinished order which causes us suffering and torment provides the necessary setting for the development of human personality and character. An unfinished creation is the only stage upon which the creativity of persons can be expressed. The presence of friction, discomfort and limitation is necessary if human creative freedom is to emerge. Eric Rust comments:

"Personal freedom needs latitude at the physical level in which it can operate. It also needs challenge and opposition to make personal development possible... But such aspects of personal being would be impossible were there to be a perfectly ordered physical system. We may think of the creator creating a world in which contingency and opposing physical systems are

In part, natural evil persists because of the chaotic root of all existence. Persons are called to join with God in an "eighth day of creation."

possible and in which they also play a part in God's purpose."

This does not mean that all creation is concerned with the development of human personality, but only that it includes what is necessary for that end and nothing that makes its final achievement impossible.

New Testament scholar William E. Hull was diagnosed with ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease, which he described as living in a body which "had unilaterally decided to commit suicide." Hull applies the concept of an unfinished creation to his own disability when he writes,

"Our bodies, like much of nature, are still works in progress with vestiges of an original chaos lurking here and there that medical science has not yet learned to tame. Being created by God no more makes my body perfect than being redeemed by God makes my soul perfect. Meanwhile, God never gives up on what God wants us eventually to become through a long and painful process of physical and spiritual evolution." Divine creation is not yet perfected.

The creator God is still at work and calls upon us to join in that task as co-creators struggling to fashion God's good kingdom.

Natural evil is not the result of human sin, but it persists and flourishes because of the human failure to address such evil in a bold fashion. Called to be co-creators with God, humanity has too often misdirected its talents in manipulative and destructive ways. Our capacity to be co-creators has resulted far too often in waste, plunder and abuse. The persistence of chaotic evil is tragic because humanity has the skill to respond positively on so many fronts. Imagine what our world could be if we focused more talent and funding on disease prevention rather than military prowess. When I was first diagnosed with MS, Mitch Freedman lessened my fears by saying we are close to finding a cure for this disease. He projected it could happen in seven to 10 years. I reminded Mitch of that prediction on several occasions; it is within reach, not only for MS, but for other diseases as well. Imagine a world without cancer, malaria and one with no multiple sclerosis. It

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could happen, but only if we strive to fulfill our task to join God in an eighth day of creation.

Nouwen is right, that is our highest calling. ■

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