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Bad Theology Lingers and Intensifies with Ungodly Effect

Patrick R. Anderson, editor

While traveling in Africa along with a small group of pastors a few years ago, I spent several days at a lodge near the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia, on the edge of what was commonly called Victoria Falls.

The Batonga people have been living in that area for hundreds of years and they, along with other tribes, named the falls Mosi-oa-Tunya, “the smoke that thunders.” When seen from afar, one’s senses are filled with the sight of the smoke-like mist soaring into the sky from the falls. The thunderous sound of the Zambezi River’s massive drop-off, creating the world’s largest sheet of cascading water, is overwhelming. The name has been well-known for many centuries. And what an appropriate name it is!

In 1855, a white fellow named David Livingstone trekked through the area and perhaps was the first white person to see the falls. He quickly claimed to have discovered the place, renaming it for an English monarch who had no idea where the falls were or who was living nearby. Certainly, the folks living in the region were unaware of either the claim of “discovery” or the renaming.

Scottish missionaries were part of a long succession of Christians to enter lands where millions of people, previously unseen by Europeans met them, sometimes innocently with smiling faces and open arms, and sometimes with fear and violence. The newcomers invariably arrived with a sense of their own superiority, claiming the land for themselves, their nations and their God.

The sense of European superiority over Africans was a commonly held mindset, applied not only to Africans, but to indigenous peoples all around the world. The newcomers awed indigenous people with firearms, trinkets, clothing and utensils deemed to be superior.

The arrival of explorers and discoverers to the “New World” during the 15th century and for hundreds of years thereafter dramatically changed the world.¹ The impetus for that was largely driven and justified by church and state-sponsored rationales and doctrines. Lands and people were mastered for the benefit of monarchs and understood to be necessary for the evan-

gelization of heathens. The belief in the superiority of invaders was both explicit and implicit.

Two doctrines birthed in the Christian faith inaugurated and sustained systems of domination and exploitation: the “Doctrine of Discovery” espoused 500 years ago, and its companion “Doctrine of White Superiority.” I contend that those doctrines (let’s call them heresies), formalized a Christian justification for very unchristian behaviors—behaviors which have driven much of the systemic ills of our world today.²

The global economy demonstrates the wide disparities between rich “discovering” nations and people and poor “discovered” nations and people. The ascendancy

Two doctrines birthed in the Christian faith inaugurated and sustained systems of domination and exploitation: the “Doctrine of Discovery” espoused 500 years ago, and its companion “Doctrine of White Superiority.” I contend that those doctrines (let’s call them heresies), formalized a Christian justification for very unchristian behaviors.

of the belief in “white superiority,” which in recent decades had been considered (primarily by white folks), to be somewhat dormant is alive and well in the 21st century.

The Doctrines of Discovery and Dominion

The Doctrine of Discovery was invoked by the Roman Catholic Church in the 15th century through three *papal bulls*.³ The popes justified and enabled European “discovery” of “new lands” and the killing or enslavement of indigenous people, with eradication of cultures, and theft of resources and land from any “non-Christian” inhabitants.

The 15th century doctrine was primarily directed

toward the lands we now recognize as the Americas; but the same justifications enabled seizing lands and enslaving people in Africa as long as they were not Christians. Although the doctrine itself was nullified in the 1530s, Spain and Portugal and other European countries had already enthusiastically embarked on an unstoppable worldwide enterprise to seek out lands, find treasure and “Christianize,” enslave, or eradicate inhabitants. Americans will best remember Pope Alexander VI’s *Inter caetera* (1493) which provided the rationalization for Christopher Columbus’ opening of the New World for colonization.

The 500 years following the establishment of the doctrine and the lingering structural effects of that doctrine are evidenced in economic disparities between descendants of the oppressed and descendants of the oppressors. Westerners are likely to understand those effects most vividly by studying colonization on Africa and Central and South America.⁴ The undeniable fact is that people who claimed to be committed to Jesus Christ invoked and justified social policies and human behaviors that nurtured a lion’s share of the ethnic, economic, political and legal inequities in the world today.

In the United States of America, the Doctrine of Discovery morphed into the “doctrine of manifest destiny” by which Western monarchies, and then European invaders in the 1600s began the process of claiming land, subjugating or eradicating inhabitants on those lands, building an economy and infrastructure with the unpaid labor of slaves by any means necessary—all with the theological blessings of Christian apologists.

One legal outcome is characterized by the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1823 ruling that indigenous people had only rights of “occupancy,” not ownership, over lands on which they had long lived. In the 19th century then, the land was open for the taking. That ruling was cited in 2005 as “precedent” in a case in upstate New York involving the Oneida Indian Nation.

In Africa, the invasion of lands rich with natural resources and human capital of European powers led to brutal conquest and dominion. In South Africa as early as 1652 and for more than 300 years thereafter, we can see first the enslavement of Africans and their shipment as cargo out of the continent, then the exploitation of African labor in the plantations and mines, followed by a mad scramble by seven European countries (Belgium, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal) to partition and exploit the continent for profit for the benefit of Europe which they understood to be their rightful privilege. The callous mapping and partitioning of the continent were

conducted without regard for geography, ethnic populations, traditional cultural values or tribal relations. Much of Africa continues to be characterized by corruption, tribal genocide and extreme destitution. The continued impoverishment and plunder can be recognized through a form of “debt slavery” whereby the continent, impoverished by this sordid history, is now financed by developed countries through the World Bank, with its riches in competition by more recent world powers like China and Russia.

Christian denominations in the West are consoled by the fact that, despite all of the demonstrable ills laid at the Church’s doorstep, the result of missionary fervor and courage in the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in today’s large percentage of Africans who describe themselves as Christian. Indeed, many African Christians have set a very high bar for following Jesus, Christian scholarship, devotion to alleviating human suffering and prophetic faith.

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The Doctrine of White Superiority and a Biblical Justification for Chattel Slavery

In the 1840s, major Christian Protestant denominations in America split along North and South lines over theological arguments regarding justification for and opposition to slavery. In earlier years Baptists and Methodists generally opposed slavery, but as churches were planted throughout the South, slaveholding churches and church leaders gained greater theological and financial influence. Leading up to and during the Civil War and in the immediate aftermath of that war, the differences between North and South were heightened.⁵ Southern ministers wrote extensively in defense of slavery and in favor of the subjugation of women, using the same or similar biblical texts.

The mindset promoted the idea that a father/master was supposed to be a benevolent and paternalistic overseer of all family (and property) members. After all, the New Testament’s injunctions “for slaves to

obey their masters” appeared alongside instructions for wives to “obey their husbands.” White men were placed at the top of the social hierarchy, white women and children next, and slaves at the bottom.⁶ This was said to be God’s will.

Historian Bill J. Leonard⁷ writes that Richard Furman’s 1822 “biblical defense” of slavery became an important guide for Baptist responses to abolitionism. Furman, pastor of First Baptist Church, Charleston, South Carolina, and namesake of Furman University (my *alma mater*), declared:

Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil, it cannot be supposed, that the inspired Apostles, who feared not the faces of men, and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their God, would have tolerated it, for a moment, in the Christian Church... In proving this subject justifiable by Scriptural authority, its morality is also proved; for the Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions.

Leonard writes:

Furman and other pro-slavery Baptists made support for slavery essential to biblical orthodoxy, implying that if the Bible was wrong in sanctioning slavery, it might be untrustworthy on the nature of salvation itself. Their literal method of interpreting the Bible aided Baptists in claiming biblical authority to support the institution of chattel slavery.

In support of Furman’s thought, South Carolina pastor Richard Fuller wrote of slavery:

...both testaments constitute one entire canon, and that they furnish a complete rule of faith and practice.” He concluded: *WHAT GOD SANCTIONED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, AND PERMITTED IN THE NEW, CANNOT BE A SIN.*

National politics in America have been embroiled in theological disputes about slavery throughout much of the 18th and 19th centuries. In October of 1858 during the height of the Lincoln and Douglas debates, Abraham Lincoln wrote a scathing indictment of those who claimed that since slavery was present in the Bible, it must have met with God’s approval.⁸ Lincoln began by observing that if Blacks were truly inferior to whites, then as good Christians, should not whites provide more to those in need instead of taking what little they had? He summed this idea up by writing:

‘Give to him that is needy’ is the Christian rule of charity; but ‘Take from him that is needy’ is the rule of slavery.

As a good thing, slavery is strikingly peculiar, in this, that it is the only good thing which no man

ever seeks the good of, for himself.

Lincoln focused his attention on those who claimed that it was the will of God that African Americans were enslaved. He noted that it was up to man, more specifically the slave owner, to determine what precisely was the “will of God” regarding the plight of the slave. Mentioning specifically Reverend Frederick Ross who the previous year had published a book entitled *Slavery Ordained of God*, Lincoln poses a simple question. If the slave owner is the one interpreting “God’s will,” would Reverend Ross voluntarily choose to surrender his slave and thereby be forced to work for his own bread, or retain his slave and continue to enjoy the benefits that slave provided?”

Theological justification from their ministers allowed Southerners to believe that “not only did God sanction slavery, but slavery’s supporters were better Christians and more faithful interpreters of Biblical text than were their opponents.” The slave-owning class was small, but it was supported by the overwhelming majority of churches and ministers in the South.

Southern ministers wrote extensively in defense of slavery and in favor of the subjugation of women, using the same or similar biblical texts.

Considering that they saw themselves as doing God’s work, white Southerners were shocked by the military defeat of the Confederacy. But they refused to see this defeat as a divine judgment on their beliefs and actions. Instead, they transformed the defeat into a belief that it was “the action of a mysterious, yet all-wise Providence and an opportunity to correct failings in personal piety.”

Proslavery theology persisted because “religious arguments had situated slavery amidst other forms of household order and had relied upon widely accepted views of women’s subordination as a corollary to slaves’ deprivation of rights.” Southern Christians defeated Reconstruction and kept their “antebellum worldview,” reaffirming it as they helped rebuild the legal and social structures of white supremacy through terrorism and with Northern indifference.

Although one is hard pressed to identify prominent Southern Christians who publicly opposed slavery, the literature of Christians devoted to emancipation, equal rights, justice and reparations for freed slaves is impressive. The passage of the 14th Amendment to the

U.S. Constitution, designed to fully incorporate former slaves into the fabric of American democratic life, is due in large measure to those voices. But in a very short time after the end of the War Between the States and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, terrible widespread violence by white mobs against Black citizens, often while wielding Christian symbols, engendered many decades of continued disenfranchisement, injustice, economic and social inequities throughout America.

Conclusion

Recently, Pope Francis publicly repudiated the “Doctrine of Discovery.” The medieval popes justified, enabled and profited from eradication of cultures and theft of resources and land. The Roman Catholic Church was enriched by proceeds from the stolen precious metals and vast treasures. Pope Francis, as the proper descendant and ecclesiastical heir of the earlier popes, wrestles with how repudiation of a heresy compensates for the heresy.

Twenty-first century Christians in America face the same questions regarding slavery and the long system of inequality engendered. Earlier this summer, the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) meeting in Stavanger, Norway representing more than 40 nations, passed a resolution unanimously repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery. However, few white American Christians, while benefiting from the advantages enjoyed by all white descendants of centuries of the enterprise of American slavery, are seriously engaged with the on-going challenges of needs for reparations and justice for descendants of American slavery.

We also face political conflicts over how we should reckon with our nation’s fractious history. Many states continue to struggle with debates about Confederate statues in public places. We have been put to the test by angry reactions to *The New York Times’* series on the 1619 Project and are reeling from Florida’s recent policies of rewriting or eliminating school history curricula. Ironically, the Critical Race Theory social science scholars will ultimately be vindicated in much the same way Galileo was vindicated for stating the obvious before irrational critics.

Christians have an obligation to contend with effects of the white world’s misinterpretation and misuse of the teachings of Jesus Christ and our complicity

in the exercise of the doctrines of dominion and white supremacy. Perhaps by doing so we will comprehend and remedy the structures and conditions that have resulted from those doctrines. ■

1 Many sources chronicle the horrors of colonialism. Perhaps a leading example is Joseph Conrad’s novel, *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), which describes King Leopold’s hellish role in Congo, using Presbyterian missionaries’ journals and other contemporaneous sources for factual accuracy.

2 I do not claim to have credentials of a scholarly theologian, but as a social scientist I am informed about social policy, religious influence, and cause and effect relationships in the mindset and worldview of influential advocates for theological viewpoints that have justified untold violence against the teachings and life of Jesus.

3 Pope Nicholas V’s *Dum diversas* (1452) and *Romanus Pontifex* (1455); and Pope Alexander VI’s *Inter caetera* (1493).

4 Among many sources to inform our understanding

Proslavery theology persisted after the war. Southern Christians defeated Reconstruction and kept their “antebellum worldview” which helped them rebuild the legal and social structures of white supremacy through the use of terrorism and with Northern indifference. And, white clergy were often silent and too often complicit.

of this fact are found in:

5 Elizabeth L. Jemison writes in her exploration of proslavery Christianity after Emancipation.

6 See “Proslavery Christianity After the Emancipation” By: Elizabeth L. Jemison, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (WINTER 2013), pp. 255-268.

7 Bill J. Leonard, *Ministry Matters*, “Slavery and Denominational Schism”, August 18, 2011.

8 Lincoln’s handwritten notes from that time can be seen at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Washington, D.C.

Together For Hope

By Chuck Poole

This past weekend, in an effort to prepare for my part in our time together this evening, I read, again, every word of the four gospels which made it into our Bible.

Like many of you, I have read through the four gospels in a single weekend several times before. But, this time, because my work with Together for Hope focuses primarily on healthcare justice, I did something I had not done on any of my previous journeys through the gospels, which was to mark with a highlighter each time the subject of healing and health comes up in the gospel records of the words and works of Jesus.

The rest of you may know the number of times healing happens in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But, in case there are some who, like me, have never plowed your way through the gospels, marking every healing, it happens 68 times. Sixty-eight times in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, those who are sick and suffering are healed and helped.

Even after you take into account the synoptic redundancies, once you add that many healing moments to all the times Jesus fed people who were hungry, welcomed people who were strangers, and intentionally sat down with and stood up for persons who had been stigmatized, ostracized, marginalized and demonized, you can see why working for a more just world is so important to so many people of faith. We don't work for social justice because we have made an ideological decision to be progressive; we work for social justice because we have made a spiritual decision to follow Jesus.

Several years ago, in a book called *Barth and Dostoevsky*, I read about a sermon Karl Barth preached on December 17, 1911, in which Barth, then 24-years-old, is reported to have said, "Jesus is the movement for social justice, and the movement for social justice is Jesus." One of Barth's biographers dismissed that sentence as a moment of youthful "naivety," but I'm not so sure. It may have been too much gospel reading that sowed such seed in young Barth's spirit.

The 20th century liberation theologian, Dorothee Söelle, said something similar when she wrote, "God is justice," which might be a more sweeping declaration than many of us would make. But scripture does say, in Genesis 18:19, "The ways of the Lord are justice and righteousness," and in Psalm 33:5, "God loves

justice," and in Proverbs 21:3, "God cares more about justice and righteousness than sacrifices and offerings," and in Amos 5:24, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," and in Micah 6:8, "What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God."

Thus, it is no surprise that the Jesus whom we believe to be the ultimate embodiment of God would spend his life healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, and intentionally sitting down with and standing up for whoever was most voiceless, vulnerable, stigmatized, ostracized, marginalized and demonized; and calling those who would follow him to do the same.

But, as for me, I cannot remember the last time I used the phrase social gospel because, to me, to say social gospel is as redundant as saying hot fire, cold snow, Holy Bible or radical Jesus. I cannot speak for you, but in my experience, to read the four gospels is to see that there is no extra, on-the-side, special category, footnote-to-the-real-gospel, social gospel. There is only the gospel, and it is social.

Indeed, while I cannot speak for anyone else, it is to me a wonder that the same Christianity which finds its beginnings in the Jesus of the four gospels eventually had to create a carve out for justice work, and name it the *social* gospel, as though working for a more just world for all persons is something other than the main gospel. If the four gospels are a trustworthy record of the words and works of Jesus, to live in solidarity with whomever is most voiceless and vulnerable, stigmatized and ostracized, marginalized and demonized is *central* to, not *extra* to, the gospel.

Which is why I no longer use the phrase *social gos-*

pel. Social gospel isn't a bad phrase. Many dear and good souls continue to use it in beautiful and powerful ways. But, as for me, I cannot remember the last time I used the phrase *social gospel* because, to me, to say *social gospel* is as redundant as saying hot fire, cold snow, Holy Bible or radical Jesus. I cannot speak for you, but in my experience, to read the four gospels is to see that there is no extra, on-the-side, special category, footnote-to-the-real-gospel, *social gospel*. There is only the gospel, and it is social.

Or, as Peter Storey much more memorably put it, “Whenever we ask Jesus to come into our heart, Jesus always answers, ‘Only if I can bring my friends.’”

And we know who Jesus’ friends are. We don’t have to lie awake nights wondering who Jesus wants us to welcome, agonizing over whom Jesus would want us to sit down with and stand up for. We have read the four gospels all the way through so many times that we have now got what I call “the Jesus gene” in us. It’s sort of like being born again. We’ve got enough of the Jesus gene in us that, while there may be a few exceptions, for almost every issue that comes along, we know what Jesus would want us to say, and where Jesus would want us to stand.

We may not have the logistics or the politics or the economics all figured out, but we are not in a hand-wringing quandary about what Jesus would say, for example, about the major matters of Together for Hope—housing, education, opportunity, nutrition and equal access to healthcare for all persons.

We have enough of the Jesus gene in us to know that if Jesus were here, Jesus would say that all cannot be fully well for any of us until all is finally well for all of us. We have enough of the Jesus gene in us to know that if Jesus were here Jesus would call us to work for a more just world for all persons by letting the love of God which has come down to us go out through us in a life of intentional, public solidarity with whomever is most voiceless and vulnerable, stigmatized and ostracized, marginalized and demonized, sick and suffering, left out and outcast, hurting and alone.

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We have enough of that old Jesus gene in us to know that all of that is absolutely central to the gospel—not the social gospel, just the gospel Gospel. ■

Chuck Poole is the author of eight books, including The Path to Depth (Nurturing Faith Books, 2022), as well as numerous published articles and the lyrics to three hymns. He retired from the pastorate of Northminster Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi in 2022 after 45 years of pastoral life in Georgia, North Carolina, Washington DC, and Jackson, Mississippi. This address was delivered in Atlanta, Georgia on June 27, 2023 at the celebration of Together For Hope’s 20th anniversary in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. He currently works with Together For Hope in the area of healthcare justice and is a frequent contributor to Christian Ethics Today.

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Baseless Anti-trans Claims Fuel Adoption of Harmful Laws – Two Criminologists Explain

By Henry F. Fradella and Alexis Rowland

It has been seven years since North Carolina made headlines for enacting a “bathroom bill” – legislation intended to prevent transgender people from using restrooms that align with their gender identity.

After boycotts threatened to cost the state more than \$3.7 billion USD, legislators repealed the law in 2017. Since then, however, religious and political conservatives have successfully spread an anti-trans moral panic, or irrational fear, across the United States.

As far back as 2001, Republican lawmakers proposed the first of what are now nearly 900 anti-LGBTQ+ bills. More than 500 of these were introduced in 49 state legislatures and the U.S. Congress during the first five months of 2023. To date, at least 79 have passed.

Many of these anti-trans laws are written and financed by a group of far-right interest groups, including the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Research Council, the Liberty Counsel and the American Principles Project.

These groups claim that their proposed laws would protect cisgender women and girls – those whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth – from the sorts of violent trans people that are often depicted in movies and other media.

But as criminologists, we know these claims are without merit. No reliable data supports the argument that transgender people commit violent crimes at higher rates than cisgender men and women. In fact, transgender people are more than four times as likely to be the victim of a crime as are cisgender people.

Anti-trans laws like the one enacted in Kansas over the governor’s veto reach beyond restrooms to limit access to many sex-segregated spaces, including “locker rooms, prisons, domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers,” based on the sex assigned at birth to a person who seeks to use those spaces.

As of the end of May 2023, at least 18 states had enacted laws within the preceding 12 months that limit medically age-appropriate gender-affirming health care for trans minors, with similar bills pending in 14 more states. And Florida’s barrage of anti-LGBTQ+ regulations prohibits even the mere discussion of sexuality and gender identity in schools through the 12th grade.

Journalist Adam Rhodes called these efforts a “centrally coordinated attack on transgender existence.”

We believe these laws and bills illustrate the increasingly hostile legislative landscape for LGBTQ+ people despite polls showing that most people in the United States want trans people to be protected from discrimination in public spaces on the basis of their gender.

What the data shows

A variety of myths, false narratives, bad science, misconceptions and outright misrepresentations undergird anti-trans laws. The reality, however, is

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that trans-exclusionary laws do not protect cisgender women and girls from harassment or violence. Rather, they result in dramatic increases in violent victimization for transgender and gender-nonconforming adults and children.

When laws permit transgender people to access sex-segregated spaces in accordance with their gender identities, crime rates do not increase. There is no association between trans-inclusive policies and more crime. As one of us wrote in a recent paper, this is likely because, just like cisgender folks, “transgender people use locker rooms and restrooms to change clothes and go to the bathroom,” not for sexual gratification or predatory reasons.

Conversely, when trans people are forced by law

to use sex-segregated spaces that align with the sex assigned to them at birth instead of their gender identity, two important facts should be noted:

First, no studies show that violent crime rates against cisgender women and girls in such spaces decrease. In other words, cisgender women and girls are no safer than they would be in the absence of anti-trans laws. Certainly, the possibility exists that a cisgender man might pose as a woman to go into certain spaces under false pretenses. But that same possibility remains regardless of whether or not transgender people are lawfully permitted in those spaces.

Second, trans people are significantly more likely to be victimized in sex-segregated spaces than are cisgender people. For instance, while incarcerated in facilities designated for men, trans women are nine to 13 times as likely to be sexually assaulted as the men with whom they are boarded.

In women's prisons, correctional staff are responsible for 41 percent of women's sexual victimization, with cisgender women committing the balance of nearly all prisoner-on-prisoner violence. Similarly, trans boys and girls who are barred from using the washrooms and locker rooms that align with their gender identity are respectively between 26 to 149 percent more likely to be sexually victimized in the locations they are forced to use than cisgender youths.

In society at large, between 84 and 90 percent of all crimes of sexual violence are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, not a stranger lurking in the shadows – or the showers or restroom stalls. But trans and nonbinary people feel very unsafe in bathrooms and locker rooms, though others experience relative safety there. In fact, the largest study of its kind found that upward of 75 percent of trans men and 64 percent of trans women reported that they routinely avoid public restrooms to minimize their chances of being harassed or assaulted.

Lies drive harm

Because criminological data does not support trans-exclusionary laws or policies, advocates of anti-trans laws often resort to lies, flawed anecdotal evidence, or what fact-checkers have called “extreme cherry-picking” to support their position.

For instance, one of us documented how isolated news stories, often from notoriously transphobic tabloids, conflate the actions of sexual predators with the “dangerousness” of trans women. Although there are undeniably examples of actual transgender people committing crimes, even deeply troubling ones, they are not evidence of any behavioral trends among the broader class of trans people. No such data exists.

We believe the spate of anti-trans proposals represents a textbook example of crime-control theater – an unnecessary, ineffective and harmful legislative response to unfounded fearmongering.

Anti-trans laws are not just baseless. They're hurtful and damaging, especially to LGBTQ+ teenagers. Recent polls indicate that more than 60 percent of these people experience deteriorating mental health – including depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts – as a result of laws and policies aimed at restricting their personhood.

The criminological research is clear that anti-trans laws do not help the people they are claimed to pro-

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tect. In fact, these laws inflict harm on people who are even more vulnerable. ■

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Christians Can Be Bad Neighbors? Reflections on Luke 10:25-37 and My Visit to the United Nations

By Lewis Brogdon

Earlier this summer, I had the honor to represent Baptist Seminary of Kentucky's (BSK) institute for Black Church Studies at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York City. The occasion was the Second Session of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent, held on May 30 to June 2.¹

It was one of the highlights of my career and definitely an Ephesians 3:20 moment ("God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all I could ask or think.") How did I arrive at such a place? What is a minister and religious scholar doing at the United Nations?

Over the past few years, God has been dealing with me about human suffering. I have always touched on these issues in my research and writing on topics such as African enslavement in America, clergy suicide and nihilism. God has continued to impress upon my spirit the need to give more attention to this.

Interestingly, God used the story of the Good Samaritan to give new focus to my work. In the story, religious persons are not the heroes. For whatever reason, they refused to show compassion and love for a neighbor in need. Instead of viewing myself, people in church, and American citizens in general as good Samaritans, as heroes and heroines, God confronted me with the realization that in some instances, many of us are like those religious persons who refuse to show compassion and love for neighbors in need.

In particular, God opened my eyes to the systems and daily processes that preoccupy us, so we do not see the profound amount of suffering happening all around us. So many of us are insulated and isolated from the toll of suffering because "there's always somewhere we have to be, something pressing that we have to do." The gospel is, among many things, a call to disrupt the perverse forms of insulation and isolation that leave our neighbors sick, alone, starving to death and dying in the streets.

I have been wrestling with this text and our world. I have preached on this and used aspects of this story in lectures. I have spent many hours studying, including watching videos of people living in abject poverty and inhumane conditions. I sat with their faces and conditions and refused to look away. Often, I tried

to imagine if that were my life – what would I think of God, good in the world, the church, government systems, and "so-called" people of goodwill who left me to suffer and die like this? I had to confront myself with the hard question: "Was I doing enough for my neighbors?" Often in prayer and meditation, I asked God, "What am I supposed to do with this?"

In hard moments like this, I lean on stories of great leaders in the Bible who took on big tasks, always with others, and pressed beyond the limits of what they thought was possible. Such stories are powerful reminders that we do not have to be messiahs for

The gospel is, among many things, a call to disrupt the perverse forms of insulation and isolation that leave our neighbors sick, alone, starving to death and dying in the streets.

marginalized people or saviors of the world. (And we are not.) We just need to do our part and recognize that we are on a team. These stories have sustained my work for the past three years since the protests of 2020. In fact, these stories have become a maxim I want to share with my readers. "When faced with the overwhelming magnitude of the work you are called to, God either wants you to connect to other good Samaritans or to remind you of the good Samaritans to whom you are already connected." Both are powerful reminders that we are never alone in this work. God's response to my prayer was a new connection that will help me to be a good neighbor to people to which the systems have blinded me.

A Divine Appointment

God opened a door to a meaningful connection with institutions and organizations doing work to address and alleviate the toll of suffering. Last year, I learned about the Permanent Forum for People of African Descent through Chakera Irvin, a recent graduate of

the Howard University School of Law, and Justin Hansford, executive director of the Thurgood Marshall Center and professor at Howard's law school. I was privileged to attend the pre-launch of the forum where I learned how these leaders are using an international platform as leverage with powerful countries to address racial violence, discrimination and inequities. A year later, I sat in the halls of the United Nations and listened and learned new ways to take up the work to which God has graciously called me.

1. One of the insightful comments made in the opening session was the need to reframe racism as a human rights issue, not just a social issue. This is a vital part of the work of the Permanent Forum. Legal language such as "crimes against humanity" was insightful as the theological academy does not use such language. Racism is often framed as a social justice issue and not a broader human rights issue.
2. I was impressed by the participation and strong support for the work of the Forum from UNESCO based in Paris, France. UNESCO, the educational, scientific, cultural organization of the United Nations, has taken up some of these issues in light of the 2020 protests. It has organized a series of conferences called Global Forum Against Racism and Discrimination that are international in scope. The next one will be held in Sao Paul, Brazil in late November.
3. A cabinet member of the U. S. government made remarks and expressed his support on behalf of President Joe Biden. Environmental disasters disproportionately affect people of color. While a cabinet-level member's participation was meaningful, the Brazilian government has a Minister of Racial Equality, Anielle Franco. Brazil has the largest African population of the diaspora with 55.9 million, while the United States is second with 46.4 million. Brazil was the only country represented at the Forum by a government office focusing solely on policies for the Black population. Minister Franco said, "The government's presence at this Forum is crucial. We're taking with us strategies that are aligned with Brazilian Black organizations and movements to extend the International Decade for People of African Descent for another 10 years, as well as submitting our candidacy for a permanent seat at the next Forum's election

and for Brazil to host next year's edition." America can learn a lot from our sisters and brothers in Brazil.

4. The Permanent Forum gives attention to global antiracist movements. There are movements all over God's world to address racism. I learned about new organizations doing work on reparations such as the African American Redress Network and First Repair. Seeing organizations that shared examples of repair done in recent years was encouraging.

While feverishly taking notes, I wondered why I was in the room. It became clear over the two days I was involved. I noticed that Christian organizations and leaders played a small role in the work of the Forum. During the sessions I attended, I do not recall a single denominational leader, major church or organization speaking out on the dual issues of racism and reparations. I did not hear of partnerships among Christian organizations and agencies doing racial

However, the misleading title of his essay caused Black pastors to miss the core issue Glaude sought to raise, which was the decentralization of the church in the African American community.

justice work. The U.N. Permanent Forum for People of African Descent is the latest example of large political and or grassroots activist movements –think Black Lives Matter (BLM) or American Descendant of Slavery (ADOS) – that have taken up the mantle of addressing the material conditions of Black people with little to no involvement from churches.

I was reminded of Dr. Eddie Glaude's 2010 article, "The Black Church is Dead," published in The Huffington Post. Glaude's contention is that while religion is important to African Americans, the idea that the Black church is central to the religious lives of African Americans has long been abandoned. I remember scores of African American pastors across the nation taking issue with Glaude's assessment of the death of the Black church. They claimed that the Black church was as viable today as it has ever been to the religious lives of Black people.

However, the misleading title of his essay caused Black pastors to miss the core issue Glaude sought

to raise, which was the decentralization of the church in the African American community. There are two factors contributing to this: (1) the growing number of African Americans who choose to practice their faith outside the bounds of the Black church; and (2) the growing number of African Americans who practice non-Christian religions or those with no religious affiliation. As far back as 2010, we were seeing these trends. The former issue stood out in my mind as I witnessed the marginal witness of the Church in this space. I wondered how many of these leaders are deeply Christian, but left churches that refuse to take up God's work outside the walls of their church. What I observed and Glaude's contention back in 2010 are microcosms of a larger issue for churches in America.

Christians Can Be Bad Neighbors

As strange as this sounds, I want you to consider the possibility that some, not all, of our churches and sisters and brothers in Christ, are bad neighbors to billions of people. Much of it is unintentional but still nonetheless true. Like the priest and Levite, we pass by neighbors in need. We might look at their suffering for a moment before departing to do something "more important." Often, we pretend not to see destitute and dying people around us or we are a part of congregations and organizations that are oblivious of the work being done in their communities and around the world.

I have become increasingly concerned with the blindness and isolationism in which too many Christians are trapped by their involvement with the busyness of American life and congregational life. (The former issue I will take up in a later piece.) American churchgoers are so busy attending worship services and activities that there is no time to engage broader issues affecting the world, especially the pressing human rights issue taken up by entities such as the United Nations or its specialized agency UNESCO. Many are busy going to church, not in being the church in the world. While church attendance and worship are important parts of Christian faith, they are not the ONLY parts, not even the main part.

I am not the only one concerned. More Christians are growing tired of churches, leaders and institutions that are socially disengaged, content to leave Jesus sleeping under bridges, starving to death, or languishing in refugee camps while we go to worship services, small group meetings and cookouts. American congregations are being challenged to do more than provide spaces for religious activities like worship, prayer and preaching. They are expected to effect change in

communities in decline and in the world as a whole, but doing this will require pastors and churches to venture outside the "insular" world of congregational life.

Re-Situating American Christians in the Story of the Good Samaritan

In the story of the Good Samaritan, the priest and Levite had to go somewhere. There was some place more important to be, something more important to do than help this person in need. What was it? Where was it? We have the same problem today. There is always some place we have to be, something more important to do than helping neighbors in need. We see suffering that we do not act to disrupt. We use busyness as an excuse not to understand why so many of God's children are trapped in oppressive cycles that produce misery and death. We go to church and let preachers justify our continued participation in "hating" our neighbors (because if I were working in the mines in the Congo, neglect would feel like hate). Our scandal

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(mine included) are the institutions, structures, and processes that have gotten in the way of people created in the divine image. In fact, in the coming months and years, we need a radical reimagining of how we do life and its relation to society, so we can begin to open our eyes to human suffering and to love our neighbors by doing something about the violence that produces human suffering. Our churches and theological institutions will play a pivotal part in this.

Conclusion and an Invitation

The story of the Samaritan begins with a question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and ends with Jesus saying, "Go and do likewise." Saying that this passage is challenging is an understatement.

Jesus does not say “go to church and you will inherit eternal life” nor “ask me into your heart, and you will inherit eternal life.” He says, “love your neighbor like this Samaritan” because, in the end, we are not just members of a congregation, we are disciples of Jesus and members of God’s kingdom that radically broke into the world 2,000 years ago. We are called to bear witness to principles and values rooted in self-sacrifice, love, justice and truth. We are called to resist powerful systems and people who oppose God’s sovereignty and cause us to conform to the world.

The call of the gospel means two things about being good neighbors. First, it means that churches have a responsibility to the world around them and all people, not just their families and fellow church members. Second, it means that our responsibility to neighbors near and far includes both stewardship and discipleship issues. These are things the gospel “demands” of us as followers of Jesus Christ, things we will give an account of before the Holy One on the day of judgment. Being a good neighbor is not something we can dismiss. It is a requirement you and I must wrestle with every single day as we take up the cross and follow Jesus, maybe the most difficult requirement Jesus gave us. Think about it this way. Christian discipleship means asking ourselves this question every day: “What do I have to do not to be like the priest and Levite to a neighbor in need?” Doing this will radically re-order things like our priorities, values, time, commitment and finances.

God used my recent trip to bring clarity to certain aspects of public faith I teach students at BSK and pastors across the country. I learned that new connections can be sources God uses to teach and encourage us in the work of justice.

So, I want to invite you to make this connection as well. I plan to take a group of Christian leaders to the next session of Permanent Forum for People of African

Descent. I want you to learn about the Forum and the United Nation’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. I hope to see some of you soon in New York or Geneva.

Questions for Further Thought

1. As members of this country and various institutions within it, what steps can we take to become more informed about the plight of neighbors near and far?
2. We cannot continue to have spaces that hide us from the devastating toll of suffering in the world. So, what would it mean to bring brief videos and visuals of human suffering into our churches and homes to disrupt the culture of blindness and callousness?
3. Getting informed about human rights issues is not optional for Christians. How can churches create mechanisms and partnerships that inform, educate and engage their congregations and members of the community about the pressing issues of our times?
4. Some connections can be a waste of your time, resources and spiritual energy. What are appropriate ways to align yourself with churches and organizations doing important work in the world? ■

Lewis Brogdon (Ph.D.) is the executive director of the Institute for Black Church Studies and Associate Professor of Preaching and Black Church Studies at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky in Louisville Kentucky. He is a frequent contributor to Christian Ethics Today.

1 For more information about the forum go to <https://www.ohchr.org/en/permanent-forum-people-african-descent>.

*We are not all in the same boat; we are in the same storm.
Some of us have yachts, some have canoes,
and some are drowning.
Just be kind and help whoever you can.*

‘Barbie’ Is, At Its Core, A Movie About the Messy Contradictions of Motherhood

By Aviva Dove-Viebahn

As a mother and a media scholar, I couldn’t help but see “Barbie” through an even narrower lens: as a film that, at its core, is about mothers and daughters.

The film’s plot centers on a life-size doll, known as “Stereotypical Barbie,” played by Margot Robbie, who begins to malfunction: Her feet go flat, and she can’t stop thinking about death. So she leaves her perfect plastic life to embark on a quest to restore the boundary between the real world and Barbieland. Along the way, she learns that the real world is nothing like her girl-power wonderland, where Barbies hold all the positions of power and influence and Kens are just accessories.

But its thematic heart rests in the film’s examination of the tensions around being a mother – a role often taken for granted, even as the cultural fantasies of motherhood clash with the actual sacrifices that moms make.

Motherhood as mere drudgery?

I was immediately struck by the movie’s funny but chilling observations about motherhood.

“Since the beginning of time,” unseen narrator Helen Mirren intones sardonically in the film’s first line, “since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls.” (Cinephiles will immediately recognize this scene and its setting as an homage to Stanley Kubrick’s famous “dawn of man” opening from “2001: A Space Odyssey.”)

Girls appear on screen, wearing drab, antiquated dresses and playing “house” with their dolls in a primitive setting, expressionless and practically drooping with boredom. The problem with these dolls is that girls “could only ever play at being mothers, which can be fun” – Mirren pauses meaningfully – “for a while.”

Then, she adds, her tone turning cynical, “Ask your mother.”

The appeal of motherhood, Mirren seems to suggest, eventually morphs into unwanted drudgery – a reality underscored moments later when the girls meet their first Barbie, who towers above them, larger than life, inspiring them to smash their mundane baby dolls. Barbie – a doll of a young, beautiful woman – com-

pels kids to leave the ennui of motherhood behind for the pink plastic sparkle of Barbieland, where all the Barbies live their best lives forever, embodying feminine perfection and possibility.

The framing of motherhood as thankless and undesirable echoes mid-20th-century feminist critiques of child rearing and housework. These roles not only bound women to the home but also forced them to perform repetitive tasks that didn’t reflect their abilities and derailed their ambitions.

In her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir argued that women, to empower themselves, needed to reject the myth that motherhood represented the pinnacle of feminine

Barbie – a doll of a young, beautiful woman – compels kids to leave the ennui of motherhood behind for the pink plastic sparkle of Barbieland, where all the Barbies live their best lives forever, embodying feminine perfection and possibility.

achievement. American writer Betty Friedan would echo this sentiment in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, railing against the image of the “happy housewife heroine” who finds fulfillment in being a wife and mother.

It’s no coincidence that these ideas overlapped with the invention of Barbie in 1959. While predating the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Barbie’s creator, Ruth Handler, did design the toy to allow girls to imagine their future adult selves, rather than simply play-acting as mothers using baby dolls.

The value in ‘motherwork’

And yet, not only do many women enjoy being mothers, but motherhood also plays an essential role in society and life.

In her 1976 book *Of Woman Born*, feminist poet Adrienne Rich draws a distinction between the fulfilling relationship mothers can have with their

children and the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which keeps women under men's control.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins coined the term "motherwork" in the mid-1990s to highlight the experiences of women of color and working-class mothers, many of whom don't have the resources to pursue their own ambitions over caring for their families and communities. When you're just trying to navigate the day-to-day without wealth or other forms of privilege, options like hiring a nanny or paying for graduate school aren't feasible or a priority.

For these mothers, the survival of their children is not a given. Instead of tedium and oppression, motherwork acknowledges that mothering can be a radically important labor of love and a source of empowerment in its own right.

In "Barbie," the mother-daughter relationship between Gloria, played by America Ferrera, and her daughter Sasha, played by Ariana Greenblatt, contains these contradictions.

After experiencing a vision of the person whose sadness seems to be the source of her malfunctions, Stereotypical Barbie initially assumes it's Sasha's tween angst that's disturbed the perfection of Barbieland and drawn her into the real world. Instead, Barbie discovers it's Gloria's loneliness – and her nostalgia for a simpler time when she played Barbies with her daughter – that has caused the rift between reality and fantasy.

Sasha and Gloria's adventure with Barbie – first escaping the Mattel executives who want to lock Barbie in a box and then journeying back to Barbieland to rescue the other Barbies from the Kens, who are trying to take over – repairs the relationship between mother and daughter.

Gloria remembers what it's like to find joy in motherhood, and Sasha realizes that her mother isn't just a bland set of values against which to rebel. Gloria is a fully fledged person with a rich inner life who, by her own estimation, is sometimes "weird and dark and crazy," which Sasha admires.

Sasha – and all the Barbies – have something else to learn from Gloria, too. Stunned that even someone as perfect as Barbie feels like she's not good enough, Gloria delivers a poignant monologue encapsulating, in Barbie's words, "the cognitive dissonance required to be a woman under patriarchy."

Gloria, as a mom struggling to reconcile her deep love for her child with the fear that she's constantly failing at motherhood, knows all too well how this cognitive dissonance wears women down.

Letting go

In her 2018 book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and*

Cruelty, scholar Jacqueline Rose argues that motherhood is tied to notions of citizenship and nation and, for this reason, can become "the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings."

The ending to "Barbie" rejects the notion that mothers are to blame for their children's mistakes. Instead, the film offers another perspective through the character of Ruth Handler, Mattel's founder, who's played by Rhea Perlman. Handler helps Barbie see what awaits her if she chooses to become human.

Symbolically letting go of her creation and encouraging her to forge her own path, Ruth tells Barbie that she cannot control her any more than she could control her own daughter, and that mothers should pave the way for their children, not hinder them.

"We mothers," she explains, "stand still so our daughters can look back to see how far they've come."

This sentimental and self-effacing message seems at odds with the film's nuanced portrayal of motherhood through humor and critique.

But, throughout, "Barbie" invites viewers to ques-

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tion even its own structure, tenets and messaging – and presents multiple perspectives on motherhood.

Mothering is hard work and sometimes may even be thankless labor. It may bore or disappoint. It can be affirming or heartbreaking or both. It involves leading and following, holding on and letting go.

Being a mother shouldn't have to be about sacrifice or about fitting some impossible ideal. Instead, motherhood can highlight the possibilities of living in – and with – the contradictions. ■

Aviva Dove-Viebahn is Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies at Arizona State University. This article first appeared August 1, 2023 on in The Conversation and is reprinted here with permission.

We Are In Good Hands...Paul Lowder

By Michael Usey

When pastors retire, it's not always a pretty thing. Some have had such a hard-fought go of it at difficult churches that their faith may be in tatters. Some retire from church-going all together; some retire from any and all discussions of theology and the life of faith. A few even retire from God, although I think that number is gratefully few. And I don't judge anyone how they piece together their spiritual life after a life of service to the Christian church as a whole. *Ministry is not for the faint of heart.*

It's also an inherent hazard of being a Christian minister in North America that one loses one's true self along the way. This is actually way too common, and I believe the reason for it is this: ministers let their public self consume their private self. In too many congregations, pastors may not be free to say exactly what they truly believe, or what they think God is saying to that congregation. *So, faith can become a performative virtue, a holy masquerade.* I don't know if the average church member can sense this charade, but other ministers can smell it a mile away.

So, what a gift it was when, in 2001, 22 years ago, the Rev. Paul Lowder began attending my church, College Park Baptist in Greensboro, NC. In his memoir, Paul said of our church that he "was amazed that in many ways it was what a church should be. They have a sense of community I haven't found in any other church ... I wish more churches could be like College Park." [p. 262] He wasn't the first retired minister that I admired, but it was lovely to have a friend and congregant such as he was over the years.

While in prison in Rome and knowing his time was short, St. Paul the apostle (not our St. Paul) wrote letters to his emissary Timothy. [I know the authorship of this letter is disputed, so sue me.] He concludes his letter in part with these words:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. ... As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the

faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. [2 Tim 4.1-2.6-8]

What amazing words: *I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.* Words that I think are so appropriate for Paul Lowder. His life was an attempt to live in God's grace in the midst of heartache and struggle. As I was saying, it's no small thing to keep one's genuine faith and authentic self while being a minister. He was a deeply open and curious person, a sign not only of his intelligence, but of his carefully honed wonder for the world. He came

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from a provincial background and, to his credit, he always sought to climb past that.

Paul Lowder was many things to me, but perhaps first and foremost, he was a careful and appreciative listener to my sermons. We both were educated at Emory University's school of theology, many years apart, and we both knew a good sermon when we heard it. Paul was always, always so kind when he had listened to my work, and he helped me get better at my craft. We sometimes chatted in person or via email about some idea I presented or someone I quoted...

...Paul and I shared a deep love of reading and books. We occasionally talked at length about something we had both read. He noted some of the books that influenced him in the back of his autobiography. I counted more than 20 books that I would have listed as my favorites as well. Not only was he a reader, but he could remember much of what he read as well. We shared a love for Frederick Buechner, the Presbyterian

minister whose non-fiction was articulate, vulnerable, tone-perfect, and real. I often quote Buechner in my sermons...

...Paul was always transparent and vulnerable with me when he talked about his life. He had a wealth of experience, as he had pastored churches in Harmony, Davidson, Irving Park, Maple Springs, Newton, Eden, and Mint Hill. I have to say, and I think he'd agreed, that moving around so often to so many different churches did not always help nor bless his ministry. I know he reflected that he and the congregation were not always a good match. Paul thought he was being moved from one congregation just at the point at which good things were beginning to happen, an aspect of Methodist polity that he felt fragmented his overall ministry.

Paul led churches for 40 years, from 1954-1994; he was a talented preacher and pastor. Paul was quite candid with me with what he had done well and what he had overlooked or missed. This honesty gave me the space to be forthright with my own mistakes and areas needing growth. This too was a gift to a young minister such as myself.

Paul was especially good with people who were facing death and dying. Conversations with him helped me hone this aspect of my ministry. I realized after talking with him that I was too focused on not being trapped at a dying person's death-watch, that I sometimes missed key moments when people were close to death, moments of confession and fear and love. He helped me linger at these deathbed holy moments, and not to keep such a firm boundary of my time...

...Paul was my friend, and I treasured his friendship. He had a quick smile and was easy to talk with; he liked to laugh. There was a deep kindness in him that was so evident in this final stage of his long life. I valued how observant he was about my own ministry and my congregation, but he was careful not to kibitz on aspects of my ministry unless I asked, and when I did, he was perspicuous, having a keen insight.

Paul awakened in my wife, Ann, a most beautiful thing: the allure of the subtle charm of the southern persimmon fruit. Ann hadn't heard of it, so Paul promised he would make her a persimmon pudding. We didn't dream that he would follow up, but the next fall, he invited us to his townhouse for coffee and dessert; he'd actually made a whole dish just so she would know this iconic little jewel of the south. We have several nearby trees that spill ripe persimmons every fall, and, since then, Ann starts harvesting a handful every time she dog-walks past persimmon trees near our park, inspired by his use of the fruit he would scout out each fall...

...Ann and I went to visit him in what turned out to be the last time in December 2019. We of course didn't know then that Covid-19 would keep us from visiting for over two years. His memory had slipped; he knew who we were but didn't remember the specifics of our family. He was still reading, still hungry to learn about life and God and human experience. He couldn't take in much new information; he couldn't remember what he'd read only pages earlier, but he had a good-natured attitude about that. He said, well, it keeps what I'm reading fresh and new. Yet his long-term memory allowed him to speak with amazing recall about books he'd read much earlier in his life. So, the gap between his absent short-term memory and his long-term memory was painfully obvious. We realized he would not remember us the very next time we visited. But his attitude about life, his habit of happiness, was what stood out to us. Paul's genuine gratitude and verve for life seem to hold him in a pleasant place. I want to be like that, if that is my fate; I want to be like Paul. There was some lovely karma, living a good final

We realized he would not remember us the very next time we visited. But his attitude about life, his habit of happiness, was what stood out to us. Paul's genuine gratitude and verve for life seem to hold him in a pleasant place. I want to be like that, if that is my fate; I want to be like Paul.

chapter because of the healthy habits he had crafted, despite many adversities along the way. We hugged, took pictures, and told each other of our love and friendship.

While I knew Paul, he lived these truths. And he concludes his musings with these good true words: *We are in good hands!* Having gone through thick and thin, it's strengthening to hear that he could still affirm his steadfast trust in God as love and that God would hold him in that love. *We are in good hands.* We were always in good hands with Paul, and God's love and kindness showed through his life with clarity and grace. For the life and friendship and love of Paul Lowder, I thank God. ■

Michael Usey recently retired as pastor of College Park Baptist Church in Greensboro, NC.

Enormous thanks to those of you who, through your monthly or yearly contributions are helping to provide financial support for the work of *Christian Ethics Today*. It means a lot to me. If you're not already a contributor and you're enjoying the journal, I hope you'll consider helping us as you are able. But we live in challenging times, and I understand that not everyone is able. I'm happy to have you here either way!

Pat Anderson, Editor

Let Them Go and Gather Their Own Straw

By Rick Burnette

Exodus 5:1-13 (NIV)

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.’”

Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.”

Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword.”

But the king of Egypt said, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!”

Then Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working.”

That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and foremen in charge of the people: “You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw.

But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don’t reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’

Make the work harder for the men so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.”

Then the slave drivers and the foremen went out and said to the people, “This is what Pharaoh says: ‘I will not give you any more straw.

Go and get your own straw wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced at all.’”

So the people scattered all over Egypt to gather stubble to use for straw.

The slave drivers kept pressing them, saying, “Complete the work required of you for each day, just as when you had straw.”

As of June 1, 2023, our nation and the world, were once again subjected to a perennial debt ceiling ordeal. A legislative framework had been hammered out by Democratic and Republican representatives and the White House, but a dysfunctional Republican congressional majority threatened not to approve a

debt limit package by June 5 which would have caused unparalleled economic turmoil as the result.

The worst economic calamity was averted when the legislation was passed by Congress and signed by President Biden. The entire world heaved a temporary sigh of relief as fragile, post-Covid economies were spared the worst, at least for now. Unfortunately, any immediate debt limit deal will only kick the can down the road as the new ceiling will expire in two years, immediately following the 2024 presidential election.

Obviously, legislative deals result in winners and losers. Who typically wins? Corporations win as they will face no additional taxes and tax avoidance loopholes will remain unchecked. The military establish-

Obviously, legislative deals result in winners and losers. Who typically wins?

ment comes out unscathed as usual. The fossil fuel industry will continue to benefit from American taxpayers’ largesse through continued subsidies and tax write-offs, and large farm corporations will continue to receive the profitable benefits of farm subsidies.

Who loses? The poor, of course. They will be expected to gather even more stubble while continuing to piece together meager livelihoods.

The increased work requirements for certain adults receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) assistance will add to that stress and deprivation. Currently, able-bodied adults (without children) between 18 and 49 may access SNAP for only three months out of every three years unless they are employed at least 20 hours a week or meet other criteria.

Considering the GOP push for additional work requirements, *Washington Post* columnist, E.J. Dionne Jr., asserts that work requirements “don’t get anyone a job and mostly create bureaucratic obstacles for working people entitled to benefits” (*Washington Post*, May 28, 2023).

Along the same vein, a May 17, 2023, *New York Times* opinion piece by David Firestone pointed out that following Arkansas’ becoming the first state to

impose very similar work requirements on Medicaid recipients in 2018, a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that 13 percent of Medicaid recipients in Arkansas lost their health coverage — about 17,000 people — with no significant change in employment. Fortunately, a federal judge ended the experiment in 2019.

A May 24, 2023, *NBC News* article (“Inside the Florida group pushing to slash food stamp rolls nationwide,” by J.J. McCorvey) reports that among families that participated in SNAP in 2021, almost 80 percent already had at least one working family member; yet the drive to impose additional work requirements on poor people continues.

Such “reforms” aren’t novel. They are a regular feature every five years or so, when a new farm bill is introduced, with fiscal hawks consistently arguing for reduced food aid and/or more work requirements.

Meanwhile, what are affluent welfare recipients expected to give up?

A May 4, 2023, *Washington Post* editorial points out that a disproportionate share of benefits “flows to relatively high-income farmers who, as a group, are better off than the average American household.” The same piece states that the House Republicans’ proposal to raise the debt limit includes no cut to farm subsidies, even while tightening eligibility for SNAP at a savings of \$11 billion over 10 years. The editorialists add that “no decent fiscal strategy would demand this sacrifice from the poor while asking nothing of the myriad special interests that feed off the farm bill’s wasteful largesse.”

Also in his May 28 article, E.J. Dionne, states that with such legislation, the GOP is sending a signal about who is “worthy” of public help, “with racial stereotypes lurking in the background.” So, there’s commonality between the logic of Pharaoh and our politicians regarding the poor. Basically, “they are lazy.”

Our race-baiting establishment still easily fires up its white base with allegations of laziness and unworthiness; dog whistles meaning foreign, non-white, and those descended from America’s enslaved. They simply aren’t worthy of public assistance. Farm workers are needed to help put food in the supply chain for the corporate good, but those same workers and their families are undeserving of America’s help.

The impact of such policies, when put into action, is evident in Immokalee, Florida. Immokalee is both a farm town and food desert. I live nearby with my wife, Ellen, and we are engaged in a food security ministry for those workers and their families, and we see their

struggles daily. SNAP and other federal food assistance isn’t available to the large population of undocumented residents who harvest America’s food. Never mind our nation’s broken immigration system, these hardworking folks are simply unworthy of receiving federal assistance. So, let them find their own straw.

Eventually, such judgement also applies to “lazy” whites and other “misfits” who fail to contribute to corporate society. Simultaneously, any discussion of systemic racism and inequities related to education, health care and other social resources is taboo, if not illegal.

Where does the Church fit within this drawn-out issue? Obviously, there’s nothing new here. We’ve had decades to absorb these arguments and decipher the dog whistles.

Further into *Exodus*, chapter 5, the compliant Israelite overseers realize they’re in trouble when the enslaved are unable to meet the brick quota despite the cruel expectation that they would supply their own straw in addition to making the same number of bricks. Out of fear and frustration, they blame Moses

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and Aaron, threatening,

“May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

By the time this article is shared, the ramifications of the recent debt ceiling drama will have begun to be felt.

Meanwhile, what is our role? Are we merely scared, compliant overseers, cowed by unjust corporations and bullying politicians? Or, like Moses and Aaron, do we dare take the risk of justice and faith to alleviate the burdens of the working poor? ■

Rick Burnette, along with his wife Ellen, have been working in communities of dispossessed, disenfranchised people for decades, first in Thailand among hill tribes, and now in Immokalee among seasonal farm workers and their families.

Do Not Be Conformed to the World of Sports: Relearning How We Think about, Feel, and Do Sports as Christians

By John B. White

Karl Barth reminds us, when giving voice to Paul's ethics in the twelfth chapter 12 of Romans, in his Romans commentary, that if we desire to get beyond false thinking, we must relate our thinking about everyday living and concrete matters to God. "And if we are to think about life, we must penetrate hidden corners, and steadily refuse to treat anything—however trivial or disgusting it may seem to be—as irrelevant." Harry Blamires, disciple of C.S. Lewis, said something similar in *The Christian Mind* when he asserted that, "There is nothing in our experience, however trivial, worldly, or even evil, which cannot be thought about Christianly." This essay, as a mini-theology of sports, seeks to help us re-think and renew our perspectives about sports by attempting to hear, translate, speak and enact the thoughts about God specific to human bodies in the context of sports.

Do Not Conform To: *Bodies are Expendable Means to the Ends of Sports*

Mark Oppenheimer, in the 2013 Super Bowl issue of *Sports Illustrated*, writes about the complexities and difficulties of reconciling certain elements of bigtime football with Christian teachings. From an interview, he reports how a former NFL coach, who later became a major sports ministry leader, defended and promoted hazardous tactics such as cut blocking while coaching. Cut blocking by design exploits a defender's vulnerable position by targeting the lower extremities of a defender, while the defender lacks the awareness of the incoming hit, making it an unforeseen collision and jeopardizing player safety. It can physically maim opponents' bodies, breaking their ankles and legs, and tearing knee ligaments, causing career or season-ending injuries. When asked if he had any regrets, the sports ministry leader indicated that he did not. Why? The Christian leader reasoned that "God loves us just the way we are but at the same time He does require excellence. And in the NFL, performance is ultimate."

If we are to think Christianly about what we read in this *Sports Illustrated* piece, we should be troubled by that response. This leader's explanation in the first clause emphasizes the self whom God uncondition-

ally loves and accepts. That is, he begins his answer with God, who certainly gives freely since our starting place as humans is not that of self-sufficiency, but as sinners who are in desperate need of forgiveness and God's mercy which no amount of human work can earn or merit.

This notion is synonymous with the doctrine of "justification by grace through faith." So far so good, right? Yet, in the same sentence, he goes on to contrast the unreserved and complete gift of acceptance with the notion that God expects something in return. We

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might initially think he is alluding to a gospel of works righteousness. I do not think that is a charitable interpretation. Rather, I think he is getting at the idea that there is some kind of reciprocity, not as the basis of our relationship with God, but as an obedient response to God's grace. Human response follows (and is derived from) divine initiative. We might say it is the logic of our covenant relationship with God, for promise and obligation are two sides of the same coin of the Christian life. Or, in theological terms, sanctification arises from justification.

However, if I am being nitpicky as a theologian, I would have preferred for the adversative conjunction "but" to be replaced with the cumulative conjunction "and." Why? Because God's in the details. Principally, the grammar of his answer carries a major theological consequence. If grammatically we connect God's love with the obligation of excellence rather than contrasting the two, we maintain the paradox of the moral life as a dialectic of gift and task regardless of the sphere of life in which we find ourselves operating.

Therefore, we avoid setting up two different ways God relates to us: as individual Christians on the one hand and in the world of sports, on the other hand.

Certainly, there is a distinction between the two; but God's call of grace originates from the same God who stands over all areas of life as our Lord. Who we are before God in church and in sports and life should be in equilibrium with God's loving call as Creator and Redeemer. Instead of living with this tension, this Christian leader conflates the norms and values of the NFL with God's moral vision of excellence. Excellence in sports performance has become equated with excellence in the kingdom. How we ought to live in football is the normalizing concept, which then easily gets rubber-stamped as the conduct that God approves. Herein lies the conformity ailment and temptation specific to bodies in football or sports in general.

This questionable theological move means that who we are and our quests in sports function as the moral standard. Sports can catechize us to agree with its stated and unstated expectations, patterns of behavior for making meaning, and a value system. When in sports (Rome), do as sportspersons (Romans) do. Players and coaches can get enrolled in a system of thinking and acting that takes on a life of its own and, out of the interest of stability, group members comply.

This same former NFL coach, in response to his own players, who hesitated at doing cut blocks because they knew that their opponents have careers too, said, "Well, they're trying to take your career away from you." This Christian leader had been taken captive by the "hidden curriculum" of football which educated his affections and actions in ways that maintained morally objectionable social arrangements and rituals. Subsequently, this construal of humans translates into the ends as justifying the means of harming bodies. Moreover, that means, by inference, that God not only accommodates "this age or the world" of sports (12:2), but God also bilaterally opts for the kind of excellence that the NFL approves of in its drive for ultimate performances.

This script comes right off the pages of Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* in which he catalogues five definitive ways that Christians have historically engaged with culture. One of his ideal types is the "Christ of Culture." For this type, Christ and culture do not exist in conflict for there is a "fundamental agreement" or close affinity between the two. In this example, what is learned and valued as excellence are cut blocks which, when accepted as good, join to achieve the way and will of God's standard of excellence. The use of cut blocks witnesses to and glorifies

God because cut blocks are acts of excellence and God requires excellence. The NFL's aspirations of heroic performances as evidenced in such tackling techniques are baptized and sanctified as an example of what God's "good, pleasing, and perfect will" looks like in football (Rom. 12:2). No doubt that the ideals of sports and God's will can coincide, but we should not assume that the two are equal and capitulate without further reflection. With renewed minds, we should test and inquire about possible compromises in given situations when seeking the norms of God's kingdom and be willing to resist harmonizing the (objectionable) tactics of the *powers that be* with God's excellence.

The integration of faith and sports is not a matter of accommodation. Our allegiance and belonging are to God and not to the world of sports. If we let our guard down, we surrender our bodies to the malforming influence of the "spirit of this age" and therefore, we do not surrender sacrificially to the service of God. When bodies become instruments of sports, the subculture of football determines the praiseworthy per-

This same former NFL coach, in response to his own players, who hesitated at doing cut blocks because they knew that their opponents have careers too, said, "Well, they're trying to take your career away from you."

spectives and practices, with Christians willingly (or unwillingly) submitting to this powerful enculturating force. And sadly, sometimes Christians extol in their post-game interviews, where moments before, vice had run roughshod over virtue, that they did this all to the glory of God. The glory of God language noxiously becomes a cover for deeds opposed to God's excellence.

Research shows how the biomechanics of cut blocks increase the likelihood of injuries, not unlike the horse collar tackle, which was eventually banned. Cut and chop blocking became signature techniques for teams like the Houston Oilers, the Forty-niners and Broncos. With this technique, bodies are conscripted, instructed and disciplined to make commitments and perform actions that can effectively hurt other bodies. Athletes' bodies are trained and made ready physically, morally and spiritually to intentionally enact specific moves that can prey upon the vulnerability of others.

And when hurt, these bodies suffer not only in the

game itself, but also after the game, because bodies are inescapably connected to provinces outside the game where friends and family live and work. The field of physical suffering can also include mental and emotional pain with matters related to grief, anxiety, agony, doubt and stress about whether a player will return to play and the future backside costs of living with chronic pain, diminishing the quality of life in mind, body and spirit.

A *Washington Post* online survey of more than 500 retired NFL players “found that nearly nine in 10 reported suffering from aches and pains on a daily basis, and they overwhelmingly—91 percent—connect nearly all their pains to football.” Because sports are more than a game, bodies do not live in isolation, as if what happens in sports stays in sports between team members and co-contestants. To the contrary, what happens in sports extends to other spheres of life; for as embodied selves, we take who we are—healthy and unhealthy—everywhere we live, relate and work.

To compound the problem of bodies in football that goes beyond cut blocks, since this can be eliminated with a mere rule change, and aims at more besetting problems intrinsic to the design of football, scholars note how football as a combat-collision sport presents a perfect storm of well-documented traumatic brain injuries and other neuro-degenerative disorders (e.g., chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), post-concussion syndrome, Alzheimer’s) and physical health issues that can have long-term cognitive and emotional consequences. Medical research specifies that football leads all sports in the rate of concussions along with the even greater concern of repeated subconcussive hits. It’s the cumulative exposure of many little and big hits across a player’s seasons of competition that can cause lasting alterations to the brain’s integrity. Furthermore, most of the public either forgets or is unaware that authorities at football’s inception in the 19th century expressed similar medical concerns about football’s bodily risks. One observer wrote in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* of how the sport of football singularly “brings the whole bodies of players into violent collision...the violent personal concussion of 22 vigorous, highly trained young men is not only permissible, but is a large part of the game.” And another as far away as San Francisco noted how “the head or skull of a contestant is quite frequently called into service, as butting during scrimmages is not uncommon.”

Additionally, to add another layer to our pang of conscience, youth, who comprise over 90 percent of football players, are unable to give informed consent and they are even more vulnerable to brain trauma, since their brains and skulls are still developing.

Children have much larger heads in comparison to the rest of their bodies with weaker neck muscles. Weaker neck muscles create the bobble-head effect as heads bounce and rotate more in reaction to tackles, hits and blocks.

Studies point out how in a practice or game, children can experience the forces of a head blow that are comparable to the hits college football players suffer. Dr. Chris Nowinski, former Harvard football player-turned-neuroscientist and co-founder and CEO of the Concussion Legacy Foundation, notes that “exposure data shows children as young as nine are getting hit in the head more than 500 times in one season of youth tackle football.” He further postulates that such a fact “should not feel normal to us. Think of the last time, outside of sports, you allowed your child to get hit hard in the head 25 times in a day.”

Dr. Kathleen Bachynski, public health professor, explores the history of youth football in her 2019 book *No Game for Boys to Play*, the title taken from the conclusion of a 1907 *Journal of the American Medical*

Medical research specifies that football leads all sports in the rate of concussions along with the even greater concern of repeated subconcussive hits.

Association. The potency of her argument is how she excavates and unearths the multiple, competing narratives that have given meaning to football and how each football hit unlocks specific ideologies and cultural values like masculinity and patriotism. A Christian interpretation could easily name all of this as extra conformity ailments or patterns and the pressures of this age that the Apostle Paul warns against as negative forms for how we comport our bodies in this world (12:2).

These concerns about the connection between playing football and brain damage are why college and professional football players such as Chris Borland, Husain Abdullah, Branson Bragg and Joshua Perry retired early from the game. They weighed the risks and put the health of their bodies first. Other former NFL players like Fran Tarkenton, Bart Scott, Jermichael Finley, Rashean Mathis, Adrian Peterson, Mike Ditka, Brett Favre and Terry Bradshaw have said they would not let their own children play football.

The bodily risks of playing football have gone from

the most visible serious injuries that require orthopedic, arthroscopic and arthritic surgeries to the silent epidemic of damage done to the brain. Knees, hips and shoulders can heal and eventually be replaced if need be; but the brain, as an irreplaceable organ, cannot be treated as an inconsequential, expendable part, as if the dings to heads in football are equivalent to Wile E. Coyote getting walloped with an anvil or frying pan on the crown of his head, leaving him momentarily dazed and “seeing stars.”

The head games in football are a matter of one’s total well-being, since these injuries involve real people with family, jobs and future plans at stake and not fictional cartoon characters (or athletes in *Madden NFL* video games) who eternally rebound from their head trauma. Brains are central to cognitive and emotional intelligence, socialization, spiritual and moral formation, and to flourishing and finding personal fulfillment as responsible citizens in communities as fathers, brothers, mothers and sisters in families, as disciples of Christ in churches and as “salt and light” in our vocations. Damage to brains can never be undone and can affect the ability to live in significant, meaningful ways unlike other damaged body parts.

This illness of conformity is not limited to male bodies in football. Laura Fleshman focuses our attention on how female bodies face their own set of bodily conformity ailments. In her book *Good for a Girl: A Woman Running in a Man’s World*, she laments how coaching strategies and sports media often betray and objectify women’s bodies. In an interview in *The Guardian* she says, “We have to stop comparing them [women] to a male standard, stop expecting them to progress like men do, stop erasing the parts of their body that are feminine.” She argues that sports are dominated by the ideals of male bodies organized around male-gendered physiology and performances. She demonstrates how this gendered messaging burdens the lived experience of female bodies and creates toxic environments between athletes and their coaches. She explains how such a worldview can foster bodily identities for which women inhospitably encounter their bodies as foes rather than friends, resulting in body shaming, obsessing about and being dissatisfied with their weight, leading to eating disorders. The motley twisted forms of body-harming practices that are rife in sports can turn our body parts to doing wrong as profane weapons of injustice, against ourselves and others, contradicting them as holy offerings that are pleasing to God.

Be Transformed: *Bodies are Given and Claimed by God as Sacrifices of Worship*

A cursory look at Christian doctrine and practices illustrates the essential place of the body in Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy: 1) Bodies are gifted to us and created by God (Creation); 2) We are exhorted to recreate and rest our bodies (Sabbath); 3) We are to break bread with other bodies (Hospitality); 4) We immerse or sprinkle bodies (Baptism); 5) We share life with other bodies (Fellowship); 6) God became a human body (Incarnation); 7) We gather as the body of Christ (Church); 8) We are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Worship); 9) We are called to serve and advocate for other bodies (Mercy and Justice ministries); 10) Jesus healed bodies (Miracles); 11) Spouses are joined as bodies (Marriage); 12) We commemorate Jesus’s passion and death by partaking of the consecrated elements of Jesus’ body and blood (Lord’s Supper); and 13) We will be resurrected with glorified bodies in the new heaven and earth (Eschatology).

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul connects his appeal to God’s grace and mercy to his exhortation of how we ought to live in our bodies as sacrifices to God. Paul’s

Paul did not say present your souls or spirits but your bodies which refers to our entire historical selves, all of the outside and inside or material and immaterial aspects of our personhood.

body ethic is deeply incarnational and echoes what he has already said in Romans 6 about presenting bodies as alive “to God as instruments of righteousness” (v.13). Paul did not say present your souls or spirits but your bodies, which refers to our entire historical selves, all of the outside and inside or material and immaterial aspects of our personhood.

Sometimes Christians have erroneously placed a premium on the soul, heart or spirit—an inward take on what they prioritize, value and give dignity to. This accounting of the image of God means that specific attributes or capabilities such as reasoning are definitively privileged. At first glance, this eliminates people who lack or who are losing specific reasoning abilities or have severe cognitive impairments. Pinpointing human characteristics or properties to determine human dignity has been used historically to justify some of the most egregious actions from infants to elders and to marginalize and oppress women and minorities because they are viewed as inferior or less than those in power. The ideal of white men has regu-

larly been the privileged placeholder for status and worth in the West, overtaking the sanctity of every particular human as a theological fact declared by God with certain subjective human declarations and personal beliefs.

The image of God pertains to who we are in relation and connection to God, since as creatures we all distinctively belong to God. As Martin Luther King, Jr., boldly asserted, the image of God gives humans uniqueness, worth and dignity and “there are not gradations in the image of God.”

Although God does not have a body, God vocationally calls all humans as image bearers to care for and steward the earth, representing God as “little lords” (Gen. 1:28; Gen. 2:15) with Jesus realized as the true image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). This call is often referred to as the cultural mandate. This mandate, given at creation in Eden, is the first commandment in the Bible, which, according to theologian John Stackhouse, has never been rescinded and is permanent, stretching from the past to the present and on into our future with God in the new heaven and earth. That means this calling is universal and extends to all people.

In summary, I say all of this about who we are as humans, because our bodily identity and service relate to our ordinary affairs and callings, whether at work or sport, and we must elevate bodily dignity versus deprecating it.

What does it mean to disparage God-given bodily dignity? What often happens, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is that Christians in sport allow their community loyalties to sport or the powers and authorities of the institution of football to supplant their ultimate loyalty to God and Christian convictions about bodies as spelled out in the Bible. What ways of thinking about bodies have trapped us in pseudo-thinking and helped to justify abuses to bodies in sports and life?

First, implicit at a popular level for some Christians is an inferior or negative view of the body rooted in the belief that the physical is less important than the spiritual. There is often an uncertainty about bodies because the physical is viewed with suspicion. This view professes that the spiritual is what is of primary importance and good, based on the false belief that our future state means that the physical world will burn up and expire and we will eternally commune with God as spiritual selves or disembodied souls. Bodies are seen as part of the earth, conceived as a temporary weigh station, making salvation deliverance from all things physical. Looking back at Niebuhr’s Christ of Culture type, this idea of religion deals only with the

soul and does not lay commanding claim on a person’s entire life. Jesus is a spiritual redeemer for personal piety but “not Lord of life.” That means that participation in ordinary life and matters of the body are morally indifferent.

If the body is bereft of theological meaning, this thinking invalidates the fact that the body is meant for the Lord and the dwelling place of God, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, which Paul further explains in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. In Paul’s context, his theological points are addressing the matter of sexual immorality, namely, prostitution.

The Spirit of God should connect us more deeply to the moral and physical health of our bodies, preventing us from divorcing our bodies from God’s earthly residence. However, although our bodies are to be rightly esteemed, they should not be made gods, for their value is linked to God’s Spirit who inhabits them. How radical would it be if Christians in sport reckoned how bodily acts of harm and violence in sports are just as reckless as sexual immorality because they show

Our bodies are not Spiritless packages of muscle, cartilage, tendons, and bones; rather God has taken up shop in what God created as good. If we abuse our bodies, we call into question our Creator and Redeemer’s value of our bodies.

disrespect toward the Holy Spirit who now resides in our bodies? Our bodies are not Spiritless packages of muscle, cartilage, tendons and bones; rather God has taken up shop in what God created as good. If we abuse our bodies, we call into question our Creator and Redeemer’s value of our bodies.

Finally, Paul adds another doctrine for us to consider when thinking about matters of the body. In 1 Corinthians 6:14, he states that just as God raised Jesus, he will raise our bodies (v. 14). Christ’s resurrection should renew our thinking about how we do sports, because the truth of the resurrection validates the fact that bodies matter.

Singing hymns like “This World is not My Home” and “I’ll Fly Away” in our Sunday morning church services can practically indoctrinate false views of bodies and the future heaven and earth. This same outlook about material stuff lends itself to depreciat-

ing ethical matters related to and stances toward the environment or nature. If the physical will not ultimately matter, then why care either for the planet or our bodies. I wonder how many Christians who are anti-environment also hold to anti-body sentiments in the arena of sports and thus, they are unconscious of how an undervaluing of the body undergirds the two separate moral issues.

Second, practical matters in sports like cut blocking, concussions, CTE and eating disorders demonstrate how our interests and justifications are shaped by mentors and models. The use of body-denying, harmful practices to achieve a team's goals rubs against the Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy of bodies. Injuries and risks to bodies are accepted as part of doing business in the rough and tumble world of sports. The culture of risk makes pain and injury a necessary part of the game and not a moral or spiritual issue.

For some Christians, spiritual matters in sports are limited to Bible studies, evangelism and chapels—not something that pertains to the schemes, strategies and objective acts chosen during the course of a game or practice. With my opening football example, the good intention of striving for excellence is singled out as the sole determinant of what makes actions acceptable or unacceptable in the eyes of God. I believe the coach genuinely believes that his motives are good and that justifies defeating a defenseless opponent. The good of his team outweighs the potential bad outcome to one player.

However, a good intention does not excuse Christians of a morally wrong act. As the old proverbs says, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Christians need to examine the raw material of their bodily actions in sports to see whether bodily dignity is affirmed or not. If we start the process of our moral reasoning with how our acts should be ordered to God as a first principle, it can and should challenge the coach-turned-Christian leader whom I cited at the beginning of this article. It should disturb the Christian leader's thought processes and arrest his mistaken belief that his pursuit of excellence was justified in instructing and doing harm to an opposing player. When witnessing the observable acts like cut blocking, body shaming or anorexia, harm is being done to bodily integrity and dignity which makes the acts morally wrong.

Presenting our bodies to God means that they find

their proper meaning, blessing and purpose in conformity to God. We are summoned to glorify God with our bodies in all of life as a worship offering. When this truth is disregarded, players and coaches often think that what they do to their bodies is their own prerogative and they are free to behave as they want with their bodies. For Christian living, freedom is not simply the capacity to freely exercise our choice. Freedom, more importantly, is about directing our choices toward God, and in the case of our bodies, it is a freedom for excellence that corresponds to the truth and goodness of God-given bodily dignity.

Practically, this means that, if one is injured, the team trainers, physicians, coaches and administrators do not own that body. Even parents do not own that body! One must be honest about the injury while respecting others' expert opinion and advice. Playing with pain, however, is never justifiable if it puts one solely in custody of what is done with the body. At best, we are granted secondary charge over our bodies as they are on loan from God with the Lord possessing ultimate authority over bodily dignity and integrity.

When bodies are mastered by others as expendable tools for athletic goals, they are adapted to the scheme and structures of this world (Rom. 12:2), denying bodily integrity and excellence which are not in keeping with God's good, pleasing and perfect will. When we conform to such patterns in sports—which we all have been guilty of at some time in sports and life—we can return to Romans 12:1-2 with the hope of Paul's encouragement to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Mind renewal is part of the ethical surrendering of our bodies to God in worship. Karl Barth sees the change of mind as a kind of repentance. Primary to true worship is repentance, which consists of renewing our minds which "is the act of rethinking." He says that the act of repentance brings us back to the thought of God which is "the prelude to a new action," that is, behavior which is well-pleasing to God. May our actions in sports be disturbed by the thought of God so that our way of inhabiting sports is a consequence of God's grace and mercy, resulting in bodies that sacrificially and truly praise God. ■

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Book Reviews

The Word Made Fresh: Preaching God's Love for Every Body

by George A. Mason (Canton, Michigan, Front Edge Publishing, 2023). 401 pages.

Reviewed by Walter B. Shurden

Over the years, people often asked if I enjoyed my theological education, now more than 60 years in the past. My stock response: “I couldn’t wait to get up in the morning to see what they were going to say next.”

I felt that way about these 80-plus sermons of Dr. George Mason. I couldn’t wait to turn the page to see what he was going to say next.

I never read a book of sermons that I do not think of Clyde Fant, that teacher of preachers extraordinaire. “What makes a good sermon?” I asked him. “Go for the text and go for the life,” he said quickly, as though he had been asked a thousand times.

“Go for the text.” Preachers learned in seminary to call that *exposition*. Synonyms are explication, interpretation and elucidation. The best and most common synonym of all is explanation. George Mason excels at being “a biblical explainer.” I wish I had counted the times in these sermons when he would quote a biblical text, then ask, “What could this possibly mean?” or “So, what should we make of what Jesus told this man?” Mason asks the question that he knows his hearer is asking. Good preaching anticipates. It anticipates the questions floating around in the pews. Sometimes using his Greek, occasionally his Hebrew, but most often his common sense and spiritual insight, George Mason explains clearly both familiar and knotty biblical passages. He never bores with Biblical facts, persons or events. His Bible lives.

“Go for the life.” The word here is application. In real estate, it is “location, location, location.” In preaching, it is “application, application, application.” It is the most difficult part of sermon making, as well as the greatest weakness in much contemporary preaching. Ministerial bookshelves are lined with commentaries that tell the preacher how to interpret the text. And if the preacher lacks books, she can go online and be staggered by the endless explanations of the meaning of a text.

In seminary they taught us how to understand the

text. They did not teach us how to apply the text. They didn’t because they couldn’t. They did not know what tragedy would strike our congregations, what evil would stalk the nation, or what war would engulf our world. If George Mason gets a solid A for explaining, he gets an A++ for application. His ability to tie life to lectionary, context to text, and what’s happening to what’s happened is one of the delightful strengths of these sermons.

Superb preaching takes so many things. But two unsuspected traits of superior preaching are wisdom and backbone. George Mason did not have courses in seminary in either Wisdom 101 or Backbone 101. Those courses were not in the curriculum. Wisdom! Mason preached for 33 years at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. Underline it: Thirty-three years! No pastor stays for 33 years without wisdom. Mason used humor wisely. Wisely, he practiced authentic pastoral care, the kind that legitimates prophetic preaching on Sunday morning. He dedicated the babies, baptized the youth, and buried the elderly. They knew that he loved them. And he circulated

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among interfaith circles in the Dallas community as a wise Christian witness. His kind of wisdom was never a synonym for compromise, and never appeared to be a calculated strategy for keeping the wolves at bay. He had backbone.

Backbone! It takes courage to preach what Jesus preached. Love above law, forgiveness rather than revenge, generosity over greed, non-violence instead of violence, inclusion rather than exclusion---try preaching that with specific applications to a local congregation and then calculate the personal and institutional cost. Backbone saturates George Mason’s sermons. He preached prophetically, but one gets the

impression it was never with a pointed index finger, never with a lack of love. He demonstrated that backbone is not the same as meanness.

There are over 80 sermons in the book, divided into 12 parts, indicating the diversity of Mason's preaching. The 12 parts are as follows: theology, Christian faith and formation, the mission of the church, Christian civility, calling and vocation, pastoral care, stewardship, Baptist roots, ecumenism and interfaith, peace-making and nonviolence, faith in the public square, and benediction. Mason based most of his sermons on the Revised Common Lectionary, but he was not chained to it. Fortunately, an index of the biblical texts is placed at the back of the book, a most helpful feature for lectionary preachers.

These 12 parts of the book reveal something of who this preacher is. He is theologian-in-residence, mentor in both faith formation and ministerial formation, missiologist, healer of souls, advocate of generosity and nonviolence, rooted denominationalist who works both ecumenical and interfaith ground, and prophet on public issues.

One is not surprised that Mason often has too much good stuff in one sermon. See, for example, his sermon on the man born blind in John 9 or the idea of freedom in Acts 16. On more than a few occasions, Mason had at least two sermons in the one that he presented. This may be one of the weaknesses of lectionary preaching, as one skates over more than one text.

One is surprised at Mason's deep, deep well. I do not know another book of sermons by a Baptist preacher where literature, movies, sports, poetry, art, science and nature play such a prominent role. But one hears no apology from Mason, for he believes these are "sacramental fields where truth, goodness and beauty may be unearthed." Gary Simpson called these sacramental fields "George's friends."

Teasing out theological themes from these sermons one easily discerns what could be called "Georgeology." Among those themes would be the following: God is love; God is for Every Body; God sides with the least and the last; Christ brings richness to life; faith is personal but not private; science is an ally to faith, calling out the called; hope rather than fear is the way forward.

Additionally, Mason works out of one of the best and broadest definitions of the gospel that I have ever read: "The gospel is God's redemption narrative from creation to consummation: beginning and continuing through the people of God---Israel, revealed most clearly in Jesus, and including now the Church." While reading these sermons I kept thinking of the words of Rumi who said, "Everything has to do with loving and

not loving." Loving is the essence of "Georgeology."

Here are some one-liners:

- "It's easy to confess Jesus is Lord until it calls on you to question every other loyalty."
- "An occupation is something you can do; a vocation is something you can't not do."
- "The line between good and evil runs down the center of every human heart. It is not a line drawn in the sand that separates one people from another."
- "Bad things can make you better or bitter."
- "Forgiveness is not burying the hatchet in the back of your offender."
- "You can't have an inclusive community in which inclusion means only likeness or like-mindedness."
- "We condemn Christian nationalism in the strongest possible terms. We repudiate the use of the name of Christ in defending violence, to undermine the work of the people, and to claim that somehow America is the rightful property of Christians."

The earliest model of Baptist theological education was personal rather than institutional. A seasoned minister would take a yearling minister under his care and teach essential elements of the pastoral role. Many ministers and churches know George Mason primarily because of his passion and success for calling out the called, his affirmation and preparation of young people for the ministry. Wilshire's ministry under Mason's leadership confirms a long-held conviction that spiritually vibrant churches naturally produce priests and prophets. Mason has mentored numbers of young preachers directly through his pastoral residency program at Wilshire. Happily, this book will continue Mason's spectacular ministry of mentoring, if only young (and old) preachers will read and study these sermons. A promise to preachers: read and **study** one of these sermons every day for 80 days; put into practice what you read, and you will become a better preacher.

It is no secret that a terrible unrest plagues the ministry these days. Many have left. Many others want out. One gets a completely different feel from George Mason. He said that ministry is "an affair of the heart." He preached these sermons to a congregation that he loved deeply. He said to them one Sunday morning "I don't know when I feel more alive than when I'm standing here before you." What words for a Christian preacher!

I once heard someone say that sermon books are vanity books. Preachers prancing, they said. In a sense

most books can be said to be vanity books. But you need to know that this is no vanity book. The idea for the book came not from Mason, but from his long-time colleague, Doug Haney. It was edited not by Mason, but by four people who know Mason well. And the book itself was produced to mark Mason's long tenure with the Wilshire Baptist Church.

If you are not careful, you will miss the title of the book. I did. I took a quick look at the cover and for several days into reading the book I thought the title was *The Word Made **Flesh***. Ordinary theological title for a preaching book, I thought, with an emphasis on the incarnation. It was one of those cases where I assumed I knew what the following word was to be, and I missed a very crucial consonant. But it is *The Word Made **Fresh***! So apt! So very, very good! Mason freshens things: old religious language, stale interpretations, theological silliness, interfaith witness, the Bible itself. But he especially freshens the relevance of the Bible to our time. ■

Thus, we have in this memoir a view from within. He describes for the reader what it was like to be in a seminary under assault, depicting that which was decried when it should have been applauded.

[Full disclosure: George Mason is chair of the board of this magazine. I have seen and heard him preach maybe three times in person. I think I have been in his presence three times. While friends, we are not in each other's closest circles.]

Walter B. Shurden is Minister at Large at Mercer University, is a frequent contributor to Christian Ethics Today, a friend and mentor to preachers, Baptist historian, and a connoisseur of good preaching.

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you with discomfort,
At easy, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

Open and Closed Doors

by Larry McSwain. Parsons Porch, 2022, 206pp.

Available on Amazon.

Reviewed by Peter Rhea Jones

The subtitle of this book is a great place to begin: “Memoir of a Survivor of the SBC Unholy War.” Rightly dubbed as memoir, this book is a model of exceptional quality of that genre. This recent publication about the Southern Baptist controversies of the 1980s with a focus on the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is worth a careful reading..

Many are familiar with previous accounts of these controversies. One was by a seasoned Southern Baptist denominational leader (Grady Cothen), another consisted of an elaborate series of chapters on aspects and organizations edited by a professional church historian and Baptist specialist (Walter Shurden), and yet another was a defense of the Takeover by one of its two principal leaders whose political expertise aided the effort (Paul Pressler), especially in getting out the vote by busing in voters! During this time, many pastors, untrained in theology but who in Baptist polity had every right to vote in the SBC, weighed in on theological education. Moreover, the author of a recent history of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, whose author claims to have touched a million pieces of data, was not even present at the seminary during the maelstrom.

Dr. Larry McSwain, a “moderate” insider, served on the faculty of Southern Seminary in the 70s and 80s. Thus, we have in this memoir a *view from within*. He describes for the reader what it was like to be in a seminary under assault, depicting that which was decried when it should have been applauded. Leaving no doubt where he stood (and stands) as a moderate in the controversy, McSwain makes a concerted effort at fairness. Helpfully, he shares interviews from some students about how they felt being in a school under assault.

Roy H. Honeycutt served as president of Southern Seminary during several of the years of the controversy. McSwain makes no attempt to hide his admiration and fondness for Honeycutt. He knew Honeycutt’s heart, his love for the seminary, his integrity, and his efforts both to protect faculty and to deal genuinely with an increasingly hostile fundamentalist board.

McSwain breaks ranks with Honeycutt in that he questions the wisdom of the president’s call to arms and to holy war with his famous chapel sermon “To the Tents.” Neither does McSwain dodge assessing two controversial events that troubled many moderate

friends of the seminary: the retirement of longtime professor of theology, Dale Moody, and the negotiated settlement with professor of ethics Paul Simmons.

Some of us have long known that McSwain himself was an effective and pivotal player during the decade-long struggle. Serving in the roles of dean of the school of theology and provost of the entire seminary placed McSwain in the eye of the storm. His latest book details events yet unrepresented, including his efforts at defending the school during these turbulent years.

President Honeycutt and McSwain worked diligently to keep Southern Seminary a healthy seminary as long as possible. They were sensitive to and advocated for a besieged faculty enduring relentless criticism and false accusation. While the teaching there was unapologetically progressive and informed by international theology, it was in turn a privilege for most students. The faculty there was not liberal in the sense of getting their jollies repudiating central theological beliefs. Sophomoric attitudes scornful of the work of local churches were not present at the seminary. However, making the Bible and theology relevant to the real world was a priority. A highly informed faculty that had produced substantial numbers of publications conducted themselves responsibly, and were devoted to students and to the Southern Baptist Convention. That faculty understood the SBC. The academic freedom that prevailed at the seminary then may now be *in absentia*.

Some fundamentalist-conservatives excuse themselves from their avoidance of the intense struggle for Black rights in the 60s and 70s, saying they just missed it. On the other hand, professors from Southern early on, including McSwain, not only did not miss it, but had to deal with the slings and arrows that accompanied valiant efforts to “speak Christian” into a tense time.

In the judgment of many, Southern Seminary and others of the SBC seminaries belonged to a charmed circle of a short list of the finest seminaries in the entire world, both for quality of academics and preparation for ministry. Southern Seminary since Honeycutt and McSwain has returned to the Calvinism of the first president of the 19th century. However, biblical inerrancy, and not Calvinism constituted the primary issue of the controversy during the 80s. It remains to be seen whether the full-blown Calvinism, represented at Southern today, will benefit Southern Baptists. Undoubtedly, while some good happens at Southern today, much has been lost, especially the progressive influence that could be relevant in such a reactionary time as ours.

McSwain, his influence far from being cancelled by his painful tour of duty in his high administrative offices, continued to function impressively as a Baptist educator. He served seven eventful years as president of a Baptist college in Rome, Georgia. (Friends of Shorter College and those interested in administration policy in general will be fascinated by his account.) While he admits that raising money was not his greatest gift, he found ways to move the college forward. After his presidential stint at Shorter, McSwain returned to his first love: the classroom. He joined the faculty at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, serving for nine good years in both the classroom and administrative roles.

Reliable new information about the controversy can be found in this book. Also, McSwain provides particularly wise advice at the end of his book. Well-written, it is intrinsically interesting. The older reader will be reminded but also informed by the inside story of the unholy war among Baptists in 1980s. The younger reader will be informed about not only what happened but why, meeting the personalities and players and the dynamics that characterized the conflict.

This then is a must-read for many. Those who think they know about the Baptist battle will find out they don't. At least this was the case for me. Even those who supported the Takeover will benefit from seeing the anguish caused within Southern Seminary. Fundamentalist-conservatives claimed that harm was inflicted on conservative students by critical methodology at Southern. One will find in this book the harm done to good people highly dedicated to theological education, not the least of whom were Honeycutt and McSwain.

Some consolation for moderates has been the creation of several new theological seminaries that permit the continuation of the "Southern Tradition." McSwain served in one of them

Thank you, Dr. McSwain. Later historians will consult this book because of its historical value and particular nature. Give it a read. ■

Peter Rhea Jones, formerly a professor at Southern Seminary 1968-1979, McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University 2000-2016, and pastor of First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia 1979-2000.

Dominion Theology

The text: *And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.* Genesis 1:28 KJV

Seven Mountains Dominionism is the most intensely political movement in the Christian nationalist theology. The stated message is that America was ordained by God to be a Christian nation. As such Christian men, along with some women, must "have dominion" (take authority) over what they call seven mountains: religion, family, education, government, media, entertainment, and business. This is to be accomplished by imposing a rigid, literal, fundamental interpretation of certain passages in the Bible.

The Old Chapel

Wm David Mallery

God speaks to us in his own way. As a youth, the Scouting program at my church introduced me to God's Voice through Nature. As an adult running a state agency and coordinating recovery efforts on the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, I had drifted away from being a good listener. I decided to take a break from work on a beautiful autumn Mississippi morning, and I took a scenic drive through the rural parts of Madison County near my new home. From my vantage point on the road less traveled I passed a wrought iron archway. Curious, I turned the vehicle around for a closer inspection. The wording above the archway said simply, "Chapel of the Cross."

I discovered the gateway led to a Place of Nature—a place where wisps of the ephemeral and flurries of the eternal waltzed together, invisibly, to the refrain of rustling leaves. My tires slowly crunched down the dirt and gravel lane that wound through an arboreal sculpture, crafted by the hands of the Master.

The landscape, in itself, was captivating—until I realized that the majestic trees were standing sentry for a place of worship, divine in Nature. The Chapel of the Cross appeared through the forest like a mirage.

Parking beneath an ancient oak, it was clear that many years (some of them hard) had etched character upon the mortared brick and stone edifice of the Chapel. Scattered on the grounds, monuments bespoke the laughter and tears of long ago. Many of the memorial words, names, and dates carved into the headstones had been all but erased by the breath of Nature and lament of rain.

The Chapel of the Cross is nestled among grand creations of the Hand of The Artist.

Ancient and majestic hardwoods and cedars mix with stately magnolia trees not only to embrace the Old Chapel but also to exalt to the heavens with arms extended. While they bathe the grounds in dappled sunlight on this particular autumn morning, their roots connect beneath those same grounds with the souls of yesteryear, interred beneath.

Only the steeple and bell overhead stand tall enough to compete with the arboreal canopy for first (and last) light of day. The grand façade of the front wall, with its columns, arches, and tall windows, stands proudly basilic. The wooden-shingled roof slopes steeply above the low side walls, reaching for the sky—as if

architects had intended to encompass a bit of heaven for worshippers inside. A portico faces eastward, creating a canvas for a welcoming vaulted entryway. Here, the morning shadows and sun juxtapose, and the sun illumines an ancient, arched wooden door.

It welcomes me.

I pass through the doorway into the heart of the sanctuary and am greeted by the structure as an old friend, belying the fact that this is my first visit. I kneel at a corner seat on the back pew. As I absorb the beauty and intricacy of the architecture, it becomes clear that God intends to speak to me on this day through a diversity of languages. This personal service is delivered by an ancient Magnolia serving as a living altar

I pass through the doorway into the heart of the sanctuary and am greeted by the structure as an old friend, belying the fact that this is my first visit. I kneel at a corner seat on the back pew. As I absorb the beauty and intricacy of the architecture, it becomes clear that God intends to speak to me on this day through a diversity of languages.

beyond the chancel. Through the Chapel's three tall, pointed-arch rear windows (clear, not stained glass), this ancient Sculpt of Nature hosts an active liveliness of squirrels and songbirds. They bear witness to a truth that transcends words, years, and windows. They speak to me in their silence.

As my gaze returns once again to the internal architecture, I admire the contrast between the alabaster walls and the dark beams supporting the high, arched ceiling. The ceiling is wooden and stained the same color as the laminated arcs and the thick, gothic beams. Separating the chancel and the nave is a broad, plastered archway, beyond which the floor takes a step upward. Along the length of the Chapel, between the

pews and straight to the sacristy, runs a carpet steeped as deeply in burgundy as the contents of the Eucharist chalice.

Along the wall on the left side of the dividing columns of the larger archway, just before the first pew, stands a small nook. From the bas-relief artwork entombed therein, I surmise that those who designed the Chapel may have failed to envision the fullness of a pipe organ.

Clearly, they had planned to include one, but it was also obvious that they had never measured one. Tucked into this smallish, arched alcove near the sacristy is the inventive result—backed by a full complement of requisite piping.

No chrome. No gold. No silver. (Perhaps pewter; I am no metalsmith.) But through simple design observation, it is clear that this organ did not originally fit in the space that was to become “home.” The larger of the pipes appear to have been disconnected and relocated beside the organ, leaning in trigonometric (dis)harmony with the slope and height of the curved ceiling above. This trans-location was not for beauty, but for functionality. The large cylinders are askew, to put it politely. However, these tarnished pipes, like the rest of the Chapel, have aged with a uniquely singular character and charm. (Perhaps it is their imperfection that initially speaks to my own tarnished soul in a familiar voice.)

It dawns on me that it is the morning of the Sabbath, as others enter behind me.

I initially suspected that the organ near the front, with the larger cylinders awry, was a non-functioning relic, serving charm over function. The contradiction of this assumption would begin a series of continued miracles for this day. As I marveled, a man in a robe walked through the Chapel and took his seat in front of the over-piped nook. (I had failed to notice a small bench sitting in front of the double keyboard, with well-worn pedals below.) After the turning of a page or two, I saw two hands reach toward the ancient console. From whence the magic in those fingers, feet, and soul came, I cannot attest. I can certainly tell you that I was woefully unprepared. The first notes reached my ears as if in whisper. I was tempted to lean forward from my perch on the pew, when suddenly sound from those antiqued pipes filled the entire Chapel! The unpretentious man sitting before the alcove-mouth filled with pipes begging for an orthodontist performed as if the entire mechanism had been designed for him, alone. Masterfully, he coaxed the subtle notes from the smaller cylinders as shadows of echoes emanated among mighty chords from the larger tubes. Never have I witnessed an organ and a pair of hands so

divinely predestined for each other.

As I listened, a sea of robes suddenly appeared and filed its way to the front of the Chapel. They glided to the front as if on wings and all sat as one. As the last echo of the pipe organ faded, the Choirmaster glanced into a mirror beside him. With a single motion of his brow, the sea of robes behind him arose. The group numbered fewer than a dozen, but from their mouths came the voices of angels. I have never seen so few voices fill an entire building. There was a spirit emanating from this small ensemble that matched the largest of choirs in talent and volume, if not in abundance and ceremony. I had opened my hymnal to the appropriate page, but I could not bring myself to interrupt.

At this moment the sunlight from the autumn day filtered through the stately oaks and into the window beside me. It cast a luminous beam directly onto the hymnal in my hands. I cannot attest to the words of the hymn being sung, but the combination of the organ magnifique, a choir of angels, and the light from heaven shining on my own hands was truly Divine. As an individual decidedly not blessed with the gift of an

*I have witnessed the Hand of God
painting glaciers and rainforests,
along with jungles and deserts,
mountains, and seas. I have gazed in
thankful wonderment at the stars in
the heavens, and I have marveled at
the microcosms of life within a ten-foot
circle in the forest. I have found God in
waterfalls. And also in mosquito bites.*

angel’s voice, it dawned on me at this moment that the blessing of hearing—witnessing and appreciating such choral splendor—can be an equally hallowed reward.

Following another robed procession, the liturgy was officiated in proper fashion, but my feet were no longer grounded. The words, the readings, and the dawning awareness of being inside a living museum that has endured as a testament to the ultimate in spirituality—these elements combined to move me beyond the words that filled the Chapel on that day.

The ceremony of Holy Communion included an observance wherein the singing seraphim gathered before the altar as if to prove that they were, indeed, very few in number. A cappella voice, strong and full—more masterfully aligned than the pipes of the

organ—erupted in finely-honed harmony to transport the entire congregation one step closer to heaven with each note, and with every verse.

I will not be so arrogant as to assert that the Chapel had been built for just that moment—just those voices, at just the perfect location and the perfect pitch, and certainly not just for me. Such a presumption would ill-fit the experience. What I can tell you is that the first Chapel Elders—the individuals who originally designed, labored, built, and loved this Chapel of the Cross—were surely on their feet in their lofty perches at that moment. It did not matter that their names and their lives had all but faded from the gravestones scattered about the grounds outside. Along with the arrival of these Ghosts of the Originals, if those present in the moment had not been standing already, we would have been thusly compelled.

At that moment I reflected on my personal spiritual journey that has taken me on a wondrous life-path beyond walls built by man. The awesome beauty of Nature has given my heart wings to believe, beyond the black and white of words on a page. I have witnessed the Hand of God painting glaciers and rainforests, along with jungles and deserts, mountains, and seas. I have gazed in thankful wonderment at the stars in the heavens, and I have marveled at the microcosms of life within a ten-foot circle in the forest. I have found God in waterfalls. And also in mosquito bites. He has spoken to me through the words of Jesus Christ and Mohandas K. Gandhi, and through the young voices of my neighbor's children. I saw God fly with my father upon his final breath, and I saw Him land on the cheeks of my newly-born daughter as angel-kissed freckles. But on that day, I realized that God's House is bigger than we know. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright wrote that he believed in God, but he calls him "Nature."

I later learned that the Chapel of the Cross is on the National Register of Historic Places. This means that there are those who have written about the Chapel without ever experiencing it. As with many places that have seen the coming and going, the birth and death of

so many generations, the chantry is part of local folklore and legend—maybe even a bit of superstition (including a few ghost tales.) But for those of us informed by an actual visit, the Chapel is Home to a Great Spirit.

I will return for more of that Spirit. I will give thanks. And I will pray that those who read these words might find just such a place in their own lives—their own personal basilica to give voice and angel wings to their faith, and their hopes, and their hearts as they soar ever heavenward: "Welcoming the stranger, nurturing one another... and the love of all God's creation."

Wm David Mallery is a retired park ranger/ naturalist who spent a career writing creative nonfiction for museums, visitor centers, and magazines. His work has been featured in national visitor centers, museum displays & brochures, as well as featured by the Associated Press and the National Science Center. His current work in poetry and prose combines natural,

The awesome beauty of Nature has given my heart wings to believe, beyond the black and white of words on a page. I have witnessed the Hand of God painting glaciers and rainforests, along with jungles and deserts, mountains, and seas.

spiritual, and human elements, sometimes aligned but often juxtaposed. His pieces have recently been featured in Better Than Starbucks, Littoral Magazine, The Blue Quill, The Writing Disorder, Utah's Best Poetry & Prose, and Rundelania. He currently resides on the slopes of Mt. Ogden, Utah with his wife, 13 guitars, and a well-worn pair of hiking boots. ■

What is Biblical Inerrancy?

I first encountered the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an undergraduate at Biola University. The evangelical school's faith statement affirms that "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are without error or misstatement in their moral and spiritual teaching and record of historical facts."

The doctrine of inerrancy is more post-biblical, even modern. And it has been particularly influential among U.S. evangelicals, who often appeal to the doctrine of inerrancy in arguments against gender equality, social justice, critical race theory and other causes thought to violate the God's infallible word.

The doctrine of inerrancy took shape during the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States. A statement crafted in 1978 by hundreds of evangelical leaders remains its fullest articulation. Known as the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, the statement was a response to emerging "liberal" or nonliteral interpretations of the Bible. According to the statement, the Bible speaks with "infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches."

As Southern Baptists and other American evangelicals attempt to articulate biblical positions on issues such as social justice, abortion, gender and sexuality, one thing remains certain: Even a Bible thought to be without errors still has to be interpreted.

Source: NT Associate Professor Geoffrey Smith, Department of Religious Studies, The University of Texas at Austin College of Liberal Arts. The Conversation, 2021.

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—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

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