

# Christian Ethics Today

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# Without Error: “Inerrancy” of the Bible and “Originalism” of the Constitution

By Patrick R. Anderson, editor

Fundamentalist Protestants who believe the Bible is “inerrant” and judges who adhere to an “originalist” view of the U.S. Constitution have the same mindset. Conservative Christians consider the entire Bible to be absolutely true historically, without any mixture of error, and originalist judges consider the Constitution to be a sacred document which means exactly what the original authors intended for it to mean. The mindset they share could be stated as “it means exactly what I say it means, and there is no other way.”

The “inerrant” reading of the Bible and the “originalist” reading of the Constitution would not easily or prominently be found in either Biblical or Constitutional literary history prior to the late decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when fundamentalist Protestants used the concept of inerrancy to promote their narrow, literal understanding of Scripture. That approach bled over into their understanding of the Constitution as divinely inspired in its original form.

Shortly after being elected Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Mike Johnson appeared on the FOX Network to be interviewed by Sean Hannity.

“I am a Bible-believing Christian,” he told Mr. Hannity. “Someone asked me today in the media, they said, ‘It’s curious, people are curious. What does Mike Johnson think about any issue under the sun?’ I said, ‘Well, go pick up a Bible off your shelf and read it.’ That’s my worldview.”

Really? I have several Bibles on my shelves, a Greek New Testament and a Hebrew Old Testament, numerous English language translations, several paraphrased versions. I pick up and read from one or more of them frequently. I read all of it, including the prophets. I find great insights to human nature and behavior in the stories found in the book of Genesis and elsewhere. But to say “the Bible is my worldview” is a trivial non-statement that reflects a nonsensical view of holy literature. It is a political statement for use in political contexts, not a statement of belief.

For me, the most challenging, inspiring, and relevant passages in the Bible are found in the “red letter” portions, words purported to have been spoken by Jesus Christ. My hermeneutic is to refer to the words and actions of Jesus to aid my understanding of the rest of the Bible. Jesus himself called into question

passages from the Bible quoted and cited by his most ardent adversaries and gave new understandings and interpretations to what biblical scholars of his day thought they already understood. In what we call “The Great Commission” Jesus provides focus for bible teaching by telling his disciples to teach new believers “to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28: 20a), providing a syllabus for teachers.

Mike Johnson claims that his Bible teaches him to believe the universe was created about 6000 years ago, that Noah’s ark housed dinosaurs along with all the other animals and humans, and that any “scientific” rebuttal to those assertions shows evidence of a war on

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Christianity. His personal beliefs are his to hold, but when applied to public policy they are dangerous. The “young earth” beliefs and interpretations of the Bible lead to nonsensical education policies and social policies.

Nowhere is his approach to the Bible more disturbing than in his cavalier dismissal of the teachings of Jesus, especially his anticipated need for political violence despite Jesus’ instruction to “turn the other cheek.” He told a congregation in Shreveport, Louisiana

“This is not someone’s personally affronting you or saying something horrible about you to turn your other cheek and forgive them... We’re talking about the very survival of the truth in our nation... We serve the Lion of Judah, not some sort of namby-pamby little king. ... Our weapons are for pulling down strongholds — this doesn’t sound like a namby-pamby Gospel.”

Indeed, it does not. The day after he was elected speaker of the House 18 people were brutally shot to

death in Lewiston, Maine by a man using a military-style weapon, which most Americans want to prohibit. The next day he told Sean Hannity and a Fox Network audience:

“The problem is the human heart. It’s not guns, it’s not the weapons...At the end of the day, we have to protect the right of the citizens to protect themselves, and that’s the Second Amendment, and that’s why our party stands so strongly for that.”

So, on the one hand, the fundamentalist’s reading of the inerrant, literally true Bible is situational. Sometimes the Bible is to be literally followed (6-day creation), sometimes not (turn the other cheek). Baptist historian, Bill Leonard, famously remarks:

“Baptists fervently believe that only baptism by immersion (dunking) is acceptable, but at the same time they serve Welch’s grape juice in the Lord’s Supper!”

Which brings us to the matter of “originalist” reading of the Constitution which would ask the questions “What was the writers’ original intent?” and “What would reasonable people at that time have understood this text to mean?” The recently added conservative justices on the current Supreme Court have shown mixed adherence to that concept. For instance, the idea that the Second Amendment ratified in 1791 was designed to protect the rights of individual citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to protect themselves with whatever firepower is available is not what the Second Amendment says or intends. The literal, “original” Second Amendment states in its entirety:

“A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

The need for a well-regulated militia to secure our free state has been supplanted by a standing, professional military. The single-shot muskets people armed themselves with in the 18<sup>th</sup> century have been supplanted by rapid-fire weapons capable of killing scores of people in seconds and made available to any and all of us. The original intent has nothing to do with life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Further, two very recent decisions made by the Supreme Court’s current conservative majority demonstrate the inconsistency of the originalists’ application of the Constitution. First, the case decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade* and a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy last year (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*), was based largely on the analysis of the Bill of Rights by Justice Samuel Alito, who wrote:

“The Constitution makes no reference to abortion, and no such right is implicitly protected by any constitutional provision, including the one on

which the defenders of *Roe* and *Casey* now chiefly rely — the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.”

The determining fact that the originalist justices leaned on was that in 1791, when the Bill of Rights was ratified, people did not think that abortion was a protected right, since the text does not explicitly say so. Each concurring conservative justice repeatedly cited the lack of any explicit intention of the original writers to include protection of abortion and concluded that originalism, understanding the intent of the authors, is the proper method for interpreting the Constitution.

Then, in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, decided this past summer the same justices decided that race-based affirmative action programs at Harvard and the University of North Carolina violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. You would think that the justices would examine whether and to what extent people in 1868, when the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified, thought that the 14<sup>th</sup>

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Amendment to the Bill of Rights permitted efforts to bring about racial equality. In fact, that was the precise purpose of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. It was added to the Constitution just three years after the end of the Civil War which was fought to end chattel slavery in America. The expressed purpose of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment was to make formerly enslaved citizens equal to all other citizens, to make Black people equal. The race-based affirmative action programs designed to level the playing field for Black students, which the originalist justices found to be unconstitutional, were exactly consistent with the original purpose of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

The originalist justices who struck down affirmative action did not mention the original intent in any of their written decisions. Originalism was silent, non-existent in the approach and reasoning of the justices. But in *Dobbs*, originalism was the key, even only criteria, and was repeatedly called on as primary rationale

for their decision. The majority of this court's conservative majority bases decisions on what they call the observance of the principle of originalism only when such observance is consistent with their own ideological values which enabled them to be placed on the court to begin with. If originalist interpretations of the Constitution are contrary to those ideological values, the conservative majority can easily disregard originalism.

Biblical inerrantists/literalists conservative Christians, usually supportive of the Christian Nationalist tribe, also bend or interpret Bible passages to comport with their established beliefs or biases. That comes as no surprise. Nor does it surprise us that Constitutional originalists on the court or in the legislature apply originalist methods to interpret the Constitution for 21<sup>st</sup> century realities only if their own beliefs and biases are enabled thereby.

The literalists and originalists share the mindset of "see it my way or no way at all". They also share the obvious contradictions and subjective use of texts. A famous preacher often said, "I believe the whole Bible! I believe it from Holy Bible to Genuine Leather! Every word is verbally spoken to the writers by the Lord!" That's cover-to-cover for those who never owned a leather-bound, Scofield Bible. Another famous preacher asked him, "Do you believe I Corinthians 7:12 is inspired?" "Of course." Read what Paul said: "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord):..." NIV.

Very few Bible students believe the Bible the way literalists do. Likewise, Constitutional scholars and students who believe the Constitution should be interpreted and applied the way originalists do are not in the mainstream, and until recent decades they were on the fringe of Constitutionalists.

For the inerrantists, the serious rub comes in the way the Bible is spoken about and used. Self-described Bible believers like Speaker Mike Johnson somehow arrive at policy positions in which he and his fellow Republicans in the House seek to dramatically reduce funding for food support for very poor citizens who are unable to feed themselves, often the elderly, infirmed, and children. This week Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-Mont.) introduced a bill that could ban Palestinians from entering the U.S. and possibly expel those who are already here in much the same way he and others seek to refuse asylum seeking people, fleeing authoritarian countries for their very lives, entrance to our country through our southern border. Such anti-immigrant sentiment is hardly the message of the Bible.

Johnson and other conservative legislators read the Bible in a way that spawns their drive to fervently advocate and legislate for abstinence-only, marriage-

centered, anti-homosexual sex education. Their mindset feeds the laws designed to deny trans-sex kids medical care, ban books from school libraries, suppress the teaching of inconvenient historical facts, and support unregulated, ubiquitous, people-killing weapons to be in the possession of virtually anyone in America. If those convictions are his and the other Republicans in the House, fine, but it is not fine to say those positions have been arrived at by reading the Bible.

That approach has led to rejection of the foundational concept of separation church and state, the "wall of separation" Thomas Jefferson and others championed. Johnson maintains that the idea of separation of church and state was not advocated by founders such as Jefferson and Madison, which is absurd. In essence, Speaker Johnson argues that the First Amendment's free exercise of religion clause was meant to keep government out of religion (Christianity) while religion (Christianity) is free to enter and influence government legislation and social policies, and to be exempt

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from obeying legislation and social policies they disagree with. For many staunch conservative Christians, religious belief has become a way for them to avoid adhering to the advances America makes in public health, civil, and human rights, especially at the local and state levels.

In terms of the Bible as one's worldview, I recommend starting with the Sermon on the Mount and the words and life of Jesus Christ.

For the Constitutional originalists, who now make up the super majority of the US Supreme Court, even as they cherry-pick the portions of the Constitution to be read in the originalist method, one would hope that soon the practical implications of looking backward many years to determine how justice should be applied today will be seen for the absurdities such an approach imply.

Speaker Johnson says the mass shootings of

Americans in schools, churches, restaurants, social gatherings, *ad infinitum*, is not attributable to the millions of modern rapid-fire weapons and devastating bullets that rip human bodies apart but is “a matter of the human heart.” Gun enthusiasts often say, “our thoughts and prayers are with the families whose loved ones’ bodies have been eviscerated by mass shootings.” Thoughts and prayers are important. My belief is that it is the thinking, or mindset of inerrantists and originalists that is at fault in our legal and governmental travails.

My prayer is that the insane literalist reading of the Bible and the absurd interpretation of the Constitution as a holy inspired document whose meanings cannot deviate from the way Americans understood them centuries ago, will soon perish from the earth. ■

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## **Giving Thanks with a Grateful Heart**

Thank you for reading, sharing and supporting *Christian Ethics Today*. As we work to develop each new edition of the journal, I am overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to focus on our mission to provide a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to the moral and ethical issues that are important to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.

The issues we face call for our best efforts. We continue to face age-old issues of war, hunger, poverty and injustice. Historical sins of misogyny, racism and domination continue to hang over our lives.

Previous generations probably did not know much about or recognize some of our current-day problems. Our grandparents would be shocked at today’s discussions of transgender issues or mass shootings with incredibly powerful weapons.

We do our best to follow the teachings and life of Jesus, working hard to find and express a faithful Christian response to what we understand to be the Gospel. We don’t always get it right. But we try our best to find a way forward in dealing with each of the moral and ethical challenges we face.

Gratitude is what I feel today. Through *Christian Ethics Today*, we try to inform and inspire and to facilitate lively discussions and new ways of thinking about issues, as we attempt to find our best Jesus-centered responses to every challenge.

This would not be possible without your support. From the bottom of my heart, thank you! Help us to do more and do it better.

—Pat Anderson, editor

# I'm a Palestinian American Christian, and I don't hear my story in any of the narratives.

By Ghassan J. Tarazi

This current horrific and deadly confrontation between Israel's powerful military and Palestinian resistance is a vivid example of reality versus propaganda. Listening to the drone of media describing the heart-breaking situation in Gaza is not enough. In addition, as a Palestinian American Christian with deep roots in Gaza, I don't hear my story in any of the narratives.

There is little doubt that the Tarazi family goes further back than 1755, when our written family tree began. This family tree is based on baptismal records in Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church in Gaza City. Archeologists have determined this church was built during the early 400s. Miraculously, it still stands on its original foundation. That's more than 1,622 years. It is one of the oldest still-active Christian churches in the world.

Throughout the centuries, the faithful Christians of this church have withstood the assaults of the Holy Roman Catholic Crusaders, the ongoing siege and devastating assaults of Israeli's military and the deafening silence and apathy of Christians around the world.

To begin my story, there are two words I need to define.

*Mizrahi* Jews are local to Palestine going back to biblical times and are still found in Palestine and Israel today. Mizrahi Jews identify themselves as a separate religious subgroup and naturally intermingle culturally with Muslims and Christians in Palestine, and have intermarried with non-Jews. They are physically, ethnically and nationally the same as non-Jewish Palestinians. DNA studies have found links between Mizrahi Jews, Christians and Muslims of Palestine.

*Ashkenazi* Jews are a Jewish population that converted to Judaism during the end of the first century and coalesced as a community in Eastern Europe, where they became a distinct Jewish community. Their language is Yiddish, a derivation of the languages in their homeland. The pogroms and hateful antisemitism in Eastern Europe drove the Ashkenazi Jews out of their homeland and they finally settled in Palestine and what became Israel.

After World War I, the British took control of Palestine under what is called the British Mandate. During that time, my family moved to Jerusalem.

Palestinian Christians, Muslims and Mizrahi Jews were educated together in English by the British.

Unfortunately, it didn't last long. World War II ended the British Mandate. The Zionist State of Israel was created by the European Ashkenazi Jews in 1948 with a blitzkrieg-like march through Palestine. The occupation of Palestine was about to start.

During Israel's creation in 1948, their military expropriated about 4.2 million acres of Palestinian land. In the process, more than 400 Palestinian cities and towns were systematically destroyed by Israeli forces and/or repopulated with Ashkenazi Jews.

Currently, as Israel's occupation evolves, the popu-

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lation of Gaza's 2.3 million people are now living in an open-air prison. Many of them are "refugees," forced to leave their homes in what was becoming Israel and being expelled into Gaza. In addition, the Israeli-imposed Gaza blockade is a denial of basic human rights and amounts to collective punishment. It severely restricts imports and exports, as well as the movement of people in and out of Gaza, denying them access to agricultural land within Gaza and fishing waters off their coast.

In addition to this air-tight blockade of Gaza, Israel has periodically attacked them with the deadliest war machinery, destroying their infrastructure including their electric generators, clean water supply and other vital services. These military incursions also have killed thousands of civilians and destroyed thousands of homes. Israel does not permit the equipment, materials and supplies needed for repairing the destruction

to enter Gaza. And now Israel has completely cut off water, food and electricity. In addition, Israeli drones are constantly heard flying over many communities in the Gaza Strip. Gazans know that at any moment Israel can drop bombs adding to the death and destruction Gazans daily face.

### **This is total occupation.**

My wife and I have made three pilgrimages to Israel and Palestine along with members of our church. We have seen and experienced the occupation of Palestine firsthand. Here are brief descriptions of what we have seen and experienced.

On our trip in 2009, my passport was taken from me at customs, and I was taken to an interrogation room where I was identified as a threat to Israel because I am a Palestinian with Gazan roots. I was asked the same questions by three different interrogators for four hours. My wife never knew where I was. The interrogators repeatedly threatened to send me back to the United States at my expense. Finally, they permitted me to rejoin my wife and the rest of our party. But they said I never would be permitted to enter Israel again.

Israel has gone to great lengths to isolate Palestinians. Israel's huge concrete separation barrier snakes around and through Palestinian communities to keep them separated. This barrier is expected to reach at least 403 miles in length and is 25 feet high. The United Nations has declared the separation barrier illegal under international law. But Israel continues to build it.

There are 593 Israeli military checkpoints and roadblocks, and there are "Jews only" highways scattered throughout the West Bank, controlling the movement of Palestinians in their own land. The checkpoints also control the movement of about 100,000 Palestinians living in the West Bank and working in Israel.

As of 2022, there are 200 illegal Israeli colonies built on stolen land in the Palestinian West Bank, including 12 in East Jerusalem, which have a population of almost 620,000 Israeli Jews. Mercilessly, Israel has destroyed more than 53,000 Palestinian homes within the West Bank, leaving more than 265,000 men, women and children homeless — *within their own homeland*.

This reality can only be called occupation.

Israel has stolen more Palestinian land, separated Palestinians within their own cities and villages — very similar to South Africa's Bantustans — and effectively taken political control of Palestine, making the Palestinian government impotent.

### **This occupation must stop.**

How can Palestinians resist this occupation? We have seen that violence is an ineffective resistance desperate victims use. My Palestinian brothers and sisters who were born into this Israeli-created and re-enforced occupation cannot be blamed alone. Putting Palestinians in this occupation is Israel's crime.

Resistance must include speaking truth to power. I am a follower of that first-century Palestinian Jew, who spoke truth to power and was hung on a Roman cross. This is a challenge for Christians and Christian communities today. The resistance to Israel's occupation must also come from followers of Jesus.

As a Palestinian Christian who is a Baptist and a member of the Alliance of Baptists, I am inviting you to be a part of resisting Israel's occupation. The Alliance and our church have voted to call Israel an apartheid state. In this statement, 1) we affirm our commitment to freedom, justice and equality for the Palestinian people and all people; 2) we oppose all forms of racism, bigotry, discrimination and oppres-

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sion, 3) we declare ourselves an apartheid-free community; and 4) we pledge to join others in working to end all support to Israel's apartheid regime, settler colonialism and military occupation. I invite you to take this pledge and work to bring Israel's occupation to an end.

The resistance must include followers of Jesus. Together we will resist Israel's occupation more effectively. ■

*Ghassan J. Tarazi is a retired educator and member of Ravensworth Baptist Church in Annandale, Va. He serves with the Justice in Palestine and Israel Community of the Alliance of Baptists. This article was first published in Baptist News Global on October 15, 2023 and is published here with permission. See [baptistnews.com](http://baptistnews.com) for other articles.*

# Who speaks for the Palestinians of Gaza?

By Nathan French

Amid the escalation of the Israel-Hamas war, observers in the region and internationally continue to make assumptions about Gazan public support for Hamas. Hamas was unpopular in Gaza before it attacked Israel; surveys showed Gazans cared more about fighting poverty than armed resistance.

Mistaken assumptions such as those by U.S. presidential candidate Ron DeSantis, claiming that all Gazans are “antisemitic,” or those that blame Gazans for “electing Hamas” may shape debates not only on how the war is perceived, but also over relief plans for Gazans in the months ahead.

Any reconstruction efforts or aid distribution might be weighed against fears of Hamas insurgents within the Gazan population.

In my own research into Jihadi-Salafism and Islamism, I found that militant movements provoked military interventions to exploit the chaos that ensues. Moreover, such groups often claim to govern in the “legitimate” interests of those they dominate even if those populations reject their rule.

As several commentators have observed, Hamas likely hopes to not just encourage a disproportionate response from Israel, but also to use the violent aftermath of intervention to cultivate continued Gazan dependence upon it and to distract from its own domestic policy failures.

## Politicians and Gaza

Leaders on both sides of the conflict have tried to make justifications for their actions. Often, they use their own perception of Gazan public opinion to support their own policy objectives.

For example, Ismail Haniyeh, chief of Hamas’ political bureau, claimed that Hamas’ actions represented Gazans and “the entire Arab Muslim community.” For Haniyeh, Hamas’ usage of violence was on behalf of Palestinians who had been assaulted in the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in September 2023, or who have suffered at the hands of Israeli security forces, or for the settlers in the West Bank.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog, meanwhile, suggested that all Gazans bore collective responsibility for Hamas. As a result, he concluded, Israel would act to preserve its own self-interest against Gaza and its people.

The Biden administration, careful not to con-

demn the Israeli bombardment, has sought a broader approach toward the escalation. In an interview and on social media, U.S. President Joseph Biden observed that “the overwhelming majority of Palestinians had nothing to do with Hamas’ appalling attacks, and [instead] are suffering as a result of them.” Such suffering, Biden noted, required the eventual lifting of the “complete siege” implemented by Israel against Gaza.

In each example, politicians used their assumptions about Gazans to support their policies. But the people in Gaza experience these policies far differently.

## Gazans hold mixed views of Hamas

Reviewing Gazan public opinion over time reveals an ongoing sense of hopelessness living under the

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Israeli blockade.

A June 2023 poll conducted by Khalil Shikaki, professor of political science and director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, indicated that 79% of Gazans supported armed opposition to Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. A Washington Institute poll from July 2023 found that only 57% of Gazans held a “somewhat positive” opinion of Hamas.

Further reading of those polls suggests a more nuanced story. Consider that in 2018, some 25% of women in Gaza risked death in childbirth, 53% of Gazans lived in poverty, and essential health care supplies were stretched thin. That same year, Shikaki found an increasing number of Gazans dissatisfied with Hamas’ government, with almost 50% hoping to leave Gaza entirely.

In the June 2023 Washington Institute poll, 64% of Gazans demanded improved health care, employment, education and some sense of normalcy instead of Hamas’ claimed “resistance.” Over 92% of Gazans



expressed outright anger at their living conditions.

Additionally, as Shikaki reported, over 73% believed the Hamas government to be corrupt. Yet, Gazans saw little hope for electoral change. With no election since 2006, a majority of Gazans alive today are not old enough to have voted for Hamas.

Support of armed resistance was not always present. When Hamas openly fought the Palestinian Authority – which governs the West Bank and questioned the legitimacy of Hamas’ victory – and seized control over the Gaza Strip in 2007, over 73% of Palestinians opposed that seizure and any further armed conflict.

At that time, fewer than one-third of Gazans supported any military action against Israel. Over 80% condemned kidnapping, arson and indiscriminate violence.

### **Gazans’ shift in support for Hamas**

If read over time, polls of Gazans from 2007 to 2023 tell a story. They help make clear that Gazan support for armed resistance grew alongside increasing frustration, anger and a sense of hopelessness with any political solution to their suffering.

In 2017, scholar Sara Roy, studying the Palestinian economy and Islamism, explored Gazan tolerance of Hamas, noting “what is new is the sense of desperation, which can be felt in the boundaries people are now willing to cross, boundaries that were once inviolable.”

Gazans, Roy argued, particularly the 75% under the age of 30, felt widely varying affinities toward Hamas’ ideology or claims to Islamic legitimacy. Hamas, they noted, paid salaries when few others could. Risking targeting by Israeli soldiers was a calculated and tolerable hazard of hire if it meant a paycheck.

In 2019, 27% of Gazans blamed Hamas for their living conditions. In that same poll, 55% supported any peace plan that would include a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as a capital and an Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories.

By 2023, when Gazans polled by Shikaki expressed their support for armed resistance, they did so in the belief that only such resistance – not electoral politics – would provide relief from the Israeli blockade and siege. At the same time, however, those polled expressed exhaustion with the corruption of Hamas and the ongoing unemployment and poverty of Gaza.

### **Palestinian desperation and Hamas’ objectives**

Any chance for a simple return to normalcy seems

lost for many Gazans, as Hamas claims to act as their “legitimate resistance.”

With peace negotiations stalled in Gaza since 2001, elections postponed, movement out of Gaza impossible, and now an escalating humanitarian crisis, an entire generation of Gazans is left with few options.

“There is death everywhere,” said 33-year-old Omar El Qattaa, a photographer based in Gaza, “and memories erased.”

Though 2023 polling indicated that a majority of Gazans were opposed to breaking the ceasefire with Israel, Hamas moved forward with its October attacks against their popular will. The sense of desperation felt by El Qatta, and millions of other Gazans, risks becoming instrumentalized by Hamas. As Matthew Leavitt, a scholar and researcher of Hamas writes, Hamas sees politics, charity, political violence and terrorism as complementary and legitimate tools to pursue its policy goals.

As Khaldoun Barghouti, a Ramallah-based Palestinian researcher, notes, the ongoing bombard-

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ment by Israel has softened Gazan frustration with Hamas – at least in the short term. Such attacks “turned blame to Hamas (over the attacks in Israel) into more anger toward Israel.”

How this will translate into support for alternatives to Hamas in the months ahead remains to be seen. Much will depend on how international stakeholders regain the trust of Gazans while assisting them with finding meaningful alternatives to a government and militant movement they once considered corrupt and unable to meet their basic needs. ■

*Nathan French is Associate Professor of Religion, Miami University. This article was first published October 18, 2023 in The Conversation and is reprinted here with permission.*

# Nazi Germany Had Admirers among American Religious Leaders – and White Supremacy Fueled Their Support

By Meghan Garrity and Melissa J. Wilde

Each September marks the anniversary of Nazi Germany's Nuremberg Laws, whose passage in 1935 stripped Jews of their German citizenship and banned "race-mixing" between Jews and other Germans. Eighty-eight years later, the United States is facing rising antisemitism and white supremacist ideology – including two neo-Nazi demonstrations in Florida in September 2023 alone.

The Nuremberg Laws were a critical juncture on the Third Reich's path toward bringing about "the full-scale creation of a racist state ... on the road to the Holocaust," according to legal historian James Whitman. Yet across the Atlantic, many Americans were unconcerned, and even admiring – including some religious leaders.

As a political scientist and a sociologist, we wanted to examine what Americans thought about Hitler and the National Socialist Party before the U.S. entered World War II – and see what lessons those findings might hold for our country today. Our recent research, which focused on religious publications, suggests that Americans' support for Nazi Germany is best explained by belief in white supremacy.

## View from the pulpit

In 1935, Adolf Hitler entered his third year in power and legally solidified the Nazi regime's racist policies. During this period, Jews, Romani, homosexuals, the mentally or physically disabled and African-Germans were all targets of Hitler's wrath. Thousands of refugees fled the country in search of safety – many to U.S. shores.

Individual public opinion data about Nazi Germany are not available for this period; Gallup's first survey on the topic was conducted in 1938. Instead, we used a database of periodicals from religious organizations that one of us (Wilde) had originally compiled for a book on views of contraception in the early 20th century. Using these periodicals, we examined the views of leaders in 25 of the United States' most prominent religious groups.

In the 1930s, the U.S. was a far more religious country than it is today, with around 95% of Americans

claiming membership in a religious denomination. The groups in our sample include 82% of Americans who reported religious membership at the time. Most are white Protestant denominations, but our sample also included Roman Catholics, three Jewish groups, Black churches, and smaller groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

We argue that while these texts are not necessarily representative of individual members' views, they are evidence of the views religious elites tried to cultivate in large segments of the American population.

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## 'Unequaled in cruelty'

These periodicals dispel the notion that Americans did not know, or understand, the gravity of the situation in Germany at the time. A third of the denominations in our sample were critical of Hitler, and their alarm demonstrates that ample information was available about the escalating situation in Nazi Germany.

These groups, which were both Christian and Jewish, wrote about "the omnipresent terror that grips every town and hamlet"; the German concentration or "education camps"; and the number of people jailed, sent to camps, killed or sterilized. Leaders of Conservative Judaism warned that "German Jewry is on the way to extinction." The Universalist General Convention described the situation in Germany as "unequaled in cruelty and brutality even by the Spanish Inquisition."

On the other end of the spectrum, religious leaders from the Norwegian Lutheran Church, which has long since merged with other denominations, emphasized that Hitler was legitimately elected and enjoyed strong support among the German people. Another

article recounted a recent trip to Germany, writing that “what we interpret as militarism” is a manifestation of support for “the program of Hitler” and “the common good.” The Presbyterian Church in the U.S. – a white Southern denomination that later merged with other Presbyterian denominations – wrote of Hitler’s regime making “effort[s] toward social justice” with reforms for illegitimate children.

And while some religious elites sympathetic to Hitler acknowledged that the Nazis’ tactics were unsavory, they suggested “the means do not, taken by themselves, condemn the end.”

### **Finding the pattern**

As we analyzed the periodicals, we classified leaders’ writings into four categories. Beyond groups that clearly sympathized with Hitler or criticized him, the largest number were ambivalent, with mixed views. Others were “distant,” barely commenting on events in Europe.

We found that two main factors explain religious elites’ views of Hitler in 1935. The first is whether their group embraced white supremacist ideas. The second is whether they were atop the religious hierarchy – that is, mainstream Protestant denominations whose members would not have been at risk of persecution in Germany.

Groups that consistently criticized Hitler had members that were marginalized because of their race or ethnicity. They regularly spoke out against prejudice, segregation and lynching. In contrast, denominations that were well established and mostly white tended to be ambivalent toward Nazism, even those that spoke out against anti-Black racism in the U.S.

But a few groups, five in total, did more than express ambivalence – they openly sympathized with Hitler. What united these groups were white supremacist beliefs. Their periodicals included articles titled “The Fitness of the Anglo-Saxon” and “Why the Anglo Saxon,” emphasizing “men are born equal in their rights, but they are not equal in their fitness and ability to serve ... God needed the white Anglo-Saxon race.”

Importantly, the groups that supported Hitler were also antisemitic and eugenicists, believing human beings could be “perfected” through selective breeding.

However, antisemitism was rampant at the time, even among groups that were ambivalent about Hitler. Similarly, support for eugenics was too broad to explain why certain religious groups in the U.S. sympathized with the Nazis. There were even religious leaders who criticized Hitler yet had connections to the American Eugenics Movement, which promoted

forced sterilization laws and, later, the legalization of birth control.

Instead, what most strongly differentiated Hitler’s sympathizers in this era was their belief in white supremacy vis-a-vis African Americans. These groups published literature claiming that African Americans were physically and mentally inferior, and one wrote positively of the Ku Klux Klan. A Southern Baptist bishop wrote, “The Negro is not like the white man ... there are striking differences physical and mental,” going on to claim, “the white race ... assumes its superiority in strength and capacity.”

### **Fast-forward**

Although 1935 is nearly a century behind us, U.S. politics has been awash in comparisons to the Third Reich for several years now. Former President Donald Trump recently compared his indictments to Nazi Germany, obfuscating the mass atrocities of Hitler’s regime.

But such comparisons do prompt reflection on

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*The Presbyterian Church in the U.S. – a white Southern denomination that later merged with other Presbyterian denominations – wrote of Hitler’s regime making “effort[s] toward social justice” with reforms for illegitimate children.*

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what drove American support for Nazi Germany in the 1930s, as Trump campaigns with an authoritarian vision for his second term, and as white nationalism remains a major aspect of U.S. politics.

In 1935, Europe was not at war, and concern about mass killings would have seemed alarmist. Yet just a few years later, a global conflagration began. On the anniversary of the Nuremberg Laws, what motivated American support for Hitler’s authoritarianism in the 1930s still resonates today. ■

*Meghan Garrity is Assistant Professor of International Security & Law, George Mason University. Melissa J. Wilde is Professor and Chair of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania. This article first appeared in theconversation.com on September 22, 2023 and is republished here with permission.*

# Book Reviews

## ***Parables, Politics, and Prophetic Faith: Hope and Perseverance in Times of Peril***

by Allan Boesak and Wendell Griffen

Good Faith Media, 2023

Reviewed by: *Marvin A. McMickle*

Allan Boesak and Wendell Griffen have offered up as strong an example of prophetic utterance as I have encountered in my 50-plus years of reading and teaching from biblical texts. Every essay is a word on fire. Every page is a condemnation of the cruelties heaped upon the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized and the disenfranchised of the earth. Each of their essays is shaped by a careful consideration of a biblical text with supporting biblical texts introduced to reinforce their major point(s). Having established a biblical premise for what God desires for the earth and all its people, they then turn their attention to how those ancient texts speak to the realities of life for people longing for justice and an end to oppression across the world.

The content of this book of essays cannot be fully grasped unless and until the reader understands the life stories of the historical circumstances that shaped these two writers.

When I was president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, we invited Allan Boesak to campus to preach and lecture. During one of his presentations, he commented on the fact that during an imprisonment at the hands of the apartheid regime of South Africa, he was not allowed to take anything with him into his cell but a Bible. Can it be that the confluence of that Bible, read and studied in a prison cell in South Africa, in an attempt to muzzle his message about that apartheid regime, was the incubator for the theology of Allan Boesak? What does the Bible say to a man that is illegally confined by an immoral regime that represented 15% of that nation's population that is determined to maintain its power and privilege over the 85% of the people that are the victims of poverty and powerlessness reinforced by unchecked brutality?

Context is equally important for grasping the worldview of Wendell Griffen as found in this book. Griffen was the first African American to serve as a Circuit Court and Appeals Court judge in Arkansas. However,

being a judge did not prevent him from vehemently opposing the war in Iraq or from participating in an anti-death penalty protest outside the governor's mansion in Arkansas on Good Friday. As a result of that action, he was barred from presiding over all cases that had a death penalty option. It was his faith and conviction as pastor of New Millennium Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, that led him to take these actions. It is his dual identity as judge and pastor that informs his view of scripture. Power should be used to pursue justice, and the Church should be the agency that constantly speaks truth to power about working for justice for all, and not just advantage for some.

The heart of these essays can best be defined by references made by Griffen and Boesak throughout their writings that leave the reader with endur-

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***The content of this book of essays cannot be fully grasped unless and until the reader understands the life stories of the historical circumstances that shaped these two writers.***

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ing, if not endearing, images of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church. In his chapter entitled *Grapes, Thorns, Figs, and Thistles*, Griffen borrows from Cornel West who describes Christianity in American as being "a form of Constantinian Christianity and prophetic Christianity." West continues, "Constantine Christianity has always been at odds with the prophetic legacy of Jesus Christ." His point there is that some religious leaders in this country sanction the social and political status quo of this country that works to the advantage of white supremacists, sexists, racists and global corporations that reap profits from around the world without regard for the care of the earth or the fair treatment of workers. Like the biblical prophets, Hananiah, who urged the king to ignore the warnings of Jeremiah and Amaziah, who urged his monarch to ignore the warnings of Amos, a substantial portion of clergy and churches in the United States have blurred the lines between patriotism and an "America first" policy, and the sovereign God of all creation whose love extends to all people in all nations.

In that same chapter, Griffen refers to some high-profile white, conservative evangelical leaders like Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Robert Jeffrees, Mike Huckabee and Franklin Graham as “*the hateful faithful*.” He links them all together, because they represent the white evangelical Christians that constitute the dominant base of Donald Trump’s political support. Never mind that neither by lifestyle nor public policy, Donald Trump is the polar opposite of biblical Christianity. They prefer Constantine’s use of the Church to solidify his power over the Roman Empire and Trump’s use of the Church to solidify his hold over the Republican Party, rather than seeing the Church as envisioned in Matthew 25 and Luke 4 that set forth the principles by which Christians should live and serve to care for the poor, the sick, the stranger and the imprisoned.

Griffen goes on to offer added critiques of the Black and white church in the United States in his essay entitled *Missing Micaiah* in which he laments the lack of response to the suffering long endured by the people of Haiti because of exploitation by moneyed interests from France and the United States. There, he asks this question: “*Have we become court prophets to the interests of U.S. and French imperialism, white supremacy, and indifference about the suffering descendants of enslaved Africans?*” Throughout the writings of Wendell Griffen, one hears echoes of Walter Bruggemann and his distinction between “royal consciousness” in which religious leaders shape their messages to conform to the political status quo that upholds the power and prerogatives of the monarchy. As opposed to “prophetic consciousness” in which the preacher speaks God’s truth to the power and political elite and call them into judgment for failing to honor God by not caring for the needs of all God’s people. Wendell Griffen makes clear that the agenda of MAGA and the will of God on earth are clearly not synonymous!

In his essay entitled *Wolves, Shepherds, and Hirelings*, Allan Boesak offers an insight into what it takes not only to write like he and Griffen do in these essays, but also what is required if others are to live into the challenges they have set before us. He begins by speaking about the nature of hope in the face of suffering and despair. He turns to Saint Augustine of Hippo who says that “*Hope is a mother with two beautiful daughters. The one is named anger and the other is named courage.*” For Boesak, there must be anger about what is going on in the world around us.

However, anger alone will not resolve any of the challenges we face in the world today.

Anger will not bring about peace while bombs fall on Gaza and beheaded babies lie on the streets of Israel. Anger will not bring about justice or equity while CEOs at various American corporations receive in one week and in some instances in just one day a salary that their employees need a year to earn, and while star athletes and entertainers earn quarter-billion contracts while underpaid public school teachers try to train up the next generation of citizens in underfunded classrooms and laboratories.

What both Boesak and Griffen have done with their writings and with their very lives is add some courage to their anger. As Boesak says, we must possess “*the courage to rise up, stand in the breach, and do something about it.*”

This is what separates this collection of essays about prophetic ministry from other books about prophetic preaching and action. Most authors only provide the reader with scholarly renderings of biblical texts and

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***What both Boesak and Griffen have done with their writings and with their very lives is add some courage to their anger. As Boesak says, we must possess “the courage to rise up, stand in the breach, and do something about it.***

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passionate exhortations about what others should be doing. Not so with this book and these two authors. The sub-title for this book could just as easily be, “***Follow us as we follow Christ.***” ■

*Dr. Marvin McMickle is former president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School where he served 2011-2019. He is widely respected as a preacher, pastor, professor, author and mentor to many. His 19th book, “Hiding God’s Word in our Hearts” has just been published by Judson Press. He has written for “Christian Ethics Today” and many other journals and magazines. He is serving as Interim Regional Executive Minister of The Cleveland Baptist Association of American Baptist Churches USA.*

# Book Review and a Response to: Purnell, Derecka. *Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom.*

Astra House, 2022.

Reviewed by Charles Kiker

Derecka Purnell, native of St. Louis, is a young Black lawyer with a bachelor's degree from the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and a JD from Harvard Law School. She is a regular contributor to *The Guardian* and numerous other publications. She is a Radical in the sense of getting to the root of things.

In *Becoming Abolitionists* she extensively treats of police killings, especially police killings of people of color, among them Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and George Floyd. The killer of Trayvon Martin was charged, indicted, and acquitted at trial. The killers of Michael Brown (and several others) never went to trial. Regarding George Floyd, the author notes: *In 2020, Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pinned George Floyd to the concrete as he hol-lered that he could not breathe. Floyd screamed. He screamed for his mother. He screamed for his breath. For his life. Until he died nine minutes later. Calls for "justice" quickly ensued. I often wonder, What if the cop who killed George Floyd had kneeled on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds instead of nine minutes? Floyd would have lived to be arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned for allegedly attempting to use a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. Is that justice? I didn't think so. Too often, the public calls for justice when Black people are killed by the police, and ignores the daily injustice if the victims live.* (Page 3)

That's radical. That gets to the root of the matter, and sets the stage for the 382 pages that follow!

Derek Chauvin was charged, indicted, convicted, and sentenced to prison. That's a measure of retributive justice, but it does not bring back George Floyd. It does nothing to improve the contexts of George Floyd's life and of where people of color live out of proportion to their population. It has not ended police killings, many of which the author mentions in her book, and some of which have occurred since its publication.

After the George Floyd murder the United States Department of Justice undertook a study of the Minneapolis Police Department. In mid June, 2023

Attorney General Merrick Garland announced the results of that study. He began by complimenting the MPD as by and large a dedicated public service entity. But there's always something beyond the "by and large." The DOJ study called for corrections to the many threats to racial justice in MPD uncovered by the study. If MPD followed the recommendations to the letter, it would do nothing to improve the myriad other police departments in the US. It would do nothing to correct the injustice of the Memphis PD, where a recent egregious police killing of a black person occurred.

The author warns of calling 911 in emergencies, especially for those living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. A 911 call may lead to police presence, which may lead to arrests due to a neglected traffic ticket, and sometimes to police violence. Calling 911 has never been a problem for me, but I do not live in a disadvantaged neighborhood.

Police killings and other prison-industrial-complex issues are prominent in this book, but a host of other issues are addressed, among them education, child welfare, genderism and sexual assault, flagism, borderism, ableism, and other isms.

For the author, *reform* of the police system cannot solve the problems. Only abolition can lead toward the creation of a new system which could aspire to become beneficial. The verb *becoming* is very important in the book title. The author makes clear in the final chapter that she is *becoming*. She makes clear that she has her path toward becoming, and that her path is in progress, and that readers may have another path. I am reminded of the opening petition in the oft repeated prayer. We ask for God's reign on earth. That is a utopian vision. We live in varying degrees of dystopia.

My path toward the longed for and prayed for reign of God on earth is not the same as the author's, and I thank her for acknowledging that we may have different paths. I have learned from her, and I would love to have coffee with her, and learn more. And I dare to dream that readers of this article might sit at that same table. ■

*Charles Kiker is a retired ABCUSA minister. He earned a BA degree from Wayland Baptist College in Plainview, Texas, and BD and PhD degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. He and his wife Patricia currently live in Arlington, TX, and are members of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth.*

# Jesus is not all that popular...

By Max Brennan

Matthew tells us that Jesus amazed people by talking as “one having authority, not as the teachers of the law.”

Jesus didn’t quote scripture before he spoke.

He even *contradicted* scripture at times: “It was said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you...”

Jesus would say “amen, amen” *before* he spoke, not after. (That’s the “verily, verily” of the old King James version.)

He was declaring what was coming to be true before he said it—and with reference to no authority beyond himself.

And Jesus said things *no one had ever said before*.

Things like: “Love your enemies.”

Search all the ancient writers for that idea. You won’t find it. It is certainly not in the Old Testament.

“Love people that do not love you,” he said. “Love those who persecute you.”

He pushed an entirely new concept of God—a God who “is kind to the ungrateful and to the wicked.”

People had never heard anything like that before—and most of them didn’t like it.

Most people don’t like it today. Most *Christians* don’t like it.

That’s why people cling to biblical inerrancy. This allows them to lift the old images of God over the God we know through the teachings of Jesus.

It’s like Jesus said: “When people have tasted the new wine, they say the old is better.”

Jesus is not all that popular. Many Christians pay little attention to him.

*Source: This is from a regular newspaper column written by Max Brennan, pastor of St. Matthew United Methodist Church in Fort Worth, Texas and is used here with his permission.*

# Truths and Lies at the Foot of the Cross: The Church and God's LGBTQ Children

By Susan Shaw

I want to tell you an indecent story. Growing up, I was one of those little kids who was at my fundamentalist Southern Baptist church every time the doors were open. I loved my Sunday school teachers and the flannelgraph board with little paper cut outs of characters from Bible stories. Every week, on my offering envelope, I proudly ticked the little boxes: Bible brought. Check. Lesson prepared. Check. Bible read. Check. Tithe. Check. Worship attendance. Check. I memorized my weekly Bible verses too. Be ye kind one to another. What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. For God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten son so that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with woman-kind: it is abomination.

Not really. I didn't memorize that last one. But I heard it preached, right alongside all those verses about love and faith and hope and joy. So surely it had to be true too, right?

So true, in fact, that somehow it never occurred to me that my aversion to dresses and Barbies and my longing to play football might foreshadow something about me. And all those girls and women I adored, and it never occurred to me to use the word "crush" to think about them. I was way too steeped in homophobia and Leviticus to imagine such a thing.

Such were the messages of my childhood. We were all equal at the foot of the cross, but some were more equal than others.

Even as I changed my mind about sexuality in seminary, I had never thought that I might be one of the people I was theologizing about. As I had a series of relationships with women, I told myself I wasn't gay, I was just in love with her. At last, in my early 30s, I had my first relationship with an out-and-proud lesbian. The gift she gave me was helping me come out to myself, though not yet to the rest of the world.

You see, I was teaching religion at a conservative Christian college and living in the closet whenever I went to work. I realized I couldn't stay at the college for long, so I went back to school to complete a master's degree in what was called women studies at the time. For two years, I was in the closet at work on Mondays, Wednesdays and Friday and out and proud

on Tuesdays and Thursdays at Oregon State University where I was taking classes. The ethical conflict was almost unbearable. I came to think of myself as a double agent, a fugitive living behind enemy lines. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I resigned. I walked out the door without a job, without any prospects and without the Evil One, who left me at this moment for a mutual friend.

What I know now only in retrospect was that this death of career and relationship was actually a step toward resurrection.

This story is indecent because, as Argentinian feminist theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid pointed out,

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*So, when a sexually transmitted virus first showed up among gay men in the U.S., it was easy for the church to say, "See, we told you so. An abomination."*

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indecent stories problematize layers of oppression. They question the traditional order of decency. They require theological and sexual honesty, and they offer a challenge to dominant stances.

Little did I know in my sheltered life in Rome, Georgia, that a movement was starting. led by some fed-up drag queens and butch lesbians at a little bar in New York City called the Stonewall. This movement would bring LGBTQ people out of the shadows and into public view and would threaten the very foundations of white Christian patriarchy with its challenge to gender and sexual binaries, heteronormativity and Victorian sexual mores. And it would scare the "bejezus" out of the emerging political white Christian Right.

Queer folks had always made a convenient target and scapegoat for conservative Christians, from Catholics to evangelicals. So, when a sexually transmitted virus first showed up among gay men in the U.S., it was easy for the church to say, "See, we told you so. An abomination."

Of course, we all know viruses don't work that way and, had we bothered to look to Africa, we would have



seen the disease ravaging heterosexual women and men. Still, it was easier to lie about queer lives and take advantage of a pandemic than to tell truths about vulnerabilities to disease based on class, race, gender and sexuality.

It seems the church had no problem telling lies if it worked to advance their political ambitions, and we see now the extent of Christian nationalist desire for a theocracy rooted in white supremacist, patriarchal values which have nothing to do with the gospel and everything to do with power.

So, there's an awful lot of lies about us being told at the foot of the cross. I don't think those of us who believe in a God of love exemplified in the life of Jesus can just sit idly by and let these lies be told. If we don't speak, we're complicit.

Now this hasn't been easy for a good Southern girl who was raised right to sit quietly, speak only when spoken to and, above all, be nice to become an out-lesbian, rabble-rousing feminist, ordained Baptist, woke, social justice activist. But, God as my witness, here I stand. I can do no other.

So, let's name these lies and tell some truths. Because, I'll tell you, there's nothing more dangerous to lies and liars than an old lesbian feminist with tenure who's got nothing to lose.

#### **Lie Number One: The Bible says . . .**

Probably the number one talking point of anti-LGBTQ Christians is that the Bible says homosexuality is a sin. It doesn't. The Bible is a collection of writings, often preceded by decades and centuries of oral tradition, written by people anywhere from 2000-3000 years ago, in different cultures, in different languages, and to people who were very different from ourselves.

Also, most of us read the Bible in translation, and translation is a difficult task even for the experts. We cannot read the five biblical texts that make up the "lobber passages" that many Christians use to lobber LGBTQ folks as if they were written in standard American English to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. If we read these passages within their historical context, understanding who wrote them and to whom, we find very different interpretive possibilities. Nothing in the Bible addresses what we now understand as queer sexualities. The Bible does, however, have a lot to say about bearing false witness and mistreating your neighbors.

#### **Lie Number Two: Love the sinner. Hate the sin.**

This is the lie that's used to cover the homophobia and transphobia underlying anti-queer bias. This state-

ment suggests that somehow sexuality is a behavior that is separate from identity. It's something queer folks do, not who we are. This statement pretends people can parse out "homosexual behavior" and hate it without somehow hating the people enacting the behavior. Our sexuality, however, isn't just behavior; it is a core piece of identity. I don't "do" queer. I "am" queer. Queerness isn't like a fabulous jacket I can take off and put in the clothes closet bin because I don't want to wear it anymore. I can no more not be queer than I cannot be white or 62-years-old or without a musical bone in my body. And that's not to say I'm advocating for a "born this way" approach to sexuality. It's much more complicated than that. After all, how often does anyone ask straight people, "Were you born straight? Or did something happen to you? When did you know you were straight? Maybe you just haven't had the right queer experience yet."

#### **Lie Number Three: God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.**

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*Nothing in the Bible addresses what we now understand as queer sexualities. The Bible does, however, have a lot to say about bearing false witness and mistreating your neighbors.*

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This lie rests on this misconception that the Bible is history, that its stories literally happened, and that those stories provide templates for how we are to live our lives. First of all, biblical writers were not historians; they would have had no concept of writing history as we understand it. They were trying to convey a theological message to their communities through the means, traditions, devices and context of their times. The story of Adam and Eve isn't prescriptive for human sexuality. It's a story that tries to explain the origins of a lot of things, like why snakes slither on the ground; but it doesn't mandate how all humans are supposed to be. Besides that, God created an awful lot of Adams and Steves and Eves and Sarahs in the animal world where same sex behaviors are quite common, more than 1500 species, as a matter of fact, from primates to starfish.

**Lie Number Four: It's a choice.**

People do not wake up one morning and go, “Oh, I think I’m going to become queer today.” Sexuality is complicated; but the science shows that one thing is clear—it’s not a simple choice. We don’t say that straight people have *chosen* heterosexuality. Certainly, all people make choices about their sexual behavior, and ethical sexual behavior is a choice. But sexual identity is a complicated process of genetics, culture, environment and experiences. And it is fluid—for all people—and can change across a lifetime.

**Lie Number Five: We have to protect the children.**

Again, let’s listen to the science: Gay men are not more likely to molest children. In fact, most men who abuse children are heterosexual. A child is at much greater risk of being molested by a straight priest or pastor than by a drag queen. Also, children are not in danger of becoming queer if they read books about co-parenting male penguins or Heather’s two mommies. They are in danger of becoming more open-minded and accepting, and I think that’s the real fear of many anti-queer activists—that their children might not be as bigoted as they are.

And let’s talk about drag for a moment since drag queens are a particular target right now. Drag is a performance, part entertainment and part social commentary, about gender. Sure, we could have a high-level theoretical conversation about performativity, signaling, homonormativity, and gender fluidity, and I have my own critiques of drag; but that’s not the point here.

The point is a lot of Christians are freaked out because they think drag queens are grooming children simply by being drag queens in a public space with children present.

Drag Queen Story Hour started in San Francisco in 2015 when Michelle Tea took her baby to library story hours but found them fairly heteronormative—focused on and assuming heterosexual families. So, she decided to create something more inclusive, especially for LGBTQ families. And Drag Queen Story Hour was born. The concept soon spread to libraries all over the country where it was well received by children and families who participated.

Attacking drag queens reading to children today serves as a convenient strategy to let the religious-political right avoid looking at their own house. The right is using fears about gender and sexuality to enlist new followers and to distract from their own current scandals, including clergy abuse and insurrection. It seems it’s much easier to play on old stereotypes about predatory gay men than to address the beams in their own eyes.

Certainly, sexuality is a component of drag. Many drag performers are gay men. Not all. Drag does suggest that queer sexuality is not deviant. That’s not grooming. And, in fact, hearing that message early on may mean the children in the audience who grow up to be queer are better able to accept themselves and less likely to kill themselves.

Now, that’s not to say drag isn’t a threat. Drag is an incredible threat—to gender norms that subordinate women and vilify LGBTQ people. And that’s what the right is really afraid of—that drag might cause people to rethink gender and sexuality, that they might further lose their grip on power over straight women and gender and sexual minorities.

You may be wondering what the Bible has to say about all of this. Well, incarnation is a kind of drag, isn’t it? At the center of our faith is a story of God taking on and performing humanity and thereby redeeming humanity. Incarnation isn’t “God in a bod.” Incarnation is God’s stamp of approval on our humanity, a statement of God’s radical inclusiveness of our

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*Conversion therapy has done untold damage to queer kids and it doesn’t work. In fact, people who have gone to conversion therapy or had a pastor or therapist try to help them change their sexual identity are three to five times more likely to attempt suicide.*

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humanity. It’s a reminder, as our Quaker siblings would put it, that there is that of God in every person.

Feminist theorists remind us that gender itself is a performance. Within our cultures we learn to act like the gender we’re assigned at birth. After all, there’s no immutable biological reason women should wear dresses, paint their nails, carry purses and wear pantyhose. Nor is there any inborn requirement that men get to have all the pockets, have pant sizes that take waist measurement and height into account, or don’t have to shave their legs.

So desperate are we to reinforce this illusion of gender that we distinguish fashion by which side of the shirt buttons are on, we charge women and men different prices for dry-cleaning said shirts, and we have gender-segregated bowling.

Drag queens upset all of that. So does the Gospel, really.

**Lie Number Six: We can cure it or cast it out.**

Conversion therapy has done untold damage to queer kids and it doesn't work. In fact, people who have gone to conversation therapy or had a pastor or therapist try to help them change their sexual identity are three to five times more likely to attempt suicide. People who have undergone conversion therapy also show higher levels of stress, depression and drug and alcohol abuse.

It's also impossible to pray the gay away. There is no demon of homosexuality to cast out, and all the anointing, shouting and praying over someone in the world won't change their sexuality. It may make them more vulnerable to depression and suicide, but it won't make them straight or cis-gender.

**Lie Number Seven: Homosexuals have an agenda.**

The conspiratorial-sounding "gay agenda" is right-wing propaganda that claims the queers are coming for your children to teach them that queerness is acceptable and to do so they are promoting gay pride, demanding special rights, and limiting the rights of Christians to speak out against their evil plan.

If queers have anything approaching an agenda, it's for us to be allowed to live in peace. In a heterosexual society, we have had to organize to advocate for our basic human rights—including simply the right to live at all, the right to work at our chosen professions, the right to love whom we love and marry that person if we want, the right to use the bathroom that makes sense to us, the right to bodily autonomy and integrity.

If queers have an agenda for children, it's that they be safe from people who would shame them, prevent them from being who they are, and drive them to depression and suicide. Yes, that takes visibility—as in children's books and drag queen story hours and Pride parades, and it takes organization against efforts to limit children's access to gender-affirming care. We know that without gender-affirming care, risk for suicide increases among young people. Would we really rather have our children dead than trans?

**Lie Number Eight: Gays recruit.**

I grew up in Northwest Georgia in the 1960s and 70s in a fundamentalist Southern Baptist church. I had two heterosexual parents. The only thing I knew about being queer was that it was an abomination. I never read a book or watched a movie with a queer character. I never knew a queer person. I didn't know about Stonewall or Pride or lesbian softball or drag. But look at how I turned out! No one had to recruit me. I found queerness all on my own within myself.

Queer folks do not go out looking for unsuspect-

ing straight people to lure into the queer life. We do not recruit because we cannot reproduce. Most queer people are like me—born to straight parents and raised in straight culture. We're queer because we're queer, not because we were recruited.

Now, kids are growing up knowing more about queerness and, yes, that seems to mean that more young people are willing to express queerness in a wide variety of ways. It's not because Pride and *Orange Is the New Black* are recruiting tools, but because a shift in the culture has allowed what was stifled in earlier times to be expressed. Some of the shame, silence and invisibility that kept many older people in the closet has lessened, and so younger people are simply freer to be who they are—and who we older folks always were but could not express.

**Lie Number Nine: Queer people are unhappy.**

If you believe the rhetoric of the Right, you'd think queer people are all miserable, pitiable creatures as a result of their sinful behavior. Yes, some of us

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*We know that without gender-affirming care, risk for suicide increases among young people. Would we really rather have our children dead than trans?*

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are depressed and suicidal; but that's because of the shame, stigma, and rejection of society, not because we're queer. A lot of us are really happy and, out of necessity, queers have created cultures that are vibrant, celebratory, joyful, colorful, inclusive and absolutely fabulous. In fact, I connected with my spouse Catherine at an LGBTQ country western dance.

I think people on the Right need to tell lies about queer unhappiness because to recognize the possibility of queer happiness would undermine their claims about sin, abomination and God's judgment.

Queer people also celebrate sexuality in ways that undermine purity culture. Purity culture is all about control of women through control of their sexuality. Queer sexuality disrupts these patriarchal beliefs about gender and sexuality and celebrates sexuality as a gift to be enjoyed, a liberating possibility of equal enjoyment, and a transgression of patriarchal norms.

Again, of course, I believe sexuality also brings with it responsibility for ethical practice. Truly liberating sexuality must be mutual, consensual, unharmed and honest. It must recognize the full humanity of the other

person and not treat anyone as an object for sexual fulfillment. But that's true whether sex is queer or straight.

**Lie Number 10: If we need to jail them, beat them, torture them, or kill them—well, that's just the price of God's kingdom.**

A lot of people who call themselves Christians think the U.S. should criminalize queer sexuality again, even to the extent of executing people for queer sexual behavior.

Tim LaHaye wrote, "Capital punishment for [homosexuals] may seem "cruel and inhuman treatment" by today's standards, but our leniency has caused today's widespread problems. This is not to suggest that Christians advocate the death penalty for today's homosexuals, but I do have a question that needs consideration. Who is really being cruel and inhuman – those whose leniency allows homosexuality to spread to millions of victims who would not otherwise have been enticed into this sad and lonely life style, or those who practiced Old Testament capital punishment?"

Uganda, influenced by American anti-LGBTQ forces, recently passed a harsh law imposing, among other penalties, up to life in prison for gay sex and the death penalty for serial offenders. It also proscribes the death penalty for people with HIV who engage in gay sex. It denies people with disabilities and people over 75 the right even to consent to gay sex, and it criminalizes promoting LGBTQ education and causes.

Think that can't happen here? Just up the road near Fort Worth, Pastor Dillon Awes of Stedfast Baptist Church in Watauga said in 2022 that gay people should be "lined up against the wall and shot in the back of the head." That same year, pastor Joe Jones of Shield of Faith Baptist Church in Boise, Idaho, claimed, "God told the nation that he ruled: Put them to death. Put all queers to death." Tom Ascol, Ron DeSantis' pastor, responded to the Ugandan law in a dust-up with Ted Cruz, of all people, who called the law "horrific and wrong," by citing Leviticus 20:13: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them." He asked, "Was this law God gave to His old covenant people 'horrific and wrong'?" Ascol clarified that he doesn't want to see the death penalty for homosexuality in the U.S., but he does think homosexuality should be criminalized.

And what are we seeing in state legislatures in conservative states like Florida, Tennessee, Idaho and Texas? Laws that ban books that mention LGBTQ people, laws that deny life-saving gender-affirming care to minors. As of now, 650 bills targeting LGBTQ

people have been proposed across the country this year alone. There's a target on our backs, and so-called Christians are leading the way.

These are some, though not all, of the most prevalent lies some Christians are telling about LGBTQ folks. What are some truths? How can we as Christians, and specifically as Baptists, think about LGBTQ lives in ways more consonant with the Gospel?

**Truth Number One: We're here. We're queer. And we're made in God's image.**

Often time, anti-LGBTQ readers of the Bible turn to Genesis to claim that God created male and female, and that binary defines human lives. Let me offer another reading. The Bible does say that God created humans male and female in the image of God. What that means, then, is that God is male and female. In other words, the Bible affirms God's own gender diversity. God encompasses all genders within God's being; God crosses genders. God is all genders, and all genders reside in the Being of God. God is non-binary.

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God is transgender. To be made in God's image is to express the full continuum of genders, not a binary.

What does the science say? Human sexuality is on a continuum. It's not a binary—simply straight or simply queer. And sexual diversity is a result of a complex interaction of biology and social factors. A lot of genes influence sexual behavior, scientists have found. There's no "gay gene," they explain," but, rather, diverse sexuality is "a natural part of our diversity as a species." Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer, then, is not a sinful choice.

In fact, homosexual behavior is common throughout the natural world. Scientists have identified homosexual behavior in more than 1500 species and have not found any species without homosexual behaviors except those that don't have sex. And it's not just about sex. Many same sex animal partners, like female Layson albatrosses and male penguins, can mate for life.

Similarly, gender is also on a continuum and is

affected by both biology and social factors. Republican legislators argue that they are following the science, but what they offer is a reductionist model of biology based on what doctors and parents see at birth. The reality is that the science is much more complex, and gender is more than visible body parts. The American Medical Association argues that the scientific evidence shows that “trans and non-binary gender identities are normal variations of human identity and expression.”

### **Truth Number Two: In the resurrection, God affirmed Jesus’ “coming out.”**

Let me tell you another indecent story. This one comes from Luke’s gospel (Luke 24):

*<sup>1</sup>But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup>They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup>but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup>While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup>The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.*

Why is this an indecent story? Why is the resurrection indecent? The resurrection is a coming-out story. It is a story that uncovers and undresses injustice. Jesus died because he challenged the dominant religious, ethnic, cultural, class, and, yes, sexual, norms of his day. He was a threat to empire because his loyalty to God outweighed his loyalty to Caesar, and he was a threat to religion because his embodied faith refused to be constrained by laws that were inhumane in their application. Jesus died because he was queer—he refused normalcy, he rejected the gender and sexual economies of his day, he disrupted essential categories of identity, and he was killed for it.

But the resurrection was his coming-out. In coming out of the tomb/closet, God vindicated the queerness of Jesus’ love for everyone, a love without boundaries of nation, religion, ethnicity or gender.

Queer stories uncover/undress injustice, bring parts of our selves back to life (because the closet is death), and give life to those around us who need to hear (just as we need to tell) our stories which are resurrection stories.

Our stories are indecent because we are not supposed to tell them. They expose the lies/constraints of heteronormativity. We are supposed to be invisible, silent, dead. Our stories are resurrection stories because we are not meant to survive.

On the cross, Jesus sided with the marginalized, oppressed and despised. The resurrection was God’s

affirmation of that choice and, in his “coming out” of the tomb, Jesus offered hope, possibility, love and welcome.

Jesus didn’t die because God demanded a blood sacrifice. Jesus died because he identified with the poor and oppressed, the weak, the refugee, the downtrodden, the queer. Jesus rejected patriarchal structuring of relationships; he spoke with women and welcomed them among his disciples; he ate with tax collectors and sinners; he challenged powerful institutions of his day, including the Roman Empire and, for that, the Empire crushed him. Or so they thought. God had other plans. When Jesus came out of the tomb, he announced God’s embrace of all of us queer folks—those of us excluded, mistreated, beaten down, and rejected by family, friends, governments and religions.

As a queer, indecent, hopeful story, the resurrection is disruptive to the status quo. The resurrection shattered social, political and religious norms. Jesus suffered at the hands of the power systems of his day; but, in his resurrection, God came out on the side of the oppressed and marginalized. God stood along-

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*On the cross, Jesus sided with the marginalized, oppressed and despised. The resurrection was God’s affirmation of that choice and, in his “coming out” of the tomb, Jesus offered hope, possibility, love and welcome.*

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side those who suffer. God announced the end of the decent, moral order of the day that crushed anyone who was different or who refused to bow down before unjust power.

Queers understand resurrection. As ones who have suffered unjustly under interlocking systems of sexism, racism, classism, ableism and heterosexism, we understand what it means to refuse our invisibility, to suffer for claiming our full humanity, and to be resurrected in living honestly and bravely in love.

Our stories make visible our suffering—discrimination, violence, AIDS, exile. They remind us we need a resurrection of justice for queer people.

Jesus’ resurrection was a loud and clear declaration of who would make up God’s community, and it is not the politically, economically or religiously powerful. It is those who choose to live in love, to side with justice, and to do God’s liberating work in the world.

**Truth Number Three: There is a Baptist case to be made for LGBTQ inclusion.**

In queer theory, we talk about “queer” as what is at odds with the norm. In that way, Baptists are a queer people, a people at odds with the norms of a Christianity that creates itself as hierarchical, authoritarian, intertwined with the state, proscriptive and exclusive. Obviously, I’m not talking about the Southern Baptist Convention here. I’m talking about those Baptist distinctives of the priesthood of the believer, religious liberty and the separation of church and state. If as Baptists we truly believe that God speaks to each of us individually, we have to make room for a diversity of voices, experiences, beliefs and lives. We each have our own small piece of the puzzle that’s limited by our social location—our place in the world, our intersectional identity, our specific experiences. But that piece of the puzzle is also essential because no one else lives in that social location, and so we each have something to bring to the table, and we all need to hear and understand everyone else’s piece of the puzzle. And let’s not make the puzzle flat. Let’s imagine it as three-dimensional, complicated, appearing differently depending on the angle from which we look at it.

Where we run into problems is when someone thinks they have all the pieces of the puzzle, see it from the only possible angle, and therefore have all the right answers for all of us. That’s not Baptist. In fact, I’d say that’s heretical. We need all the perspectives. And, of course, being Baptists, we can disagree with one another till the cows come home, if it’s done in love and with more listening than talking and more respect than judgment and with no need to toss someone out because we disagree.

Baptists are a messy people, and so is God’s community. And that is very queer.

So why would we not, as Baptists, welcome queer people as people who bring other perspectives, other experiences with God, other angles of vision to the table to teach us and learn from us?

I tell people I’m now a Baptist in exile in the United Christian Church. The UCC’s motto is “God is still speaking.” I think that’s pretty Baptist too. It means we are open to hearing God’s voice in each and every one of us, and we embrace the fact that those voices sometimes may be competing and contradictory, but that’s okay because there’s no way any one of us is ever going to understand all of God, but those voices we’re afraid to hear, those voices who bring something different to the table, those voices who tell indecent stories very well likely have something of God to tell us.

So, it’s time for the Church to stop telling lies about LGBTQ people. It’s truth, the Bible tells us, that will set us free. In your churches, tell truths. It may cost you something—members, offerings, protests. But don’t settle for the cheap grace Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us about that asks nothing of us. Authentic discipleship is costly.

Proclaim loudly your welcome of LGBTQ people. We won’t think we’re welcome in a Baptist church, especially if you don’t put it on your website and hang a banner on the church, because we’re not welcome just as we are in most Baptist churches.

And in your personal lives, if you’re straight, be an ally. Don’t proclaim yourself one. That’s not your job. Just do the work of an ally—show up, confront homophobia, educate friends and family, vote—and we’ll call you one.

Across Christendom we are not yet all equal at the foot of the cross. There’s work to be done. I am grateful that the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists has engaged in that work.

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We need more Baptists like you. After all, we’re here. We’re queer. And God loves us too—just as we are. That’s the truth. ■

*This address was first presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB) which was hosted by Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas on September 11, 2023. The author provided this edited and revised version specially for Christian Ethics Today. Susan Shaw is professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Director of the School of Language, Culture, and Society at Oregon State University. She holds an MA and PhD from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. She is author or co-author of several books on Women’s Studies as well as *God Speaks to Us, Too: Southern Baptist Women on Church, Home, and Society*, *Reflective Faith: A Theological Toolbox for Women*, and co-author (with Mina Carson and Tisa Lewis) of *Girls Rock! Fifty Years of Women Making Music*.*

## **Hate the sin, but love the sinner?**

I think Jesus knew that if he commanded his disciples to 'love the sinner,' they would begin looking at other people more as sinners than neighbors. And that, inevitably, would lead to judgment. If I love you more as a sinner than as my neighbor, then I am bound to focus more on your sin. I will start looking for all the things that are wrong with you. And perhaps, without intending it, I will begin thinking about our relationship like this: "You are a sinner, but I graciously choose to love you anyway." If that sounds a little puffed up, self-righteous, and even prideful to you, then you have perceived accurately.

Source: Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say*

# Strengthen What Remains: Queer Apocalyptic Hope

Cody J. Sanders

*“I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God”*  
Angel of the church in Sardis, recorded by John of Patmos Revelation 3:1b-2 (NRSVue).

When did you first realize that the world had ended?

Was it when you heard the bomb had dropped on Hiroshima? Or was it when you experienced either first-hand or through video footage the carnage of war? Was it when you first learned the name of Three Mile Island, or Chernobyl, or heard that an earthquake and tsunami had severed power at Fukushima?

Was it when an unknown virus started showing up in your circles of gay friends, and one-by-one you watched them die, wondering when – or *if* – anyone would ever do anything to help fight AIDS?

Or did the world as you know it end when the COVID-19 pandemic finally reached the place where you live, and stories from the ICUs of the world started to appear on your phone screens and occupy your dreams? Or was it two months into lockdown? Or perhaps when Covid deaths surpassed a million? Or two million? Or six-and-a-half million?

Or were you finally pushed to the edge of the world you believed you knew when you turned on your television on January 6 and saw the U.S. Capitol being overrun by your fellow citizens trying to overturn an election through an organized insurrection, encouraged by the sitting president of the United States?

For others, it happened when white sails of European ships appeared on the horizon, portending the end of the world. Or similar sails off the West African shores, absconding with people who would never again know a day without chains and enforced labor. For some, it was the day when no more bison could be found on the plains, or when ancestral lands were left behind in a compulsory march toward the setting sun.

The world is always ending for some.

It has ended resolutely for many.

And it is ending for us.

We are living the apocalypse, or perhaps more aptly after all that I’ve just named, we are living in the post-apocalypse.<sup>1</sup> The sooner we realize this, the better

we’ll be able to cultivate life in the aftermath of the earth’s numerous endings and edges.

So, I ask you to *let your eyes be opened* – an “unveiling” in the truest meaning of the word “apocalypse” – to the times through which we are all living and dying. Potentials for life and care and community abound for those not tied to pasts that we cannot relive, or futures in which we were never meant to survive.<sup>2</sup>

That is the realm of apocalyptic imagination. Where many of our siblings of faith get it wrong is in attempting to predict when the world will end, rather than recognizing the signs of endings all around them. They imagine ways of escaping the “end times,” rather than

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*Apocalyptic imagination is a way of living in time; time that is filled with endings and new beginnings.*

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living faithfully at the end(s) of the earth as we know it, *right now*. Apocalyptic imagination is a way of living in time; time that is filled with endings and new beginnings. It is not about a time to come in a linear future, but a time that is always upon us – pasts and present and futures enfolding onto one another. A circular, cyclical, spiraling time.

It is queer time. As José Esteban Muñoz presses us to see,

We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. . . Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.<sup>3</sup>

The comingling of vanished pasts, the precarious present, and desires for future possibility is also the realm of hope. Because there is no need for hope if you do not first know its absence. As Baptist ethicist Miguel De La Torre argues,



“We embrace hopelessness when we embrace the sufferers of the world, and in embracing them, we discover our own humanity and salvation, providing impetus to our praxis, for hopelessness is the precursor to resistance and revolution.”<sup>4</sup>

Optimism, then, becomes the enemy of hope. For if we believe with all our hearts that things are going to be just fine, then hope is displaced by the idols of optimism and progress. And if the futures we seek are only slightly tweaked versions of the present, then there is no room in our imaginations for hope, which always yearns for surprise, *or revolution*. Or, as the Apostle Paul said it, “*Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees?*” (Romans 8:24 NRSVue).

So, these are our three realms of exploration: apocalypse, queerness and hope. All three fraught and contested. All three bound up with up with futurity. And we have many able queer guides to led us into the realm of futurity.

After her untimely death following a fall at the age of only 58, one of her obituaries described Octavia Butler as possessing “vivid intelligence and [a] powerful work ethic,” lauded her for being “a pioneering figure in the white, male-dominated field of American science fictions.” And described her as “a famously reclusive lesbian.”<sup>5</sup>

A student once asked this foundational figure of Afro-Futurism, “Do you really believe that in the future we’re going to have the kind of trouble you write about in your books?”<sup>6</sup>

The student was referring to Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, published in 1993 and 1998 respectively and opening their narratives in 2024 and 2032. The books are near future dystopias in which an extreme wealth gap exists between the rich and the rest, drug abuse is rampant, public education is a thing of the past and illiteracy the norm, U.S. government is in fascist shambles, infrastructure in disrepair, and the onslaught of climate collapse is made harrowingly manifest.

Butler replied to the student, “I didn’t make up the problems. All I did was look around at the problems we’re neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters.”

I took Butler’s method seriously a couple of weeks ago, not as a matter of fiction writing, but as a matter of church leadership. As our church’s moderator and I planned for our annual congregational leadership retreat, we developed three scenarios all set just about a decade into the future, centered on our City of Cambridge.<sup>7</sup> Each scenario takes the political, economic and climate realities we are facing right now

and developed them just a bit further into the near-future, only working with what we know is happening at this present moment, and not delving into any fanciful works of fiction.

One scenario developed along a trajectory of Trumpism gaining further political foothold in the coming election and played out the implications just a few years out, including its impact on women, LGBTQIA people, immigrant and racial minorities, “Jim Crow 2.0,”<sup>8</sup> the federal targeting of sanctuary cities, and a union at risk of dissolution.

Another scenario took our current economic situation and our city’s affordable housing crisis and developed it just bit further for our church and city. Rampant economic disparity, constant supply chain breakdowns, food insecurity, and the inaccessibility of basic health-care shaped the reality of this near future.

A third scenario looked at the realities we are facing with the climate and imagined beyond the Paris Agreement’s 1.5-2 °C threshold being crossed, and the increase in wildfires and water shortages and desertifi-

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*And if the futures we seek are only slightly tweaked versions of the present, then there is no room in our imaginations for hope, which always yearns for surprise, or revolution. Or, as the Apostle Paul said it, “Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees?” (Romans 8:24 NRSVue).*

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cation, an influx of climate refugees, and the complex, cascading, and difficult to manage effects of climate change in the coming years.<sup>9</sup>

I was a little apprehensive about this retreat. We’ve already lived through a difficult few years. *How would folks respond to amplifying those difficulties?* At first, a dismal pall of silence fell over the groups reading these scenarios. One of the group’s notetakers began her notes: “Initial response from everyone: bleak.”

After an hour or so of talk around the tables about what kind of church we were being called to become in such precarious futures, I started to hear engaged conversation around the tables, punctuated by laughter and the signs of people having a good time together.

I had to go around to the groups and be sure they

were still talking about the dismal scenarios I had given them and, oddly enough, *they were*.

They were discussing questions like: Whose life is made most precarious in this near future? What are the gifts and graces and assets of our congregation that would be life-sustaining offerings in this near future? In what ways do we need to develop as a congregation in the next decade to faithfully face the challenges of this near future? *Who do we want to be as a congregation in a future like this one?*<sup>10</sup>

Even in Butler's extraordinary bleak near-future in which a fascist leader is running for president with the slogan, "Make America Great Again" (remember, she was writing *Parable of the Talents* in 1998), and the only safe places to live are in walled communities, and any social safety net that ever existed has now disappeared, somehow her characters form life-sustaining community, experience the richness of relationship, share resources, have sex, make one another laugh and live meaningful lives together at the edge.

At the end of Butler's conversation with the questioning student, the student asked for her *answer* to all of the problems she presents in her novels.

"There isn't one," she replied.

"You mean we're just doomed?" he asked.

"No," Butler said. "I mean there's no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be."<sup>11</sup>

And I want to ask *you*: Among the thousands of potential answers to all of our future problems, do you want to be one of them?

Now you've entered the realm of the apocalyptic. You've made an ethical choice – a commitment – to being one of the answers at the ends and edges of the world as we know it. Because the "apocalyptic" is not about the cataclysmic end of the world as we've so often been led to believe. But it is about catastrophe and endings and edges through which we find ourselves living and dying right now. As Catherine Keller notes of the larger discourse of "eschatology," "*eschatos* means 'edge'...[a] discourse of hope in the face of horror, a hope that recognizes injustice as such and meets its awesome power with confidence in a radical transformation."<sup>12</sup>

And the words that prompted this talk tonight are contained in that eschatological, apocalyptic vision of John in the Book of Revelation, when the angel of the church in Sardis speaks:

These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:  
*'I know your works; you have a name for being*

*alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is at the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you'.* (Rev. 3:1-4 NRSV)

I had never really paid much attention to the church in Sardis in the Book of Revelation. All the other churches have some major problems over which they're thoroughly chided by their angels. Like the church at Laodicea, perhaps the most famous: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot...So...I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15).

But the church at Sardis doesn't get much in the way of specifics from their angel. It's a chiding of sorts, but it feels a lot like "you know what you did." Or, perhaps, "you know what you've failed to do."<sup>13</sup> Sardis is a city of history and beauty and wealth but, as Sigve

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Tonstad notes "*reputation and reality* do not match" for the Sardis church.<sup>14</sup> "Believers in Sardis are in a state of denial, far removed from reality, in part because society applauds them."<sup>15</sup>

And looking at the church of Sardis in the Book of Revelation can be like looking in a mirror for us – Christians in a place of beauty and prominence and wealth and history and yet, *being in a state of denial*, having a reputation for being alive, but in reality being at the point of death, a state of sleepwalking our way through the post-apocalypse.

It is the work of apocalyptic imagination *to rouse us from our sleep*, to keep us awake to the possibilities that exist beyond the world-ending status quo.

But if we're going to take this notion of developing a queer apocalyptic hope seriously, there's a warning we need to heed: Apocalypse is almost always misunderstood when it is interpreted through centering the lived human experience of the privileged and the com-

fortable. We haven't known how to handle it, so we've erred in one of two major directions:

For many of our conservative siblings in faith, the error is literalizing apocalyptic discourse and seeing every detail of an apocalyptic message like Revelation coming to life in the world around them. For many of our more liberal siblings in faith, the error is in ignoring the apocalyptic material in scripture because it embarrasses us.

Apocalyptic imagination cannot be undertaken from the centers, but only by foregrounding experiences of endings and edges taking place at margins. From the center, it becomes a project of identifying those who's "in" and "out," "good" and "evil," and firming up the boundaries. From the margins, apocalyptic imagination becomes a project of possibility and even revolution – the way things are *are not* the way they have to be, nor will the status quo inhere forever.

## Wake Up

And the first step in the apocalyptic imagination is to WAKE UP! To wake up to the realities of domination and destruction. To wake up from the dreams that are killing us.

Historian Michael Rawson conveys the story of a group of environmental activists who traveled into the Amazon rainforest in 1995 at the request of the indigenous Achuar people on the border between Ecuador and Peru. The Achuar elders and shamans had been having visions since the 1980s suggesting that their land and culture were coming under serious threat. Western oil companies were advancing, and environmental and cultural disruption were rising. When the activists arrived, they expected to be recruited to help in the local organizing efforts against the oil companies and other threats to the environment and culture of the Achuar. Instead, the shamans and elders asked these activists to go back home and "change the dream of the modern world."<sup>16</sup>

We're all caught up in dreams – some our own, but many are the dreams of another – dreams that we don't even know are dreams. Deleuze warned,

The dream of those who dream concerns those who are not dreaming...Because as soon as someone else dreams, there is danger. People's dreams are always devouring, and threatening to engulf us; the other's dream is very dangerous. Dreams have a terrible will to power and each of us is a victim to the other's dreams...Beware of the other's dream, because if you are caught in the other's dreams you are done for!<sup>17</sup>

To name just a few of the dreams of others that have become devouring and dangerous, we're caught up in dreams of human supremacy over an earth that is filled with "natural resources" for the taking, rather than our more-than-human kin with whom we are in inextricable relationship. This is a dream built upon extractive capitalism in which leaving fossil fuels in the ground means a lost future potential revenue, which is, for some, a worse proposition than the sure collapse of the climate portended by continuing to extract it as we are plunged more deeply into what we now blithely call The Sixth Mass Extinction.<sup>18</sup>

It's been just over a year after the warning of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that the world has only until 2030 to take drastic action to reduce CO2 levels by 45% to avert irreversible climate-driven disaster. With over 6,000 scientific references, the 2018 IPCC report warned of catastrophic consequences if the global net CO2 levels do not quickly fall by that drastic measure. This is a feat that

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*And the first step in the apocalyptic imagination is to WAKE UP! To wake up to the realities of domination and destruction. To wake up from the dreams that are killing us.*

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would "require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society."<sup>19</sup>

We're caught up in an especially virulent dream of White Christian Nationalism that is threatening to engulf the entirety of the nation. In their book, *The Flag and The Cross*, Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry argue that white Christian nationalism is not just a set of erroneous beliefs about America's past. It is a set of unconscious desires about America's future.<sup>20</sup>

And while many who ascribe to Christian nationalist values don't actually practice Christianity or belong to a church, Gorski and Perry explain that in the movement, "the word 'Christian' remains the right's most effective signal to white conservatives that 'our values,' 'our heritage,' 'our way of life,' and 'our influence' are under attack, and 'we' must respond."<sup>21</sup> "To follow Jesus and love America is to love individualism and libertarian freedom, expressed in allegiance to capitalism."<sup>22</sup>

These desires are all connected by what Gorski and Perry describe as a "deep story." And much of the

ways we understand what is of ultimate concern is through story. They say,

What makes deep stories “deep” is that they have deep roots in a culture. Deep stories have been told and retold so many times and across so many generations that they feel natural and true: even and perhaps especially when they are at odds with history. In sum, a deep story is more myth than history. More precisely, it is a mythological version of history.<sup>23</sup>

It is the “mythological versions of history” that apocalyptic imagination is especially good at puncturing with an alternative vision and a call to committed action.

We’re living amid the cis-heteropatriarchal dreams of others evidenced by an increasingly militant anti-trans political movement, the overturning of *Row v. Wade*, and the portent of things to come in that decision rolling back recent gains in LGBTQ rights. In particular, in the last couple of years, we’ve seen state legislatures taking aim at trans youth with obscenely cruel legislation, attacking their access to medical care and sports teams. Emergent debates spurred by white panic about history curriculum in schools addressing race run alongside renewed efforts to remove LGBTQ+-affirming content from school libraries.

And every one of these insidious dreams is now compounded by “cyber-enabled information warfare” that “undercuts society’s ability to respond.”<sup>24</sup> Because we each live within our own algorithmically tailored dream-world, feeding back to us our own desires and reinforcing our conspiratorial fantasies.

“Beware of the other’s dream, because if you are caught in the other’s dreams you are done for!” Deleuze warned.

And being caught up in each of these dreams with their overlapping borders *doesn’t mean supporting these visions of a future*. It can simply mean being apathetic or unaware of them. This is often the situation into which apocalyptic visionaries shout the words, “Wake up!”

Umair Haque aptly names what we’re experiencing in our slumbering inattention as a *pathology of the soul*: “American[s] appear to be quite happy simply watching one another die.” He says, “They just don’t appear to be too disturbed, moved, or even affected by... their kids killing each other, their social bonds collapsing, being powerless to live with dignity, or having to numb the pain of it all away.” It is our widespread indifference to these realities around us that he points to as evidence of a society in collapse. Our failure

to “be aghast, shocked, and stunned, and... moved to make them not happen” is the pathology of soul in what he terms a “predatory society.” He explains further the mundane nature of predatory force:

A predatory society doesn’t just mean oligarchs ripping people off financially. In a truer way, it means people nodding and smiling and going about their everyday business as their neighbours, friends, and colleagues die early deaths in shallow graves. The predator in American society isn’t just its super-rich—but an invisible and insatiable force: the normalization of what in the rest of the world would be seen as shameful, historic, generational moral failures, if not crimes, becoming mere mundane everyday affairs not to be too worried by or troubled about.

Haque says that these social pathologies of societal collapse are so out of the ordinary from what we’ve ever seen or experienced that “it is like the meteor that

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*Umair Haque aptly names what we’re experiencing in our slumbering inattention as a pathology of the soul: “American[s] appear to be quite happy simply watching one another die.”*

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hit the dinosaurs: an outlier beyond outliers, an event at the extreme of the extremes. That is why our narratives, frames, and theories cannot really capture it—much less explain it.” He argues, “We need a whole new language—and a new way of seeing—to even begin to make sense of it.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Strengthen What Remains**

But once we are awakened by the apocalyptic unveiling – and our churches are not yet all awake to these dreams of others that threaten to undo us – but *once we are*, our apocalyptic summons is to STRENGTHEN WHAT REMAINS and is on the point of death through effective acts of resistance and revolution.

Apocalyptic discourse – far from simplistic catastrophizing – involves an incisive critique of the present powers and their ability to catch us up in the dreams of another. But they are also a call to action in the here and now, not in some distant future.<sup>26</sup>

This is the part that you need to practice within your

own communities of faith and the partnerships you're developing in your local communities. And it's the part that I can't provide much direction on, aside from a few general invitations.

The first came to by way of a South African Methodist minister named Trevor Hudson who said something that has stuck with me for 10 years now. I don't remember anything about the talk he gave to this group of ministers except for this one line that haunts my ministry like an apocalyptic warning. Hudson said, "Disorganized good is no match for organized evil."<sup>27</sup>

It's easy to look around us get so caught up in our fear that we get busy with a haphazard smattering of peace and justice projects without cultivating the stillness to hear the voice of the Divine returning us to a sacred centeredness of purpose and mission, and the critical attention to understand the complexity of the perils we face. Organizing for justice gets harder by the day in this political landscape. But "disorganized good is no match for organized evil."

A second important lesson I want to pass on to you is one I learned from some of my students about the necessity of grief as part of this work. Last January, I taught a course at Chicago Theological Seminary titled, "Speculative Futurist Theologies of Care: Constructing Spiritual Care at the End(s) of the Earth." In the first hour of the week-long, eight-hours-a day intensive, I laid out the course materials, explained the readings and topics we would engage – from the present and future of racial injustice and violence, to the rise of fascism and White Christian Nationalism, to the coming crises of climate refugees and the decreasing livability of life on the planet. We were going to ask together, "What shapes do practices of 'care' need to take in these probably near-futures that we and our faith communities are living and dying into?"

At the end of the syllabus review, one student raised her hand and said, "Professor, do you think we could have some time during each class to grieve together?" Other students nodded and verbalized their agreement over the need to grieve what we were facing together. So, the students all started volunteering to lead grief practices and rituals throughout the week. They were some of the most profound times we shared together in the class, each student demonstrating their own abilities – some of which they didn't know they possessed – to help a community face the ends and edges of the world in which we are living and dying.

Another potent lesson I received from one of my congregants just recently. In the congregational leadership retreat a few weeks back, confronting the possibilities of several bleak near-future scenarios, one young woman in the congregation shared a phrase

that has become meaningful to her recently: "Resist & Rejoice." She said that this phrase had helped her to see the need to both show up for one another in times of injustice, doing the necessary work to confront injustice, and also to care for one another's souls in the process, to make joy together, to rejoice while we resist. Nothing could be truer to the apocalyptic rhythm of Revelation than the unveiling of the Empire's violent mechanizations punctuated by rejoicing song.

I wrote her later to ask her for an attribution for the phrase so that I could properly cite it. She wrote back saying that she didn't know where the phrase originated, but that she had seen it in a beautiful mural painted on the side of a cinderblock wall in New Orleans and had never forgotten it.<sup>28</sup> This speaks to the power of art as an ally in cultivating apocalyptic imagination and methods of strengthening what remains and is at the point of death.

And if I had to add a third "r" to the list, I'd amend it to say, "Resist, Rejoice and Rest." None of us are

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*Organizing for justice gets harder by the day in this political landscape. But "disorganized good is no match for organized evil."*

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doing anyone any good by burning ourselves out. Black women activists have always been our greatest teachers in this regard, and one I'd commend to you is Tricia Hersey and her organization called "The Nap Ministry," examining the liberating power of naps and developing a "rest is resistance" framework for activism.<sup>29</sup>

And finally, what may seem a bit old fashioned, a little out of touch, too-little-too-late, perhaps is the importance of prayer in apocalyptic imagination. And there's one apocalyptic prayer that you all already know, even if you've never seen it apocalyptically. And it's possible, as we look back over this old prayer – this staple of the Christian liturgical tradition – that we've never really recognized it for what it is. "Our Father-and-Mother who art in Heaven..."

"Thy kingdom come." Has a familiar ring to it doesn't it? The coming kingdom of God – the reign of the Divine in our midst – was a theme replete in Jesus' teachings. And in Luke's version of the prayer, there's no "our," no "who art in heaven," no "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and all that flow-

ery stuff that make our prayers sound more full and complete. *Just a simple, stark, direct petition: “Your kingdom come!”*

We don’t often connect this tame little prayer said the world over every single day by children to the message of Revelation, but it’s strikingly similar to the way that the entire New Testament ends in the Book of Revelation:

*“The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.”  
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen” (Rev. 22:20-21).*

“Thy kingdom come” – we may not have given it much thought over the course of our lives as we’ve prayed this rote little line, but it’s an eschatological prayer for the ages.

“Give us each day our daily bread.” We can be sure, because this is the Gospel of Luke, that there is a very practical concern for the daily food of the poor bound

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***Thy kingdom come”– we may not have given it much thought over the course of our lives as we’ve prayed this rote little line, but it’s an eschatological prayer for the ages.***

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up in this prayer. Luke always holds a concern for the poor. But there’s more to it than meets the eye: another plausible translation of this phrase, “daily bread,” is “bread for tomorrow,” not signaling a penchant for planning ahead, but another eschatological allusion that Fred Craddock says might very well mean “bread

from heaven at the final coming of the kingdom.”<sup>30</sup> Not just “give us what we need to survive the next day,” but “when thy kingdom comes, give us the manna from heaven that will sustain us in the final hour.”

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.” “When your kingdom comes, spare us the final time of trial,” or as Craddock says again, “the final thrashing about and agony of evil before the end.”<sup>31</sup>

This from a man who had “set his face toward Jerusalem,” the text says just a chapter or so before – headed straight for what could only be described as his ultimate “the time of trial,” when the world of his disciples would come crashing down around their heads.

The world is always ending for some.

It has ended resolutely for many.

And it is ending for us.

Heard in this way, even at the very heart of the Christian tradition in words known by nearly everyone, Jesus may very well have been teaching them – and us – a prayer for the end of the world as we know it.<sup>32</sup> ■

*Cody J. Sanders is Associate Professor of Congregational and Community Care Leadership at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. His most recent book, co-authored with Mikeal C. Parsons is *Corpse Care: Ethics for Tending the Dead*, published this year by Fortress Press. This presentation was given at the Inaugural Fall Lecture of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists (AWAB) at St. Luke’s Missionary Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina on September 26, 2022 and was updated and offered to readers of *Christian Ethics Today* by the author.*

*Footnotes with all references can be found in the online version at: <https://christianethicstoday.com/wp/strengthen-what-...apocalyptic-hope/>*

# Christmas Season vs Advent

By Patrick Anderson

Except for a few years when our children were small, but even then, deep down, I have harbored an adult-long dislike for Christmas. I don't like the mythology of Santa. The reliance of the entire American economy on retailers' success in wooing me to spend money on foolish things is a very big turn-off. The noise about conflicted Christendom's rhetoric to "put Christ back in Christmas" is depressing. Debates over nativity scenes in the public square, a supposed war on Christmas, the gaudiness...I hate it all. I do not like the depression-like letdown after the mad rush of present opening on Christmas day. Christmas is not my idea of "the most wonderful time of the year" despite hearing that musical expression ad nauseum.

When our three children were no longer living at home, Carolyn and I were left behind a few years ago. Released from our previous routine of Christmas-as-crucial-to-child-raising, we enjoyed the empty nest for a few short years by spending the Christmas season doing fun things. One year we went to London for two weeks; we devoted extra offerings to ministries for the poor; I thought we had forsaken bad Christmas and instead thought holy thoughts of righteous separation from the worldliness of Christmas. Ha!

That changed as Amy and her two children moved into our house on Beech Mountain. Sydney age 8 and Davis age 5 gave us a new focus in our home. As part of that, we are into Christmas again with lots of decorations, music, and manufactured excitement. Despite my curmudgeon-ness, my old cold heart is softening. Perhaps it was the 5-inch snowfall we had this weekend and the blazing fireplace. Maybe it is the music and hot chocolate with the added kick. I cannot be sure, but I do feel my old frozen heart melting.

Davis is the biggest reason. He is the first person I have encountered who really epitomizes the "spirit of Christmas", if there is such a thing. He snuggles really well for one thing, and all grandparents are suckers for snuggling grandchildren. But the biggest quality he brings to the table is his genuinely selfless attitude.

I asked him while we were sitting together in front of the fire, "What do you want for Christmas, big guy?" The question itself exposed my reversion to bad ol' Christmases past by focusing our conversation on the evil subject of material expectations, something I had sworn off. But he just shrugged and said "I don't

know, nothing" with an air of disinterest, a detachment which I have not seen in the other children in my life. Then, he said, "I want Sydney to have a puppy."

Well, that just about did me in. He knows his big sister is having a hard time with the family reorganization. He talks with her in privileged conversations only siblings have and he knows how lonely she feels sometimes, and he hears her frequent longing for a dog of her own, a pet to snuggle with, to shower with affection, and talk to. I know he is reflecting his own deep feelings too, but more than anything, Davis wants his sister to be happy.

Davis has spent the past two days with his Gram, Carolyn, working on a special handmade card for Syd.

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*Christmas is not my idea of "the most wonderful time of the year" despite hearing that musical expression ad nauseum.*

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He selected buttons from Gram's stash and ribbons carefully chosen for color and texture. He picked his favorite sharpies and created a drawing of a house with a door that opens onto the sight of a Christmas tree, decorated in his own artistic style. He thinks day and night of trying to make his sister happy. He is sure this hand-crafted card will please her, and he works hard at keeping his efforts secret so she will be properly surprised. His creative juices are flowing. He is the happiest kid I know as he puts all his creative energy in the special card.

We got Sydney a puppy. His name is Scruffy. I am now in the Christmas spirit (or something akin to it). Davis has won me over. Maybe the sound I hear is the jingle bells in the melting snow of my heart.

Maybe the Christmas Season is not so bad after all. It doesn't have to be totally disconnected from the Advent, the birth of Jesus. ■

*Note: A version of this essay was written and published in December of 2009.*

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—Foy Valentine, *Founding Editor*

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