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Editor's Introduction for the Spring Edition: "As I Live It"

Personal remembrances help us understand the issues confronting us today. In this edition I reflect on the Southern Baptist Convention's epic "Takeover" by fundamentalists in the 1970s and '80s and the prescient insights of Texas Baptist layman, John Baugh, who showed that takeover to be a harbinger of the current takeover of the Republican Party.

Pastor Mitri Raheb, using Jesus' own description of his mission as recorded in the fourth chapter of Luke, depicts the similarities of Jesus' experiences in Roman-occupied Palestine to his own life in a Palestine occupied by Israelis. Charles Kiker explains the first chapters of Genesis as the poetic rendering of the truth of God's creative work.

Randall Balmer cites personal examples of the many mistruths espoused by leading white nationalists claiming to be Christian. Baptist pastor and small-town mayor, Bill Blackburn, puts "separation of church and state" in context from his own experiences. Wendell Griffen describes Robert P. Jones' book, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy*, from his own experiences and readings. Gary Furr as a pastor, counselor and parent describes Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*, explaining the ways handheld devices are rewiring the brains of our children and how Christians can address the problem.

Personal experiences and understandings can add to our understanding of life's most perplexing problems.

The Takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention: A Cautionary Tale

By Patrick Anderson, editor

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of
foolishness.*

*It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of
incredulity.*

*It was the season of Light, it was the season of
Darkness,*

*It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of
despair,*

*We had everything before us, we had nothing
before us,*

*We were all going direct to Heaven, we were all
going direct the other way.*

—Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

The late Romanian Baptist pastor and theologian, Dr. Ioan Bunaciu, wrote a book, *The History of Romanian Baptists: As I Lived It*. It is a first-person account of the historical development of the strongest evangelical church movement in a Communist country.

Romania was dominated by the despotic ruler, Nicolai Ceausescu, and supported by the official state church, the Romanian Orthodox Church; but even while under persecution, the church continued.

A colleague and friend took exception to some parts of the book and complained to the author about it. Dr. Bunaciu responded: "I wrote the Baptist history in Romania, *as I lived it*; If you lived it differently, write your own book!"

First person histories can be very contradictory, it seems. The assessment of historians as to whether events are best—wise and hopeful—or worst—foolish and despairing, as Dickens seems to imply, depends on the historian's preference for one or the other set of conclusions.

For instance, the dramatic takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, beginning in 1979 and culminating in 1990, is frequently positively referred to as "The Conservative Resurgence of the SBC." In truth, those of us who lived through that time know that it is

more accurately termed, "The Baptist War," or more genteelly as "The Fundamentalist Takeover of the SBC."

That history is often referenced by scholars and commentators when describing the rise of "Christian Nationalism" in America.

Labels matter, and even that term, "Christian Nationalism," has been proudly appropriated by people like U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson and zealous fans of Donald Trump who conflate nationalism with patriotism.

My friend, Wendell Griffen, told me that the term is "wrong, wrong, wrong" (his words). Never mind the non-Christian use of the term and the non-historical understanding of American nationalism; he says it should more honestly be called "Christian fascism" or "Christian authoritarianism."

Whatever it is called, what happened in the SBC in the 1980s was not a conservative resurgence by any means. Conservatism had nothing to do with it. It was a well-planned and executed total takeover of America's largest and richest non-Catholic denomination by power-driven men who lied, cheated and used every means necessary to gain control of the whole operation. And, they did it.

Total control of the SBC was not all they wanted, as studies of the so-called Religious Right have only recently begun to document. They realized that the SBC with its riches, many morally pliable preachers, and easily-snookered laypeople who filled the pews and offering plates of 30,000 churches, could be appropriated for their own use. But the greater goal was to take over America, to make it a "Christian nation," to champion their misunderstanding of the Bible to promote "biblical law," a white, male-dominated authoritarian theocracy.

Right about now, if you have read this far, you may be scratching your head and thinking, "What is Pat saying now? Has he gone off his rocker and become a conspiracy theorist?"

The architects, enablers and advocates of the takeover of the SBC created a road map of tactics and strategies which have been adopted by far-right zealots. A few decades ago, they too represented a small minority of Americans; yet they have managed to take over the Republican Party in America and are relentlessly advancing their own unpopular and erroneous beliefs about the founding ideas of America, the Bible, the Constitution, and democracy. Today, that campaign appears far-too-likely to take over the entire American government in 2024.

In the SBC case, the fundamentalists devised an aggressive campaign to undermine church members'

faith in the agencies of their beloved denomination. They traveled the Bible Belt, preaching to gatherings large and small, claiming that the SBC was led by "liberals" who did not believe the Bible. That seminary professors were indoctrinating preachers with heresies. They claimed that SBC missionaries no longer sought to evangelize, that, inexplicably, some SBC churches had even called women pastors(!).

There was a small kernel of truth in some of those claims—as one might find a bit of corn or oats in horse manure. But the impact of the presentations was what we now understand to be *gaslighting*. That term was not widely known in the 1980s, but in 2022, Merriam-Webster named *gaslighting* as their "Word of the Year," defining it in part as:

...to psychologically manipulate (a person) usually over an extended period of time so that the victim questions the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality...

Psychology Today defines gaslighting as an insidious form of manipulation and psychological control which

Not many Baptists or other Christians saw what John Baugh saw. He was prescient, ahead of his time. But now, just a few decades later, we see that he was correct. The same tactics of the SBC Takeover have been employed by unscrupulous men and women to successfully capture and control more than half of America's state legislatures and governorships, and a super-majority of justices on the U.S. Supreme Court.

deliberately and systematically feeds false information that makes it increasingly difficult for the victim to see the truth.

The SBC Takeover strategists understood that only a very small number of SBC church members participated in the governing processes of the denomination which took place at annual meetings of the SBC in various cities. A denomination that claimed 14,000,000 members normally saw 12-20,000 persons attend the annual meetings. If even a small number of gullible and frightened church members and pastors could

be herded to the annual SBC Convention meetings each year and vote as directed by the fundamentalist leaders, they could remove the existing officers and executives, change the traditional statements of Baptist beliefs about the separation of church and state, diminish women's roles in the church, and refute local church autonomy. They could replace the existing type of administrative leadership that so far had thwarted the ambitions of the fundamentalists with zealots who would follow the dictates of fundamentalism. When I attended the annual SBC Convention meeting for the first time in 1985, there were 45,000 registered voters in attendance.

By the time the final break in the denomination occurred at the annual meeting of the SBC in New Orleans in 1990, the SBC was totally and publicly dominated by fundamentalists who had already made much progress in removing agency executives, seminary presidents and professors, unsupportive board members, and anyone associated with the resistance to the Fundamentalist Takeover.

Today, the SBC has been ravaged by financial and sexual abuse scandals, sagging seminary enrollment, deficits, declining membership, and political relevancy only for the MAGA-world. The public has increasingly and correctly understood the SBC to be a pliable and reliable tool of the extremist faction of the Republican Party.

Even as the SBC Takeover was unfolding in the 1980s, most of us who fought hard to "save" the SBC from the disaster that resulted from the Takeover, did not fully appreciate the broader implications of what was happening.

John F. Baugh, was an exception. I first became aware of John Baugh at the SBC Annual Meeting in Dallas, Texas, in 1985, well after the struggle had been

engaged. The next year in Atlanta, I met him personally. I had learned that he was the founding president and CEO of the giant food distribution corporation, Sysco. Mr. Baugh was a well-known Texas Baptist layman, a gentleman and a devout and honorable man. He understood what was at stake in the SBC Takeover better than anyone else I had met. He knew the fundamentalists who led the scheme to take over the SBC, calling them phonies, and explaining that they were motivated by visions of power, greed and control.

In 1996, John Baugh published his first and only book, *The Battle for Baptist Integrity*, in which he told the story of the takeover *as he lived it*. He warned Southern Baptists about the dangers of the fundamentalist mindset and the motives and tactics of authoritarians. He saw that the final goal, beyond the takeover of the SBC, was to capture, reconstruct and dominate the United States of America.

Not many Baptists or other Christians saw what John Baugh saw. He was prescient, ahead of his time. But now, just a few decades later, we see that he was correct. The same tactics of the SBC Takeover have been employed by unscrupulous men and women to successfully capture and control more than half of America's state legislatures and governorships, and a super-majority of justices on the U.S. Supreme Court. They have entrenched a large number of far right appellate and federal judges, enabled a minority of representatives to dominate the leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives, and much more. They work night and day to install Donald J. Trump into a second term as president of the U.S. to further the reconstruction and domination of America.

That is how I continue "*to live it.*" What happened to the Southern Baptist Convention is a cautionary tale, indeed. ■

Jesus' Mission Statement: Bible Study From the Book of Luke

by Mitri Raheb

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4, 16-21 NIV)

This text is at the beginning of Luke's gospel. After the record of Jesus' birth, genealogy and his temptation, the first thing Jesus does is the teaching at the synagogue in Nazareth. This sermon should be read as Jesus' mission statement. It provides an overview of Jesus' life, work, and ministry. It points to Jesus' mandate. His mission is broken into five goals:

- Bring good news to the poor
- Proclaim release to the captives
- Proclaim recovery of sight to the blind
- Let the oppressed go free
- Proclaim the year of Jubilee

This mission statement is highly political. There is nothing here about the salvation of souls; it's all about liberation of the oppressed. The target group of Jesus' ministry is not the souls, but the oppressed. Luke, in comparison to Matthew, is not interested in the poor in spirit, but in those made poor by unjust economic systems. Jesus here is not so much concerned by those captive to "sin." but those jailed by the empire.

Are we made blind so that we can't see anymore what the text is saying? If we have doubt then let's look at Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1, which is a kind of a prelude to Luke 4.

"My soul magnifies the Lord...He has shown strength with his arm; he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the

lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty."

People wonder if Jesus was no more than Joseph's son; but Luke 4 makes it clear that Jesus is Mary's son, and they have the same theology with a preferential option for the oppressed and poor. If we have doubt, let's look at Jesus sermon on the field in Luke 6 to see that he is interested in the poor and the hungry.

To understand Jesus' mission, we have to understand its context.

Palestine has been an occupied country for most of the last 3000 years. It started with the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then came the Greeks and then the Romans. Jesus' mission

The Bible didn't originate in the Bible belt, but in Palestine. Jesus was born in occupied Palestine which was under Roman occupation. How can we understand the historical Jesus without understanding what occupation means, what it does, and how it controls life in its entirety.

statement is a combination of words spoken by Trito-Isaiah (Chapter 61, 1-2 and 58, 6) and Deutero-Isaiah (Chapter 42,7). At the time of Deutero-Isaiah, Palestine was occupied by the Babylonians. Although the Babylonians were no more at the time of Trito-Isaiah, the Persians were in control. These words were spoken in the context of empire. Jesus knew exactly what to quote from the Hebrew bible, when, and why. Der Sitz im Leben of those text is the occupation. This is why they must be read and understood in this context.

Occupation is almost a synonym for Palestine. The Romans weren't the last empire who occupied our country. We had the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Ottomans, the British, and now the Israeli occupation.

I was five-years-old when Israel occupied Bethlehem in 1967. This was exactly 50 years ago. I know what

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living under occupation means. I can imagine what it meant for Jesus to be born under occupation, to live his entire life under occupation, and to be crushed on the cross by the empire. There is no way to understand Jesus' mission without looking at the context of imperial occupation.

Occupied people are not poor *per se*; they are made poor. Their resources are exploited by the empire and obtained by cheap labor to keep the economy of the empire running and growing. The cost of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is around 10 billion dollars annually, representing almost 80% of the GDP. The total economic aid that we get doesn't even compensate for 10 % of what the occupation is costing us. Occupied people are not poor, they are made poor. Jesus understood that. This is why he is not promising them aid, or food, but good news of social justice.

Those captives Jesus is addressing are not those captives in sin. The text is very clear. These are captives of the empire. They are political prisoners who dared to resist the empire. They are put into prison so that they don't disrupt the empire, so that business in the empire can continue as usual. Since 1967, over 700,000 Palestinian political prisoners have been put in Israel's jails. This is almost one-fifth of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Currently, over 6000 Palestinian political prisoners are in Israeli jails waiting for someone to proclaim their freedom and set them free. Jesus must have spoken these words in a similar context. What he is promising is nothing less than a revolution. This revolution is very relevant to those occupied and denied freedom.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. It wasn't the Lord God that promised Palestine to Israel, but Lord Balfour. This was part of a British imperial colonial plan. The Israeli occupation is nothing other than the last chapter of 19th century European colonialism. The empire occupies land but also seminaries and theological faculties. If the empire provides the hardware for occupation, seminaries provide the software. Imperial seminaries portray colonialism as fulfillment of prophecy. Oppression becomes theologically sanctified.

This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Many churches are calling for a year of Jubilee, for Israel to end its occupation and to give the land back to its original owners. Other churches continue to whitewash the Israeli occupation theologically.

Jesus' mission statement is highly political. But Jesus' mission is holistic. This is why we see Jesus opting for the sinners and outcasts of his time.

Occupied people often blame themselves for their occupation. They see this is a punishment from God for not observing the law. Religious conservatism becomes one possible response to the empire and oppression. So more religious laws are produced to keep people in line. Occupied people in this case become doubly oppressed. They are oppressed by the political laws of the empire but also by religious laws introduced by their own religious establishment. Freedom from religious oppression is an integral part of Jesus' mission and an integral part of the reformation. This is the context of *sola gracia* and *sola scripture*.

Understanding Jesus' mission in his context might be threatening for some people who are used to spiritualizing Jesus' ministry. But this understanding poses a challenge as well to us. If we are to understand Jesus' mission as highly political, then we need to ask the question of whether or not Jesus was able to achieve the five goals he set for himself. Did he accomplish his mission? Was his mission fulfilled?

Freedom from religious oppression is an integral part of Jesus' mission and an integral part of the reformation. This is the context of sola gracia and sola scripture.

If his mission is understood spiritually, it is easier to claim that it was fulfilled. But what if his mission is political? Then, don't we need to admit that Jesus failed in his mission? Imperial oppression is not only still in Palestine, but throughout the world in an unprecedented magnitude.

We were taught to say, that Jesus' mission is fulfilled—but not yet. It is interesting that the ending of Luke's gospel is not the same as the ending in the gospel of John with it is "finished/accomplished" idea of victory. This is why we have a second part to Luke's gospel known as the Acts of the Apostles.

What was accomplished is the proclamation. Jesus proclaimed God's vision for this world in very clear terms which are highly political. But Jesus didn't claim that he is the one who will do all of that. He proclaims God's intention, vision and mission statement. But as in any other plan, God needs resources to accomplish his plan. He needs human resources and, with his mission statement, he hopes to invite and motivate us to join his team, to join his mission and to become his

agents of change. The book of Acts is a response to the question, "Lord when will you restore the kingdom?" Jesus answers by saying: "You will receive the Holy Spirit and will be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and until the end of time." Luke's second book is open-ended. He must have envisioned people like Luther, Calvin and us. He must have hope for Jesus' followers to continue with this mission.

Jesus' sermon was in no way an illusion, wishful thinking or a kind of hallucination. Jesus' sermon was the unfolding of a new vision for social and political transformation, a world with no political prisoners, none who are landless, or who are exploited and oppressed. As Christians, we continue to live in a broken world and thus the tension between the "the world as it is" with all its ugly and painful realities and the "the world as it could be." We must balance that tension. Being too absorbed by "the world as it is" makes us resentful. Dreaming too much about "the world as it should be" makes us fundamentalists.

We can't live except with our two feet deeply grounded in the reality of this world and, at the same time, with our two hands engaged in creating the "the world as it could be." We must learn to hold the reins of tension between history with its endless wounds and the future with its promises without forgetting that "today" is the space in which to heal wounds and to seize opportunities. We need to analyze the oppressive system of the empire without falling into a kind of fatalism where we become objects of history. To some extent, we lose the future the moment we lose our capability for imagination. Jesus' sermon is an open invitation to envision a new world as God intended it. Without a new driving vision and without allowing for such an imaginative process to take place, the world will spiral into chaos. Without vision, nations go astray. It is in this time of immense challenges that imaginative faith rises to discover the endless possibilities that lie therein.

Imagination is important; but imagination alone is not enough. God's preferential option for the poor is good; but it is not enough. Faith is about imagination; but it is more about hope. Imagination is what we see. Hope is what we do. Imagination can be highly deceiving if it is not connected to a well-defined strategy and a plan. Hope is the power to keep focusing on the larger vision while taking the small steps towards that future. Hope doesn't wait for vision to come. Hope is vision in action today.

Faith that makes people passive, depressive, or

illusory is not faith, but opium. Faith is facing the empire with open eyes that analyze what is happening while, at the same time, developing the ability to see beyond what humans see. Hope is living the reality and yet investing in a different one. Jesus' plan has to be implemented "today" in our lives, in our churches, and in our world. Jesus' sermon can't be something from "yesterday." It is always a call for us today to engage in God's mission. Just as *Ekklesia semper reformanda*, so we have to keep translating Jesus' sermon into our world of today, in the context of the empire of today, with a new vision for the world of today.

This is our call. It is a costly call. This is why the people after hearing Jesus' sermon felt threatened and wanted to get rid of him. Everyone who dares to challenge the empire experiences what Jesus experienced. The time of Jesus is not different than our time. It is much easier to spiritualize Christianity so that it loses its teeth. Then we don't need to do much, but to conform ourselves to the empire. Jesus' sermon

This is our call. It is a costly call. This is why the people after hearing Jesus' sermon felt threatened and wanted to get rid of him.

is an open invitation for a costly life that is committed to social, political and religious transformation in the face of the empire today. ■

The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb is the most widely-published Palestinian Christian theologian today. Among his more than 50 published books are Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible and In the Eye of the Storm: Middle Eastern Christians in an Age of Empire. He is founder and president of Dar al-Katima University in Bethlehem and former senior pastor of the Christmas Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. He also serves as an elected member to the Palestinian National Council and the Palestinian Central Council. This sermon was preached at the General Council in Leipzig, Germany, July 3, 2017, and is found on Dr. Raheb's website www.mitriraheb.org

Reclaiming Genesis 1-3 from Biblical Literalism and Secular Humanism

by Charles Kiker

My cousin Donald McKinney was a West Texas cotton farmer. Our families were close-knit. In 2008, my older brother and I got word that Donald had gone the way of all flesh, and we decided to go to Big Spring for Donald's funeral. After the funeral, there was a family dinner, and I sat at table next to Donald's grandson Matt Foss. Matt confided in me, "Grandad told me that he takes the Bible too seriously to take it literally." I responded, "Your Grandad was a wise man."

New Testament scholar Frank Stagg often told his students, "To literalize is to trivialize." Cotton farmer Donald McKinney never heard of Frank Stagg, but they had a lot in common.

In company with West Texas cotton farmer Donald McKinney and New Testament scholar Frank Stagg, I take the stories in Genesis 1-3 too seriously to trivialize them by literalizing them.

Biblical stories do not require historical accuracy or literal facticity to be profoundly true. We will encounter stories in the first chapters of Genesis that cannot be historical, as we understand history, or factual, as we understand fact, and can still be profoundly true, as we understand truth. The story tellers who gave us Genesis were people of their own time. But let us understand that we too are creatures of our own time, and that our understandings of history, fact and truth may be misunderstandings in a different time.

Genesis 1:1-2:4a is the first of two creation accounts in Genesis. Most scholars who take the documentary hypothesis seriously—and I do—scribe Genesis 1:1-2:4a to the priestly (P) strand of the Pentateuch. The date for P is probably early post-exilic, circa 500 BCE.

I read Genesis 1:1-2:4a as a creation poem followed by a celebration of seventh day rest. The first word in Genesis is the same as the title for the book: *b'raysheeth*, commonly translated, "in the beginning." That is a good, but unfortunate translation for our historical context because it is so easily heard as indicating chronological calendar time. Is the universe six thousand, six million, six billion, or maybe sixty billion years old? A biblical inerrantist acknowledges that while scientifically the world appears to be old, as a theologian he believes it's somewhere around 6,000 years old. Another inerrantist says that Bishop

Ussher's dating of creation at 4004 BCE was probably right, if you allow a 25-year more or less margin of error!

Someone else was more precise: October 10, 4004 BCE, at 10:00 o'clock in the morning. We will not learn the date of creation from Genesis. Nor should we try. The word *b'raysheeth* is derived from the Hebrew word *rosh*. It can refer to head, or top or first. The Greek word used to translate it in the Septuagint is *arkhe*, from which we get "arch" as in archbishop, archdiocese. The first words in the Septuagint are, translated to English, "In *arkhe* God made. . . ."

Biblical stories do not require historical accuracy or literal facticity to be profoundly true. We will encounter stories in the first chapters of Genesis that cannot be historical, as we understand history, or factual, as we understand fact, and can still be profoundly true, as we understand truth.

A book from a couple of decades ago is titled "How Does a Poem Mean?" Not "what" but "how?" How does Genesis 1:1-2:4a mean? How I hear the first word in the Bible is as the title of a creation poem. I paraphrase it Now Hear This. How I hear verse one is as the subject line for the poem: "God created the heavens and the earth." The following verses describe the earth as an utter chaos, concrete nothingness and deep, deep darkness with a category six hurricane howling over the waters. Concrete nothingness; utter darkness on the face of the deep, and the ruach *Elohim* (mighty wind) over the waters. Utter chaos; utter darkness; God speaks, "Let light come!" And light came, and God saw that the light was good. God called the light "day," and the darkness "night." Then the first refrain,

"And there was evening, and there was morning, one day."

This refrain is repeated at the end of each of the six days of creation. Fact and story collide. How can there be a 24-hour day, as literal six-day creation folks understand the story, before the sun is created? And how can there be light before the sun? Light comes to utter darkness, and God calls the light good. "God saw that it was good" is a secondary refrain, uttered seven times in the six days of creation.

The darkness is not banished, but it is no longer in charge. Each of the six days of creation begins with darkness. Every day starts with darkness, but ends with light. Good news indeed!

The following lines are this author's effort to condense and paraphrase the Hebrew poetry of Genesis 1:2-5 into English verse:

NOW HEAR THIS

Earth was just a jumbled mess of concrete nothingness.

And darkest darkness, nothing less, in the depths of the abyss.

Then God invited Light to counteract that darkest Night.

God understood that Light was good.

Light was Day. God named it so.

Yes, there was dark; but there was light

On that first day.

On the second day, God deals with the watery chaos by making a

firmament, a metal dome above in the midst of the waters to separate the

waters above from the waters below, "and there was evening, and there

was morning, a second day."

And the waters under the heavens were gathered into one place so

that there was dry land. "And God saw that it was good." In accordance

with God's speech the earth brought forth vegetation.

And there was evening, and there was morning, a third day.

Fact as we know and understand fact collides head on with a story in a creation poem. But there is profound truth in this story. God is dealing with the waters of the Great Deep. Darkness, and the deep—God is dealing with both!

We advance to the fourth day, and physical light as we know light. There's the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. And they are for signs and for seasons, and for days and for years. There's no trace of divinity in the heavenly light-

givers. And God made the stars. And the stars do not make us what we are. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day. God permitted the waters to bring forth all kinds of sea life, and birds of the air, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. . . . And there was evening, and there was morning, a fifth day. On day six, the earth brings forth land animals, Then, as described in Genesis 1:26-31, God created humankind in God's own image and in God's likeness. In the poetic cadence of KJV (verse 27), "So God created man in his own image. In the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." Gerhard von Rad, (Old Testament Theology, p. 145) suggests that Israel did not regard God anthropomorphically, but regarded man theomorphically. God gave humankind dominion over creation. Humans were to be God's stewards over the creation. And notice that in the secondary refrain, God pronounced the creation VERY good. And there was evening, and there was morning, a sixth day. Darkness vs. light and chaos vs. order provide the theme for the six days of

"There was evening, and there was morning" for days one through six.

"Yes, there was darkness, but there was light." For six days; but there was a seventh day. The work is complete; now God can rest.

creation in Genesis!. "There was evening, and there was morning" for days one through six. "Yes, there was darkness, but there was light." For six days; but there was a seventh day. The work is complete; now God can rest.

Where is the refrain? Could it be that our Priestly Poet forgot it? Or just didn't need it? Or is it that there is no ending to this seventh day? We will return to these questions after we view the second creation account in the remainder of chapter 2, and the "fall" in chapter 3. Creation and "Fall" in Genesis chapters 2 and 3 There are obvious differences, even conflict between the Creation Poem of Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a and the Story of Eden in Genesis 2:4b - 2:25.

There are different names for God: *Elohim* in the Creation Poem; and YHWH *Elohim* in 2:4b-25. The sequence of creation is different. In chapter 2:4b ff it is land, man, vegetation, animals, woman. In the first account it is light, firmament, vegetation, heavenly

lights, sea creatures; land creatures, humankind.

The climates are different: too much water vs. not enough water. The accounts are markedly different in style. Gen. 2:4b-3:3:24 is widely considered to be from the J (yahwist) strand of the Pentateuch. J is earlier than P (priestly). J might be as early as David. P is after the 586 BCE exile. In J, YHWH is widely used as the divine name. After chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis, the YHWH *Elohim* combination is extremely rare in the Hebrew Bible.

The beginning of the Story of Eden is very much like Gen 1:1, the beginning of the creation poem, except is now YHWH *Elohim*. There's no rain; the ground is watered by a mist or by rising ground water. YHWH *Elohim*, formed man, *adham*, from the dust of the ground (*adh'mah*), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being [*nephesh hayah* in Hebrew], the same term used for living animals in Gen. 1:20, 23-24. A human corpse is a dead *nephesh muth* in Lev. 21:11 and Num 6:6.

When I was six months old, a whooping cough epidemic was ravaging the Valley View community. I got it and was having a bad coughing spell. Mother tried to call the doctor on the wall-mounted crank telephone and bumped my head on the cabinet. I changed from coughing to crying, and lost my breath. I was about to be a dead *nephesh*. Crawford Crane, a nomad from South Carolina, had taken up residence at our house. He witnessed all this and said, "Give me that baby!" He took me in his arms and gave me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation long before medical people knew anything about it. I got my breath back, and from that day Mr. Crane claimed me as his boy.

After all, he had given breath of life back to me. He got old age dementia and was sent to the insane asylum in Wichita Falls. Almost everybody sent there died there. Mr. Crane did. They sent his body back to Tulia for burial. I attended his funeral at First Baptist Church there as a little boy.

I told this story at the breakfast table, and my son-in-law, Alan Bean, asked me, "Does Mr. Crane still have a claim on you?" I said, "Probably." When Somebody #1 gives Somebody #2 the breath of life, Somebody #1 has some kind of claim on Somebody #2. YHWH *Elohim* has a claim on *adham*! We are all *adham*. YHWH *Elohim* made the trees in the garden, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

There follows a description of a river flowing out of the garden. It's large enough to water the garden and still branch into four streams watering the known world. This river calls to mind the river of Ezekiel 47, flowing out of the Temple down to the Dead Sea, making it a fresh water lake, and reminds us of the river

in Revelation 22 that nourishes the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the *ethnoi*. Ethnic healing, not ethnic cleansing!

After the digression about the rivers, the narrator turns back to *adham*, and puts him in the garden to "till it and to keep it." YHWH *Elohim* gave definite instructions about the trees in the garden. The man may eat the fruit of any of the trees of the garden, except for the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; "in the day you eat of it, you shall die." We'll come back to this at the end of chapter 3. But YHWH *Elohim* noticed that *adham* was lonely and needed a helper; so out of the ground, the same stuff the man is made of, YHWH *Elohim* formed the animals and brought them to *adham* to see what he would call them. Whatever the man called a *nephesh hayah* was what it was.

A faithful member of the Arco church had a big sheep ranch. We took our eight-year-old granddaughter out to see the sheep. She wondered aloud about the origin of sheep. "They're sheep," the rancher said, "just like God made them." He knew his Bible well.

Our concern is more with what the serpent says than with who he is. And what he says is in the form of a distorted question, "Did God really say?"

But back to the story: Out of all those creatures, there was no helpmate for the man. So, YHWH *Elohim* anesthetized *adham*, removed a rib, and made the rib into a woman. And when Adam came out from under, YHWH *Elohim* brought her to him to see what he thought. He thought it was great! "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" Adam said, "I'll call her *Ishah* since she came from *Ish*." The narrator adds that they were unashamedly naked. At least for the time being.

Enter the serpent, the most subtle of all the wild animals that Yahweh *Elohim* had made. And the serpent struck up a conversation with the woman. "Did God say that you should not eat from any of the trees in the garden?" The serpent uses a Hebrew expression of incredulity, "Did God really say . . .?" sowing a seed of doubt in the mind of the woman.

The serpent is not yet a snake as we know snakes. He is not *ha satan*, the adversary among the heavenly beings in the prologue to the Book of Job. He is not

among the sons of God who took a liking to the daughters of men in Genesis 6:1-4. Our concern is more with what the serpent says than with who he is. And what he says is in the form of a distorted question, "Did God really say?"

The woman responded to the serpent that they could eat of any of the trees except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and added that they could not touch it on penalty of death. The serpent sneered, "You will not die. *Elohim* knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like *Elohim*, knowing good and evil. The woman gets bad press for adding the prohibition of touching the tree. But any knowledge the woman had about the forbidden tree had to come from another source. She was still a rib in the man's side when the prohibition was given.

She was persuaded. She believed the serpent. So, she ate, and gave the man a bite. Then they realized they were naked, and clothed themselves with fig leaf aprons. They had grown beyond childhood, and they didn't die!

But, remember the end of chapter two? They were unashamedly naked. No longer so! Then, they heard the sound of YHWH *Elohim* walking in the garden. And they tried to hide. But they could not hide from YHWH *Elohim*, who said. "Where are you, *adham*?" "I heard you walking in the garden, and I was naked and afraid, so I tried to hide."

"Who told you that you were naked? Have you been eating the fruit of that tree that I told you not to eat?" "That woman that you gave me gave me some of the fruit, and I ate." It's the woman's fault, and ultimately it's God's fault.

Now it's time to question the woman. And she shifts the blame. "The serpent tricked me; it's his fault."

The defendants are guilty. Now it's sentencing time. The serpent is no longer upright but goes on his belly; he will eat the dust from which he was made; there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman's descendants. This enmity goes back to pre-history but not forward to eternity. In Isaiah's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom, "The nursing child will play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den (Isaiah 11:8, NRSV).

And *Ishah* will suffer the pangs of childbirth. And her desire is for her man, who will rule over her. Patriarchy already? And as for *Adahm*, the ground *adh'mah* from which he was taken grows thorns and thistles and by the sweat of his brow he will eke out a living from it. ". . . you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19 NRSV).

And, Longfellow to the contrary, that was spoken of the *nephesh*. Now *adham* names his wife Eve, and

we have Adam and Eve, and YHWH *Elohim* made garments of skin for them. Then the LORD God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil . . ." (verse 22).

We have heard that before in verse five, the serpent speaking to the woman, "God [*Elohim*] knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God knowing good and evil." YHWH *Elohim* says that what the serpent said would happen has happened.

When I pointed this out in a lay ministry training program in Idaho, one of the students became very upset. "God and the devil cannot agree," he said angrily. "Your argument is not with me," I said, "but with the Bible."

The narrator continues:

“. . . and now, he might reach out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”--therefore [YHWH Elohim] sent him forth from the garden of Eden . . . and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cheru-

We've dealt with stories that are neither historical nor factual, but profoundly true. We are still east of Eden. And if we go with the narrator to the story of Cain and Abel, we will be yet farther east of Eden.

bim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:22b-24 NRSV).

We've dealt with stories that are neither historical nor factual, but profoundly true. We are still east of Eden. And if we go with the narrator to the story of Cain and Abel, we will be yet farther east of Eden.

To conclude this essay, let's go back to the seventh day in the priestly poem of creation.

We've seen six days of creation, each day concluding with the refrain, "And there was evening and there was morning." The refrain is absent for the seventh day. I can't imagine that the artistic priestly poet forgot it. Or, that he thought it was unimportant. I hear the loud voice of the absence of the refrain as a statement of eschatological hope. He chose hope over the bitterness of the post exilic psalmist:

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!"

Down to its foundations!"
O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock! Psalm 137:7-9
(NRSV)

Let's put ourselves in the place of that poet. Let's think the unthinkable, that constitutional protections have disappeared, that there is an absolute autocracy reaching from the White House down to down to the courthouse. In such a scenario, the leaders of inclusive and justice-seeking churches that dare speak truth to power could be incarcerated, or worse. And the edifices of such churches could be torn down, down to their foundations, while their Edomite Christian Nationalist cousins cheer on the devastation. Hate could grow strong and mock the song of "Peace on Earth, good will to all."

The priestly poet of creation knew about the exile,

and Adam and Eve and the serpent, and the flood, and the tower of Babel. He chose hope over hate. He had not heard what we have heard: the Good News of the New Jerusalem on earth, where the gates to the city are open by day, and there is no night there! (Revelation 22:25). But John the Revelator did know the creation poem! We should not read the vision of the New Jerusalem as "pie in the sky when we die by and by," but as a vision of hope born of faith, in the midst of despair born of persecution.

May we, whatever the darkness and chaos around us, hang on to hope! And all God's people said . . . ■

Charles Kiker is a retired ABCUSA minister and educator. He earned the BA degree from Wayland Baptist College (now university) and the PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife Patricia live in Arlington, TX with their daughter and son-in-law, Nancy and Alan Bean. They are members of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

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Celebrate the continuing presence of *Christian Ethics Today*

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Abortion and Bioethics: Principles to Guide U.S. Abortion Debates

By Nancy S. Jecker

On June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 decision that established the nationwide right to choose an abortion.

For decades, rancorous debate about the ruling has often been dominated by politics. Ethics garners less attention, although it lies at the heart of the legal controversy. As a philosopher and bioethicist, I study moral problems in medicine and health policy, including abortion.

Bioethical approaches to abortion often appeal to four principles: respect patients' autonomy; nonmaleficence, or "do no harm"; beneficence, or provide beneficial care; and justice. These principles were first developed during the 1970s to guide research involving human subjects. Today, they are essential guides for many doctors and ethicists in challenging medical cases.

Patient autonomy

The ethical principle of autonomy states that patients are entitled to make decisions about their own medical care when able. The American Medical Association's Code of Medical Ethics recognizes a patient's right to "receive information and ask questions about recommended treatments" in order to "make well-considered decisions about care." Respect for autonomy is enshrined in laws governing informed consent, which protect patients' right to know the medical options available and make an informed voluntary decision.

One great story every day

Some bioethicists regard respect for autonomy as lending firm support to the right to choose abortion, arguing that if a pregnant person wishes to end their pregnancy, the state should not interfere. According to one interpretation of this view, the principle of autonomy means that a person owns their body and should be free to decide what happens in and to it.

Abortion opponents do not necessarily challenge the soundness of respecting people's autonomy, but may disagree about how to interpret this principle. Some regard a pregnant person as "two patients" – the pregnant person and the fetus.

One way to reconcile these views is to say that as an

immature human being becomes "increasingly self-conscious, rational and autonomous it is harmed to an increasing degree," as philosopher Jeff McMahan writes. In this view, a late-stage fetus has more interest in its future than a fertilized egg, and therefore the later in pregnancy an abortion takes place, the more it may hinder the fetus's developing interests. In the U.S., where 92.7% of abortions occur at or before 13 weeks' gestation, a pregnant person's rights may often outweigh those attributed to the fetus. Later in pregnancy, however, rights attributed to the fetus may assume greater weight. Balancing these competing claims remains contentious.

Bioethical approaches to abortion often appeal to four principles: respect patients' autonomy; nonmaleficence, or "do no harm"; beneficence, or provide beneficial care; and justice.

Nonmaleficence and beneficence

The ethical principle of "do no harm" forbids intentionally harming or injuring a patient. It demands medically competent care that minimizes risks. Nonmaleficence is often paired with a principle of beneficence, a duty to benefit patients. Together, these principles emphasize doing more good than harm.

Minimizing the risk of harm figures prominently in the World Health Organization's opposition to bans on abortion because pregnant people facing barriers to abortion often resort to unsafe methods, which represent a leading cause of avoidable maternal deaths and morbidities worldwide.

Although 97% of unsafe abortions occur in developing countries, developed countries that have narrowed abortion access have produced unintended harms. In Poland, for example, doctors fearing prosecution have hesitated to administer cancer treatments during pregnancy or remove a fetus after a pregnant person's water breaks early in the pregnancy, before the fetus is viable. In the U.S., restrictive abortion laws in some

states, like Texas, have complicated care for miscarriages and high-risk pregnancies, putting pregnant people's lives at risk.

However, Americans who favor overturning Roe are primarily concerned about fetal harm. Regardless of whether or not the fetus is considered a person, the fetus might have an interest in avoiding pain. Late in pregnancy, some ethicists think that humane care for pregnant people should include minimizing fetal pain irrespective of whether a pregnancy continues. Neuroscience teaches that the human capacity to experience feeling or sensation develops between 24 and 28 weeks' gestation.

Justice

Justice, a final principle of bioethics, requires treating similar cases similarly. If the pregnant person and fetus are moral equals, many argue that it would be unjust to kill the fetus except in self-defense, if the fetus threatens the pregnant person's life. Others hold that even in self-defense, terminating the fetus' life is wrong because a fetus is not morally responsible for any threat it poses.

Yet defenders of abortion point out that even if abortion results in the death of an innocent person, that is not its goal. If the ethics of an action is judged by its goals, then abortion might be justified in cases where it realizes an ethical aim, such as saving a woman's life or protecting a family's ability to care for their current children. Defenders of abortion also argue that even if the fetus has a right to life, a person does not have a right to everything they need to stay alive. For example, having a right to life does not entail a right to threaten another's health or life, or ride roughshod over another's life plans and goals.

Justice also deals with the fair distribution of benefits and burdens. Among wealthy countries, the U.S. has the highest rate of deaths linked to pregnancy and childbirth. Without legal protection for abortion, pregnancy and childbirth for Americans could become even more risky. Studies show that women are more likely to die while pregnant or shortly thereafter in states with the most restrictive abortion policies.

Minority groups may have the most to lose if the right to choose abortion is not upheld because they utilize a disproportionate share of abortion services. In Mississippi, for example, people of color represent 44% of the population, but 81% of those receiving abortions. Other states follow a similar pattern, leading some health activists to conclude that "abortion restrictions are racist."

Other marginalized groups, including low-income families, could also be hard hit by abortion restrictions because abortions are expected to get pricier.

Politics aside, abortion raises profound ethical questions that remain unsettled, which courts are left to settle using the blunt instrument of law. In this sense, abortion "begins as a moral argument and ends as a legal argument," in the words of law and ethics scholar Katherine Watson.

Putting to rest legal controversies surrounding abortion would require reaching moral consensus. Short of that, articulating our own moral views and understanding others' can bring all sides closer to a principled

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compromise. ■

Nancy S. Jecker is Professor of Bioethics and Humanities, School of Medicine, University of Washington. This essay was first published in The Conversation, June 23, 2022 and is reprinted with permission.

A White Nationalist's Many Mistruths

By Randall Balmer

Tony Perkins, head of the Family Research Council, a Religious Right organization, has a history of involvement with the Ku Klux Klan in his home state of Louisiana. In 1996, while running the unsuccessful U.S. Senate campaign of his friend and mentor, Woody Jenkins, Perkins contracted with Klan Imperial Wizard David Duke's organization, Impact Mail & Printing, for automated phone calls.

The Federal Election Commission later determined that the campaign, in an apparent attempt to hide the Klan connection, "knowingly and willfully filed false disclosure reports."

While serving as a legislator in Louisiana, Perkins addressed the state chapter of the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC) on May 17, 2001, in the state capital. The CCC, a white supremacist organization widely known as the "uptown Klan," on its website once described African Americans as a "retrograde species of humanity."

A newspaper photograph captured Perkins smiling broadly, standing in front of a Confederate flag at Bonanno's Restaurant in Baton Rouge. When challenged on his association with a racist group, Perkins claimed that he was unaware of its history.

Here's a tip, genius. If you're addressing a room full of white faces with a Confederate flag at your back, it's probably not the local chapter of UFO enthusiasts.

These tawdry associations have not deterred Perkins from parading as an arbiter of morality, despite his support for Donald Trump. From his perch as head of the Family Research Council, which the Southern Poverty Law Center classifies as a hate group, Perkins rails against Islam, same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights.

And most recently, he has set his sights on Politico.

In response to Heidi Przybyla's article about Christian nationalism, Perkins together with Brian Burch of *Catholic Voice*, sent a letter of protest alleging Przybyla's "disqualifying lack of knowledge of the United States of America's founding documents and a profoundly prejudicial view toward American religious groups."

The letter continues to advance the demonstrably false narrative that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. Apparently, Perkins's dissembling knows no limits.

Once more, for the record: The founders, well aware of the wars of religion in Europe and England, explicitly specified that the new government should have no entanglement with religion. The First Amendment is abundantly clear: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Paradoxically, Perkins should take comfort in the very amendment he seeks to subvert.

However warped his views on theology or race or sexuality, he has every right to them under the "free exercise" clause. In addition, by creating a free marketplace for religion and disentangling it from the state, the First Amendment has ensured a religious

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vitality in the United States unmatched anywhere in the world.

Although Perkins himself has benefited from the "free exercise" provision, he cannot ignore the first clause of the First Amendment, the part about prohibiting religious establishment, thereby, in Thomas Jefferson's words, constructing a "wall of separation between church and state."

Perkins and his right-wing compatriots also like to assert that the founders themselves were evangelical Christians. This is so ludicrous that I'm tempted not to dignify it with a response.

Jefferson himself excised references to Jesus' divinity and miracles from the New Testament; this expur-

gated version, published posthumously, has come to be known as the Jefferson Bible.

Jefferson expressed his fondest hope that Americans would eventually embrace the “rational Christianity” of Unitarians, those who believe that Jesus was a moral exemplar, but not the son of God. Indeed, no founder, with the possible exception of John Witherspoon, Presbyterian minister and president of the College of New Jersey, or Benjamin Rush, a physician, would qualify for membership in any of the churches now advocating for Christian nationalism.

Finally, the Treaty of Tripoli was negotiated during the George Washington administration, sent to Congress by John Adams and ratified unanimously by the U.S. Senate on June 7, 1797. The treaty reads in part, “The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.”

Pointing out the fallacies and distortions of Christian nationalism in no way represents “a profoundly prejudicial view toward American religious groups,” as the letter from Perkins and Burch asserts. It’s simply an attempt to set the record straight and counter the false information propagated by Perkins and his ilk.

Perkins has every right to spout whatever bigoted or white supremacist notions he wishes to spread; the second part of the First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech. The rest of us have the responsibility to refute such nonsense. ■

Randall Balmer, a professor at Dartmouth College, is the author of “Solemn Reverence: The Separation of Church and State in American Life.” He is a frequent contributor to Christian Ethics Today.

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How Traditional Salvation Concepts Allow “Christians” to Ignore the Ethics of Jesus

By Ron Perritt

Many of us wonder how people who claim to be Christians can intentionally and consistently ignore the ethical teachings of Jesus. How can “Christians” have instigated and supported so much persecution and suffering in direct opposition to the ethical principles that Jesus taught? Why do they support politicians and public policies that disadvantage their neighbors and claim that religious freedom is the right to discriminate against people whom they happen to dislike?

I suggest the reason for this disconnect began early in the growth of Christianity. The first hints can be found in the New Testament book of James in the controversy over the meaning of faith. Then came the Nicene Creed and others which established orthodox systems of belief. What one professed to believe, one’s “faith,” became enormously important, often a matter of life and death. In its quest for power, the institutional church developed a system to control people by instilling fear of spending eternity in hell and claiming to have God’s exclusive authority to forgive sin and offer salvation.

Power often involved persecution of people with whom the church disagreed, which was clearly contrary to the teachings of Jesus; so it was necessary to provide a way to be “saved” which bypassed the ethical teachings of Jesus. The solution was to make salvation contingent on professing adherence to an orthodox set of propositions *about* Jesus, the efficacy of his death, God and the Bible, etc. This concept of salvation continued through the Protestant Reformation. “Faith” became assent to the truth of certain propositions with each denomination identifying itself by its own unique mixture of propositions and its method of achieving forgiveness. This concept of “faith in Jesus” became equated to “belief in Jesus” and was read back into Paul’s letters and passages such as John 3:16. Thus “believing in Jesus” often became little more than assent to propositions *about* Jesus.

Many of us who grew up in the evangelical tradition can clearly remember sermons laced with fear and guilt plus a lot of emphasis on the destiny of sinners. Our salvation and Christian status required that we profess our “faith” that “Jesus was our Lord and Savior who was sent by God to die on the cross for

the forgiveness of sin.” With this profession of “faith,” one’s eternal destiny in heaven was secured. Ethics under this idea of salvation become a kind of negative concept in that one shouldn’t do anything that might be considered “really sinful” as defined by society’s cultural norms, rather than helping bring about the Kingdom of God for all.

I grew up in a racially segregated community. The church members I knew were not KKK supporters, but they also would never have publicly advocated for equal quality education for non-white children or truly equal rights and respect for all under the law. Being “Christian” simply did not require loving *all*

The message of Jesus I read in the Gospels is that our responsibly as Jesus’ followers is to help bring about the Kingdom of God, a place in time where God’s desire for agape love, justice, mercy, respect for one another and reverence for God become actualized.

your neighbors as yourself. Why cause upheaval and risk rejection by the community if it really doesn’t matter to your eternal destiny? Treating *all* your neighbors as you would want to be treated was more like a good suggestion, not really a requirement for being a Christian, in that one’s eternal destiny certainly did not depend on it.

The message of Jesus I read in the Gospels is that our responsibly as Jesus’ followers is to help bring about the Kingdom of God, a place in time where God’s desire for agape love, justice, mercy, respect for one another and reverence for God become actualized. Our salvation in this life and into the next consists of becoming free of our self-centeredness and learning to love by the Great Commandment, without regard for personal reward. Jesus taught this through his preaching and example. He condemned the religious leaders

of his day, not for not knowing what they should do, but for not doing it. We are Christians, followers of Jesus, only to the extent our lives are actually guided by the teachings and example of Jesus. When Jesus encountered Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and announced that “salvation has come to this house,” it was not because Zacchaeus professed some notions *about* Jesus; it was because he vowed to live a life consistent with Jesus’ teachings. Faith, for a follower of Jesus, is trust that Jesus teaches what God desires for us to do and then actually doing it. “So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). “...I by my works will show you my faith” (James 2:18).

Some people might argue that this interpretation of faith is equivalent to works righteousness, that it says we can work our way into heaven. This is not what Jesus taught. We must not only consider the works, but also the motivation behind the works. When Jesus gave the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor, he was talking about a special kind of love, agape love. This type of love seeks only to enhance the well-being of the one loved, without any expectation of compensation or reward. It is a totally selfless type of love, the kind Jesus exhibited in his healing ministry. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-36) is an example. The word “love” in the Great Commandment means an act of mercy, kindness or generosity, done with an unselfish motivation. Doing something for another in order to get a reward is not an act of agape love and thus fails the requirements of the Great Commandment.

Some of us are old enough to remember tent revivals at which the preacher exhorted the audience to “profess Jesus as your personal savior, if you want to go to

heaven.” This, to me, is a classic example of the corruption of Jesus’ message at every level.

Today, we hear “Christians” preaching that religious freedom means the right to discriminate against anyone we don’t like. This hypocrisy, like that practiced in the past by “Christians” who persecuted those who were different, owned slaves or supported discrimination in all its forms, gives many, especially the younger generation, plenty of reason to reject Christianity.

For Christianity to survive, we must recover the principles laid down by Jesus. Believing certain ideas about Jesus is not bad in itself, but it is not what Jesus taught was necessary for salvation. The term “Christian” is not a title to be awarded by a church, like a school issues a diploma, but a lifestyle guided by the ethical teachings of Jesus. ■

Ron Perritt is an electrical and computer engineer, a 2001 MDiv graduate of Candler School of Theology, and author of Coherent Christianity, published in 2019 by Nuturing Faith Inc. (Good Faith Media).

For Christianity to survive, we must recover the principles laid down by Jesus. Believing certain ideas about Jesus is not bad in itself, but it is not what Jesus taught was necessary for salvation.

The Musings of a Small Town Mayor: My faith

By Bill Blackburn

The fact that I am a Christian and a Baptist minister has been reflected in my recent book, *The Musings of a Small Town Mayor*. My Christian faith is at the heart of who I am.

However, I also believe, given my Baptist heritage, in the separation of church and state. Not absolute separation, nevertheless separation. And a corollary of that is religious liberty which is at the heart of the Baptist faith and history.

The founders of this nation did not establish one church nor denomination. There was considerable diversity among the founding fathers in regard to faith, but they knew well the destructive religious wars of Europe and at times the undue interference of church hierarchies. They believed in the place of faith, but they wanted to construct a constitution that kept any religious group from controlling the affairs of the country.

So, though I assumed some were concerned about having a Kerrville minister who was a Baptist pastor as mayor, I would never have told citizens to vote for me because I thought I was God’s chosen for mayor, and I would never tell the city council to vote for something because I had prayed and God told me how to vote and therefore they should follow my lead.

I would never want to use my faith to gain advantage nor to intimidate others.

I have enjoyed thinking about Benjamin Disraeli, who was twice elected Prime Minister of Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century. Disraeli said that his very pious adversary, William Gladstone, another Prime Minister, always had an ace up his sleeve. And Disraeli said Gladstone would claim that the good Lord had put that ace in his sleeve! I did not have as mayor of Kerrville an ace up my sleeve, and if I had, I would not have claimed the Lord put it there.

My faith affected everything I did as mayor because that position is public service. I did believe that I was serving God and the citizens as mayor. On this I disagree with Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan who said in a “The Future of Democracy” conference broadcast on C-Span 2 September 26, 2023: “Being Jewish is super important to my life, but I hope that being Jewish is of no importance to my judgment.”

To me that is sad. When you look at the ways the Jewish faith has shaped this nation and its laws includ-

ing the legal texts and especially the influence of what Christians call “The Old Testament,” The Tanakh, I would hope Kagan’s faith would influence her judgment on the Supreme Court. Kagan also made a distinction between her personal morality due to her faith and the morality that influences her judgement as a Supreme Court judge. I can understand that, but as an observant Jew, I would expect her faith would be reflected in her judgments on the bench. I believe your decisions in public can be informed by your religious faith without being sectarian.

My ethical commitments are strong and obviously influenced my voting and leadership. I well might speak from my sense of right and wrong, but what I

Disraeli said that his very pious adversary, William Gladstone, another Prime Minister, always had an ace up his sleeve. And Disraeli said Gladstone would claim that the good Lord had put that ace in his sleeve!

said was spoken in the court of public opinion and would be open to challenge.

As I have indicated earlier, I prayed for discernment, prayed for strength, prayed for patience and restraint, and most of all prayed for what was good for all the citizens of Kerrville.

My commitment to the biblical understanding that all persons are “created in God’s image” was reflected in respect for all those coming before us as the city council and for my fellow council members.

And, yes, I did regularly pray what is called *The Lord’s Prayer* which asks that the Lord’s will be done “on earth as it is in heaven.” And, I was often reminded of the words of Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961) the second Secretary-General of the United Nations: “In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.”

Here is a quote from Felix Frankfurter (1882-1965), associate justice of the Supreme Court:

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Certainly the affirmative pursuit of one's convictions about the ultimate mystery of the universe and man's relation to it is placed beyond the reach of law. Government may not interfere with organized or individual expressions of belief or disbelief. Propagation of belief - or even of disbelief - in the supernatural is protected, whether in church or chapel, mosque or synagogue, tabernacle or meeting-house.

As stated earlier, very important to Baptists is religious liberty. People should be free to worship and practice their faith, but likewise they should have the freedom of unbelief. Coerced faith is not faith.

In my almost 40 years in Kerrville, I have spoken out and written letters to the editor in defense of groups of our citizens under attack usually by persons who professed to be Christians. I have stood up on behalf of the local Jewish community, Muslims, Mormons, and persons of no faith.

Karl Menninger, the noted psychiatrist, wrote a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* He maintained that with all the maladies we face, sin, though it carries a lot of weight as a word, should be factored in plus the implied accountability.

How could sin be considered in governance?

From whatever faith stance of the founding fathers, I believe they were very conscious of sin as the Constitution was constructed. They had the history of power abused and distorted in Europe and elsewhere, the hazards of the concentration of authority, and mankind's bent toward selfishness and gluttony, domination, power and control, arrogance, and favoritism. I believe the separation of powers in our constitution is clearly based on, yes, hard experience, but also a protection from the vagaries of sin.

Michael Novak, Catholic layman, author of many books, and U.S. Representative to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, makes this point:

The founders ransacked dusty libraries to discover what went wrong in Constantinople, what went wrong in Venice, and what wrong in London in order to invent workable remedies. But this same insight may also be derived from a classical Judeo-Christian conviction, the doctrine of sin. (James Madison on Religious Liberty, Robert S. Alley, ed., p. 301.)

The three branches of government proposed by founder James Madison – executive, legislative, judicial – was in part out of the fear of all three branches over-reaching their power. (Federalist Number 47 and 48) As Madison stated,

The accumulation of all powers legislative, executive and judiciary in the same hands, whether of one, a few or many, and whether hereditary, self appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny. (Federalist 47)

While the text of the Constitution does not expressly refer to the doctrine of the separation of powers, the checks and balances were protection against the kind of abuse seen in the British monarchy. By the way, on this matter and others, Madison was influenced by the thought of the French theorist [Montesquieu](#).

To my point, the separation of powers at the federal level or the city level is a guardrail against the sins of pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth.

So, as I pointed out earlier, the city council serves the legislative function, the city manager and staff the executive function, and appeals are dealt with in the

People should be free to worship and practice their faith, but likewise they should have the freedom of unbelief. Coerced faith is not faith.

courts.

Finally, this from what be an ancestor of mine, “Those who would treat politics and morality apart will never understand the one or the other.” (John Morley (1838-1923), First Viscount of Blackburn, a British statesman, writer, and newspaper editor) ■

Bill Blackburn is a longtime friend of Christian Ethics Today. He is a graduate of Baylor University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was on the staff of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. This essay is from his recent book, Musings of a Small Town Mayor, about his time in Kerrville, Texas as pastor, then two-term mayor of the town.

Book Reviews

The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future

by Robert P. Jones (Simon & Schuster, Sept. 2023, 400 pages)

Reviewed by Wendell Griffen

The latest book by Robert P. Jones, president of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), is rightly titled *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and The Path to a Shared American Future*. In this book, Jones exposes the religious role in creating and spreading white supremacy by European – meaning white – Christians by the Doctrine of Discovery, a set of papal bulls issued in 1493 that established the moral, intellectual, political and legal foundation for European colonization efforts in the United States.

American history teachers did not teach that papal edicts declared non-Christian societies morally, intellectually and politically inferior a year after Columbus purportedly “discovered” what Europeans called the “New World.” The Doctrine of Discovery claims that European civilization and western Christianity are superior to all other cultures, races and religions.

Jones exposes how that claim was the foundation for domination, colonial conquest, enslavement and future oppression of indigenous people in North America, Africa and Asia because, in his words, the Doctrine of Discovery “merged the interests of European imperialism, including the African slave trade, with Christian missionary zeal.”

Americans do not learn about the Doctrine of Discovery. Jones admits that he did not learn about it in a decade of graduate education in the 1990s, including a graduate seminary degree and a PhD in religion. Yet, the Doctrine of Discovery has operated in plain sight as indigenous people and African Americans have known and complained that the roots of white supremacy must be traced to western Christianity.

In addition to exposing what American history teachers did not teach and what American students did not learn, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* documents how the Doctrine of Discovery and its white supremacist precepts appear in the 1776 Declaration of Independence and the 1789 Constitution of the United States. Jones teaches us how the Doctrine of

Discovery influenced Thomas Jefferson, and how it was formally incorporated into U.S. law by the U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous 1823 decision in *Johnson v. McIntosh*. In that case, Chief Justice John Marshall wrote that “discovery gave [the United States] an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or conquest.”

Robert Jones does much more than educate readers about history we were not taught. *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* is forthright about the enduring impact of racial injustice Americans willfully refuse to acknowledge. Jones details how the Doctrine of Discovery impacted life in his native Mississippi “four hundred years before Emmett Till” was murdered in 1955 in Money, Mississippi. We learn how the Doctrine of Discovery factored in the lynching

That intellectual and emotional honesty is what makes The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy compelling. That intellectual, emotional, and social honesty by Jones, a White Baptist ethicist and researcher of U.S. religious values, is revealing, refreshing and the best reason to read The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy.

of black people in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1920. Read *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* and learn, perhaps for the first time, how the Doctrine of Discovery operated in the history of white settler colonization of Oklahoma and lurked in the shadows of the 1920 massacre and terrorism of Black people in Tulsa. And readers will learn how public officials who were also leading religious figures in their respective locations participated in and condoned, tacitly, and openly, racial injustice in those locations.

Yet *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* is hopeful without being sentimental, that Americans might work together to re-imagine and live out a new future despite our history. In doing so, Robert Jones admits being “stunned by the sheer amount of energy and

capital required to maintain this worldview [of white supremacy] in the presence of so much counterevidence... [and being] transfixed by the command it has had on American psyches from the founding to the present.”

That intellectual and emotional honesty is what makes *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* compelling. That intellectual, emotional, and social honesty by Jones, a White Baptist ethicist and researcher of U.S. religious values, is revealing, refreshing and the best reason to read *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy*. Perhaps readers will be inspired to summon the courage to not merely reflect on the book, but also teach it, then with Jones, join in walking the path to a shared American future. ■

Wendell Griffen is retired district court judge in Little Rock, AR serves on the board of Christian Ethics Today, and is a well-known author and speaker.

The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness

*by Jonathan Haidt (Penguin Press, March 26, 2024,
400 pages)*

Reviewed by Gary A. Furr

In 2010 I led a group of pastors to the Holy Land. I noticed that whenever there was free time, at least half of the group sat in the commons area of our retreat center staring at their phones. While I had a cell phone, I had not yet transitioned to the usage levels I would later attain. I still did a great deal of my work on the computer and through email. It seemed odd to sit in a group while no one was talking for long periods of time. But they were just ahead of me—the phone and the iPad would come to dominate all our lives more and more. It seemed odd to see pastors sit for hours at a time, staring at their phones and messages. Meanwhile, the Sea of Galilee was right outside our door. What was this to distract us from such a place?

Jonathan Haidt’s latest book has shot to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and should be at the top of the reading list of every pastor, parent, and community leader. He is sounding an alarm: we have an epidemic of mental illness that is entirely preventable but now out of control. If he is right, many social ills—drug abuse, suicide and depression, gun violence

and mass shootings, at least among young people, are at the least worsened by the very technology we have placed in their hands at younger and younger ages.

It is as though, Haidt writes, that we gave consent to allow our children to be placed on an expedition to Mars, a harsh world where they are completely untrained and ill-equipped to survive. Even in the 1990s and 2000s, as parents hovered over their children’s daily activities, fearful of sex offenders and kidnappings in public spaces, children were allowed to enter a far more dangerous place with insufficient help.

Most of us are aware, by observation if not through research, that our devices have taken over our lives morally, spiritually, and in ways that transform our humanity. In recent years, I read the work of Sherry Turkel and Nicholas Carr as they warned of the profound transformation of our perceptual and communal lives through the revolution of the internet. The rapidity of the replacement of books by online reading and information has been breathtaking. January 6, 2021, and the insurrection at the Capitol only underlined a weird disappearance of common and rational public

And what is the net effect? Essentially that what he calls the play-based childhood of most of human history has been replaced a “phone-based childhood.”

life into the murky recesses of the virtual world.

Originally Haight, a social psychology professor at New York University, set out to document the damage of social media to democracy and democratic institutions. Ultimately, his research uncovered an even more alarming reality about what our technology is doing to children.

Gen Z became the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets that called them away from the people nearby and into an alternative universe that was exciting, addictive, unstable, and—as I will show—unsuitable for adolescents.

Plenty of books, especially Christian ones, have lamented the negative impact of social media. But Haidt and his colleagues document this disaster impressively. Study after study showed them and us that a catastrophic rise in preteen and teen depression among females shot skyward from 2010 to 2015, and among boys, other similar negative effects. This was not only nearly universal across studies in the United States. It was replicated across the entire globe in

developed countries and wherever the internet and mobile phones appeared.

At the same time, Instagram and other apps exploded in the virtual sphere, bringing the world into the purses and pockets of us all. And what is the net effect? Essentially that what he calls the play-based childhood of most of human history has been replaced a “phone-based childhood.”

It was the release of the iPhone 4 in June of 2010 that brought the front facing camera, and Instagram was developed to be used only on smartphones. Soon teenage girls were using filters and editing software to improve their looks as they presented themselves to their peers not in the usual ways, but online more and more. Bullying and anonymous shaming soon followed.

Boys abandoned their usual ways of relating to one another and increasingly disappeared into video games. Pornography became pervasive and easily accessible. Parents were ill prepared to stay ahead of their children, who were much more adept in using the technology. While companies placed “age restrictions” on their products for minors, in fact it was impossible to police and easy to bypass.

The companies who created these devices and their addictive algorithms, as is well documented by now, intentionally designed them to prey upon human vulnerabilities and claim more and more time and attention from our children.

Haidt argues that the rampant mental illness among youth is not created by a dangerous world. Life has always been filled with danger. Wars do not even cripple children and societies fully—instead he argues that people rally together and hold one another up. But the “Great Rewiring of Childhood” has damaged deeply the ability for young people to be fully present in their world and process it accurately. From 2010 to 2015, social patterns, role models, emotions, and sleep patterns began to be shaped by the changes it brought.

Life did not suddenly get more difficult. Instead, “around 2012...world events were suddenly being pumped into adolescents’ brains through their phones, not as news stories, but as social media posts.” (p. 38) Depression rates among preteen girls increased dramatically even as symptoms of older women having depression did not change significantly.

We are now familiar with “social media influencers” and “digital media creators,” but fifteen years ago these were unheard of and ridiculous notions—that unknown people who produced only “virtual” content—would shape more and more the self-images of young girls. The impact was more deeply felt in less affluent homes, where supervision after school

was harder and harder to monitor and therefore usage higher.

In part two, he describes in detail the normal processes by which children learn their world—conformity bias and prestige bias. In other words, who do you want to be like? And who is impressive in your social world, someone you wish to be around, to learn from, or be associated with? This has ancient roots in human development and is familiar to us. Erik Erikson in his seminal work described adolescence as a time when young people find heroes to emulate and peers to associate with them. Through human history this was learned within community through the play and friendships of children. Sports, competitive activities, service, free play, hobbies and school are essential to this process.

With the phone-based childhood, however, this process is short-circuited and suddenly a flood of marketing takes its place. Haidt documents extensively how the companies—Google, Facebook, Instagram and all their similar endeavors, intentionally created their products to stimulate the desire for users to spend

We are now familiar with “social media influencers” and “digital media creators,” but fifteen years ago these were unheard of and ridiculous notions—that unknown people who produced only “virtual” content—would shape more and more the self-images of young girls. The impact was more deeply felt in less affluent homes, where supervision after school was harder and harder to monitor and therefore usage higher.

more and more time on their devices. The children and all of us are not the customers of the digital producers—it is their advertisers. *And what the advertisers are buying is our time and attention.* The more time we spend online, the more they can charge.

From the outset, there have been a minority of voices within the companies social media world who have protested the implications of disrespecting their customers and especially children and the impact it would have on their lives. To date, though, little has been done to hold them accountable, and they continue

to rake in vast profits while undermining the very “connection” they advertise as the outcome of their products.

As for children, the most toxic development was the addition of the “like” click. Now we have been addicted to approval from others, even strangers who view us. It has been damaging enough for us adults but consider what this might do to a twelve-year-old, fragile and uncertain about themselves.

Haidt has plenty of suggestions about what ought to be done about all of this—for parents, schools, and lawmakers. For schools, he says there are two very simple solutions: phone-free schools and more free play. Counter to our competitive stresses on children, he reminds us that learning goes on all the time, not merely through curriculum and tests. On his website he offers five suggestions: (See <https://jonathanhaidt.com/anxious-generation>)

- **Give children far more time playing with other children.** This play should ideally be outdoors, in mixed age groups, with little or no adult supervision (which is the way most parents grew up, at least until the 1980s).
- **Look for more ways to embed children in stable real-world communities.** Online networks are not nearly as binding or satisfying.
- **Don’t give a smartphone as the first phone.** Give a phone or watch that is specialized for communication, not for internet-based apps.
- **Don’t give a smartphone until high school.** This is easy to do, *if* many of your child’s friends’ parents are doing the same thing.
- **Delay the opening of accounts on nearly all social media platforms until the beginning of high school (at least).** This will become easier to do if we can support legislators who are trying to raise the age of “internet adulthood” from today’s 13 (with no verification) to 16 (with mandatory age verification).

I would add that de-emphasizing the arts, vocational training and other opportunities are not enhancing learning but diminishing it in the long run. He cites some fascinating successful experiments in diminishing teen anxiety through expanded opportunities for free play. For parents, he gives age-specific guidelines to protect them and enhance the development of whole persons. There are guidelines

for the use of screens and devices by age group for parents.

Children are learning socially, experimentally, all the time. He is hopeful that it is not yet too late. His chapters are very readable and accessible. He places summaries at the end of each section so that his argument is plainly understandable. He adds:

teens who spend more time using social media are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and other disorders, while teens who spend more time with groups of young people (such as playing team sports or participating in religious communities) have better mental health. (p. 121)

It is most interesting that Haidt argues for the place of spirituality and religion. Though not himself an overtly religious person, he believes that the idea of Pascal that there is a “God shaped vacuum” in us has a universal significance. While he substitutes “spiritual” for God, he spends a surprising amount of space on the importance of the religious quest in lives. It is the longing for something larger than ourselves, a greater

As much time as we spend lamenting the state of the world, it seems inarguable to me that we ought to do something about it. And above all, don’t merely post on Twitter and Instagram and think we’ve done anything.

sense of purpose.

Churches might find a bit of inspiration for what they do in this. In a moment when we are told constantly what a bad job we are doing, there are some clear opportunities. It is not solved by churches simply acquiescing to technology and adapting to it.

I would argue that the shallow and false religiosity being mediated through online communities is precisely the argument against religion primarily as an online self-help endeavor. We have the phenomenon of “self-educated” (!) Christian nationalism that is disconnected from actual concrete communities, instead existing in the murky recesses of the internet. Authentic community is needed more than ever. It won’t happen unless we care about it and work for it, not simply post about it.

It reminds me of Langdon Gilkey’s experiences in World War II which he described in the book,

Shantung Compound. Westerners were rounded up by the Japanese and put into internment camps. Their captors left them to organize their life together. Protestant fundamentalists, foul-mouthed sailors, worldly businessmen, housewives, Catholic nuns, and everything in between, thrown together and captive, they organized into a community.

One day, it came to the attention of the community that the teenagers were having sexual orgies in a quiet corner of the camp. All manner of consternation broke out among the leaders, and the conservative Protestants especially were alarmed. The Catholic nuns, on the other hand, got together and organized a rigorous schedule of card and board games, activities, and sports for children and soon the orgies ceased.

As alarming as the virtual world may seem, it is still possible, Haidt believes, for us to pull back from the virtual abyss. It will take collective action, strong laws that require accountability from the companies. We need leadership from parents, churches, synagogues, and other faith-based groups, as well as a restructuring of our own lives. We have passively accepted this state of things. It is within our possibilities to demand a different kind of world for our children, but it will not

happen. Leaders must lead. And the book is a great help with ideas to implement. But they must be carried out. It is not a moment for passivity.

I rarely say this: every pastor, teacher, principal, parent, and church member need to read this book or at least a presentation about it. He has a website where a summary is easily available. As much time as we spend lamenting the state of the world, it seems inarguable to me that we ought to do something about it. And above all, don’t merely post on Twitter and Instagram and think we’ve done anything.

One last observation: his discussion of attention and the algorithms of the virtual world set off an alarm bell. When we talk about stewardship, what about the stewardship of our minds, hearts, attention, time, and thoughts? As important as money may be, perhaps attention is the glaringly ignored aspect of our time. The short-circuiting of contemplation, reflection, and consideration is more needed than ever. ■

Gary Furr is a speaker, writer and performing musician living in Birmingham, Alabama. He retired in 2021 after a 41 year career as a pastor. His podcast, writings, and blog can be found at <https://garyfurr.me>

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A Small Step towards Peace from Red Letter Christians

By Tony Campolo

Editor's Note: It is not possible to overstate the influence Tony Campolo has had on our understanding of the teachings of Jesus. As a writer, speaker, and public voice for faithful Christian living he has inspired and informed many of us. This article, published in Christian Ethics Today in 2016, Issue 94, addressed Israel's 50 years of occupation of the Palestinian Territory and 10 years of the Gaza blockade which had devastated Gaza's economy, caused widespread destruction and left most people largely cut off from the outside world. Christian Ethics Today honors Tony as a champion, a strong advocate for Christian ethics as a member of CET's Board of Directors.

Jesus once said that if we are faithful in little things, He would make us the ruler over great things (Matthew 25:21). To that end, we Red Letter Christians want to offer a proposal of one small step towards resolving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in the Holy Land. It's a little thing that could have great consequences.

This small step toward peace which I am suggesting has to do with a way of overcoming the dire effects of the blockade of the Gaza Strip by the Israeli government and its army. I suggest it is a way people of goodwill on all sides of this conflict might see as something they can do together.

Presently, we know that any attempts to break the blockade have been stopped by the Israelis because they fear that shipments going into the Gaza Strip from the outside, which they could not control, might provide a means for militant Palestinians and those who sympathize with them to carry war materials into the Gaza Strip. The Israelis are afraid that rockets from countries such as Egypt and Iran could easily be smuggled into the Gaza Strip and lobbed over the wall that separates Gaza from Israel. An end of the blockade might well mean a greater propensity for guns to end up in the hands of terrorists.

There is little question in anyone's mind that there have been concerted efforts by the pro-Palestinian nations that surround Israel to make weapons available to terrorist organizations such as Hamas. This would encourage and support attacks on the Israelis, whom they have sworn to drive out of the Holy Land.

The blockade, however, has prevented essential medicines, food and fuel for motor vehicles from getting to the Palestinians who live in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government argues that it is not devoid of humanitarian impulses and would be more than willing to sell such essentials and use Israeli vehicles to carry

them into the people in the Gaza Strip. The problem is that the Palestinians living there are extremely poor, and the cost of buying these essentials is so high that they cannot afford to purchase what they need from the State of Israel.

The proposal I am offering here is that Christians, Jews and Muslims here in the United States raise funds to purchase the food, medicines and other essentials that those who live in the Gaza Strip require for survival.

The proposal I am offering here is that Christians, Jews and Muslims here in the United States raise funds to purchase the food, medicines and other essentials that those who live in the Gaza Strip require for survival. This joint organization would then buy the desperately needed things from the Israelis and have the Israeli government utilize its own trucks to ship them into the blockaded area. This proposal would create a win-win situation for almost all parties involved in this difficult impasse.

First of all, the Israeli government would be free from the accusation that it is inhumane in keeping essential food and medicine out of the hands of needy Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. The blockade of Gaza has earned the Israelis a very negative image among the rest of the peoples of the world—most of whom view the blockade as an instrument of the Israeli government that makes the Palestinians suffer. This bad image would be somewhat overcome if Israel

cooperated in the implementation of this proposal.

Secondly, Christians, Jews and Muslims working together in such a humanitarian cause would do much to improve the image that many secularists have of religion. With all the evil that has been done in the name of God, a joint effort by the three major world religions could do the reputation of religion in general a lot of good.

Recently hostility has been growing between Jewish and Christian Zionists and certain Protestant denominations that have condemned the blockade and have called for an embargo on any goods produced by Israeli companies based in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. There has even been a call for divestiture of investments in all Israeli companies as long as the blockade continues.

The Pope, speaking for the Roman Catholic Church, has made pronouncements condemning both the blockade and the illegal settlements in the West Bank. Too often such condemnation ends up being defined as being anti-Semitic. This has harmed interfaith relations. Christian critics of Israel working along with other Christians and joined by Jews and Muslims working to alleviate the sufferings of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip would send a strong message about the altruism inherent in each of these groups. Working together, they would actualize the spirit of reconciliation. Zionist groups, both Jewish and Christian, that have been unfairly vilified as being opposed to humanitarian efforts that would benefit the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip would with these efforts do much to overcome the negative image they have in some quarters.

Muslims here in the United States would have an

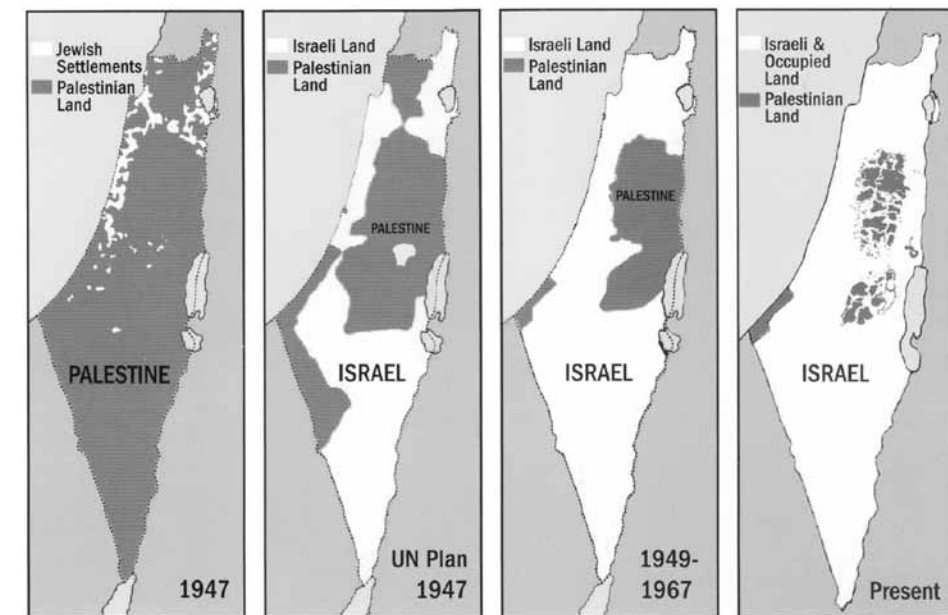
opportunity to reach out to their Islamic brothers and sisters who are suffering because of the blockade. Such an effort might even be joined by Muslims of good will in the Arab countries that surround Israel and contribute to the wellbeing of those presently being victimized by the blockade.

Finally, the people in the Gaza Strip would be blessed by this effort which might have a very positive effect on the ways in which they relate to all the groups cited above. The most important thing is that these desperately needy people would experience some deliverance from their present suffering.

We all know that the privation suffered by the Palestinians as a result of the Israeli blockade has encouraged terrorists to respond with violence and made it easy for them to recruit young people for their radical organizations. This proposal might help counteract all of that. Here's a chance in the words of Jesus "to overcome evil with good!"

For those of us who want peace, I suggest that this is one way to put our money where our mouths are. ■

We all know that the privation suffered by the Palestinians as a result of the Israeli blockade has encouraged terrorists to respond with violence and made it easy for them to recruit young people for their radical organizations.



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A Journal of Christian Ethics

“We need now to recover the prophethood of all believers, matching our zeal for the priesthood of all believers with a passion for the prophethood of all believers.”
—Foy Valentine, *Founding Editor*

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

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- Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics

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Dr. Patrick R. Anderson is the current editor. He earned a BA from Furman University, MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and PhD from Florida State University. He is a professor, criminologist, pastor and writer. He and his wife, Carolyn, have been intimately involved in the development and operation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as well as several non-profit ministries among poor and disadvantaged people.

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