

# Christian Ethics Today

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- 2 **Who Will Be Attracted to the Job of ICE Agent?** *Patrick Anderson, Editor*
- 5 **A Big White Lie** *Marvin A. McMickle*
- 6 **The Bible According to the Department of Homeland Security** *Brian Kaylor*
- 9 **How the Catholic Church Helped Change the Conversation About Capital Punishment in the United States** *Austin Sarat*
- 11 **A Call for Repentance for the Anti-Immigrant Sins of a Nation** *Chuck Poole*
- 13 **The Silence That Speaks: Commentary on the Lived Effects of Immigration Polic** *Elket Rodriguez*
- 14 **What is CREC? The Christian Nationalist Group Has a Vision for America – and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s Support** *Samuel Perry*
- 16 **Resisting Stupidity, Injustice and Complacency: Words of Wisdom and Courage From Confessing Church Pastor Ernst Käsemann** *Cody J. Sanders*
- 20 **I Spoke About LGBTQ+ Inclusion at Truett Seminary and Watched Bridges Being Built** *Georgia McKee*

## BOOKS CONSIDERED

- 22 ***Abundance*** By Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson (New York: Avid Readers Press, 2025, 289 pages) *Reviewed by Fisher Humphreys*
- 24 ***The Heart is a Little to the Left*** *Walter B. Shurden*
- 26 ***No Tide Rising: Theology, Economics, and the Future*** (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2009, 198 pages) *Reviewed by Michael D. Royster*
- 27 **Political Endorsements by Churches...A Dangerous Shift** *By Amanda Tyler*

# Who Will Be Attracted to the Job of ICE Agent?

By Patrick Anderson<sup>1</sup>

A centerpiece of “The Big Beautiful Bill,” as the recently passed tax and spending act was dubbed by President Trump, is a massive funding appropriation for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), an agency of the Department of Homeland Security. The law increases the total allocation for ICE from about \$8 billion a year to almost \$30 billion. This means ICE now surpasses the FBI as the largest and highest-funded federal law enforcement agency.

The biggest element of this huge allocation of money is an intense effort to recruit 10,000 new ICE agents to be stationed primarily in America’s largest cities, like New York and Los Angeles. Tom Homan, Trump’s border czar, told reporters: “You’re going to see immigration enforcement on a level you’ve never seen it before.”

Mass deportation of migrants and asylum seekers has been Trump’s most vociferous and repeated rallying cry for MAGA’s base. The result is masked men claiming to be government agents seizing people off the street, and in some cases sending them to overseas gulags, without adherence to America’s constitutional due process and legal precedent.

All this is being justified with claims that Americans are being terrorized by immigrant criminals. As Trump infamously said: “You can’t walk across the street to get a loaf of bread. You get shot, you get mugged, you get raped, you get whatever it may be.” The fact of the matter is that crime has plunged dramatically during the past decade, and the rate of crime among immigrants is significantly lower than that of the population at large.

Rapidly expanding the number of federal law enforcement officers is not new. After 9-11, the FBI experienced an influx of new applicants that resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of agents, but that increase was nonetheless a much smaller bump in agency size than what we are now seeing with ICE. In the case of the FBI, the role of agent was well-defined and therefore the new FBI agents tended to be lawyers, accountants, linguists, and PhDs, often with some foreign language specialty. The motivation for that FBI cohort, in addition to the urgency of combatting terrorism, was in part that the job was held in high regard; the American public generally looked favorably on FBI agents’ professionalism, effectiveness, and commitment to “The American Way.”

That view of the FBI was no doubt influenced by movie and television depictions of incorruptible, crime-fighting agents like the Prohibition-era agent Eliot Ness, who was commonly referred to as a G-man, short for “government man.” The well-known malignancy of the agency’s racism and bigotry, especially under the despotic J. Edgar Hoover, was brushed aside in favor of the perceived glamor of working for the FBI. Applicants were rigorously investigated before hiring and thoroughly trained and supervised during their careers. Senior agents served as mentors and role models. Accounts of FBI heroism and crime-fighting prowess were heavily promoted and reported in the news. Newspapers carried pictures of G-men wearing business suits and fedora-style hats, often

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brandishing weapons and captured contraband.

ICE, on the other hand, does not have a long and storied past. Established by Congress in 2003, ICE is a newcomer on the American law enforcement scene. As part of the frenetic reaction to 9-11, ICE’s intended function was to address the threat of terrorism. During recent years, especially under President Trump’s administrations, the intended functions of the agency have been largely forgotten. In many ways ICE is now operating as a rogue agency.

Many Americans are horrified and outraged by the images of unanswerable, independent agents exercising government power, in many cases outside the law and in violation of the U.S. Constitution, against

some of the most vulnerable, frightened, powerless human beings in America — people who in many cases have nowhere to turn for assistance. Instead of well-dressed FBI G-men hailed as heroes and identified proudly, ICE agents appear as masked ruffians wearing threatening, warrior-like SWAT police gear and are seen roughly arresting terrorized migrants, including children and elderly people. The image they paint is one of unfettered power and domination. Who are those agents? Why are they not publicly identified? What kind of people will be attracted to the use of that kind of power? Who is inspired by the idea of a “law enforcement” job in which unidentified police with no legal oversight or boundaries, no documentation, no communication, and no cause offer zero due process and wear masks signaling their lack of accountability and secret, anonymous, unlimited power? Who will be these new agents’ trainers, role models, and supervisors? What policies will inform and direct their decisions? We must recognize that a good number of Americans will look on those same images and say, “Yeah! I want some of that! Sign me up!”

This massive infusion of funds for the purpose of attracting and hiring thousands of new ICE agents is of great concern to police scholars and criminologists, including me. We learned some important lessons in the 1970s when a similar nationwide effort was made to hire more and better-trained police, especially in urban areas. The effort arose in the wake of highly visible civil unrest by civil rights activists and anti-Vietnam War protesters, along with lawlessness by both protesters and law enforcers alike. The poor quality of police agencies at the time was easily documented and recognized.

Congress appropriated a lot of money at first to improve the existing police departments, and to train and educate existing law enforcement personnel. Later, the emphasis shifted to recruiting, hiring and training a new cadre of police personnel. Community colleges, police academies and law enforcement agencies were awash in federal dollars to make all that happen.

Here’s what transpired: First, a great disagreement emerged between social scientists, who argued that the criminal justice system needed to be “reformed,” and criminal justice leaders, such as police chiefs and sheriffs, who maintained that it only needed to be “improved.” Reform implied a total re-imagining and restructuring of criminal justice. Many entrenched police leaders wanted the federal money, but only to improve existing practices — a position summed up as, “We know what we’re doing; just leave us alone and give us more money so we can do it better.” The struggle between those two factions has persisted.

A large proportion of police at that time had no more than a high school education and a good many did not even have that. The prevailing view among members of Congress and their staffs was that a more educated workforce would improve the police image and perhaps even foster professionalism. Large sums of money were allocated to educate police officers and, later, jail and prison personnel. Incentives were offered to entice officers to go to college, and many thousands did. I taught and trained a great number of them.

Many were eager to have the credential of having completed some collegiate study, mostly in criminal justice courses that were often taught by retired FBI agents who reinforced J. Edgar Hoover’s discredited ideas of justice. These officer-students tended to be uninterested in either their own education or any change in existing police practices. A smaller number of in-service students were genuinely interested in having a true college experience — one that would widen their knowledge and understanding of society through courses taught by faculty with PhDs in the arts and sciences.<sup>2</sup>

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Many of my cohort of criminal justice professors quickly learned that a trained and educated police force does not guarantee better decision-making by police, or a more just criminal justice system. College degrees or certificates from training academies do not automatically lead to more and better peace keeping, protection and service by police in society. Based on my own experience, I contend that the quality of policing depends on the quality of the people doing the policing. In other words, the wrong person educated and trained is still the wrong person. The opposite also holds true.

Fortunately, most police officers and criminal justice personnel approach their profession with a high sense of purpose, as well as a deep desire to help others, to uphold the values expressed in the U.S. Constitution, and to serve the causes of justice and propriety. Nonetheless, it remains true that some people are drawn to careers in criminal justice because they believe such careers will offer opportunities to live out their own bad values and desires. Some people are also enticed by the possibility of holding a position of power and authority. The uniform, weapons, badge,

and other symbols of the job give an aura of domination that can lead to excessive force, discrimination and bullying of vulnerable individuals. Others even join police ranks to engage in criminal behavior while using the badge as a shield. Further exacerbating the problem, stubborn and entrenched police leaders, having gained their status through a system they know and understand, are sometimes loath to embrace new methods and technologies.

When nefarious reasons for entering law enforcement are combined with a lack of respect by the executive branch and criminal justice apparatus for the law and the courts, we can expect to see more use of force, a punitive focus, and an increase in the unjust exercise of power and control.

A law enforcement agency seeking to hire personnel should first ask the question: "What kind of people do we want to work in this agency?" Immigration and Customs Enforcement has implicitly stated who they want: people with total fealty to Donald Trump and his administration. President Trump has said that he wants ICE to be ruthless, overly aggressive, and forceful in their jobs. He empowers them to respond to any interference or criticism with overwhelming force. ICE, along with many pockets of President Trump's administration of justice apparatus, has defied court rulings, ignored the Bill of Rights, and misled the public about what they are doing, all in an effort to find and deport as many migrants as they can, without regard to criminal records, legal status, documentation or anything else. This fulfills a deliberate intention to exploit governmental power for immoral or unethical purposes.

Immigration advocates are bracing for more masked agents to descend upon local communities with heavy-handed tactics. "There's an incredible sense of dread, frankly," said Chris Newman, the legal director and general counsel for the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, which represents day laborer groups across the country. So far, he said, Trump has tried to expand his power over immigration through executive actions, some of which have been blocked by the lower federal courts. "But this [Big Beautiful Bill] is legislation, signed into law, and gives people an impression of a sense of permanence, which is ominous," Mr. Newman said.

America's criminal justice network, already seen by many as in great need of reform, faces a comprehensive effort to establish the type of police system favored by police states in fascist regimes such as Russia and North Korea. This is the conclusion I reach when I see the images of ICE agents and other police officers rousting and hauling away peaceful workers, students, and individuals attending court hearings,

all while anguished family members and neighbors futilely ask for explanations and plea for restraint by the masked strangers posing as agents of our country.

These are not the G-men of days past. America is not living up to its promise of liberty and justice for all. Sadly, the outlook is bleak. ■

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1 My wife, Carolyn, and I were students at Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Ft. Worth, TX when we were burglarized and had virtually everything we owned stolen. Police officers told us that the thieves must be juveniles because the fingerprints were small. That experience began a life-long interest in and fascination with crime and justice. At the beginning of my third year in the Master of Divinity program, I secured a job as a juvenile probation officer in Fort Worth and worked there for four years. While the direction of our lives later shifted and I now sometimes serve as a bi-vocational or interim pastor, I experienced a long career as a criminologist. My PhD is in criminology. I was a scholar, professor, trainer and expert on criminal justice custom and practice. I published books and

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articles in academic journals. I was certified in federal court as an expert witness and fulfilled that role in nearly 100 cases regarding police use of force and custody deaths. Foy Valentine contracted with me while I was on the faculty of Louisiana State University to study the social effects of legalized gambling, including with regard to crime, and to serve as an expert witness in legislative hearings regarding the expansion of legalized gambling. (I testified against it.) That's how I became acquainted with Foy and later, with *Christian Ethics Today*.

2 Lawrence W. Sherman conducted a two-year study of criminal justice education; Jossey-Bass Publishing Company and the Police Foundation published it on January 2, 1978 as *Quality of Police Education: A Critical Review With Recommendations for Improving Programs in Higher Education*. It was a devastating critique of police education.



# A Big White Lie

By Marvin A. McMickle

Donald Trump wants to retell American history by removing the story of slavery from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

As part of his attack on anything that suggests diversity, equity and inclusion, Trump wants to create a version of American history that ignores the events of 1619 when indentured servants, who later became victims of generational slavery, were off-loaded by a Dutch-owned slave ship at Jamestown, Va.

Trump prefers a narrative that begins in 1776 in Philadelphia, Pa., where an all-white assembly of delegates, many of whom were slave owners themselves, signed the Declaration of Independence complaining about their oppression at the hands of King George III and the British Parliament, even as they were silent about their own oppression of the Africans they were buying, selling, raping and brutalizing.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture has a specific design, intention and narrative. These start at the lowest level of the building, where the history of slavery is told and displayed in graphic detail. The mood is dark, because there is no pleasant way to tell that story. On display is a tree stump that appears to be polished. In fact, the shine of that stump is the result of the thousands of feet of African men, women and children who were shuttled up and down, forced to stand there until sold to the highest white bidder.

This practice continued for 245 years. Africans and African Americans were sold to be field hands, house servants, midnight mistresses and also sex workers who were used as profit to reproduce new slaves so that slave owners would no longer need to buy them at market prices. The slaves cleared fields, planted and picked crops, and built plantation houses. They even built the United States Capitol and the White House in which Donald Trump now lives.

This is part of the story that Donald Trump does not want told. He wants Thomas Jefferson, but not his slave mistress Sally Hemmings. He wants George Washington, but not the slaves that built his Mount Vernon mansion. He wants Valley Forge and Yorktown, but he does not want Crispus Attucks, a Black man who was killed by the British at the Boston Massacre of 1770, becoming the first person to die in pursuit of American independence. He does not

want Salem Poor and Peter Salem, Black soldiers who fought in the battle at Bunker Hill in 1775, or the all-Black first Rhode Island Regiment that fought under George Washington at the decisive Battle of Yorktown in 1781.

President George W. Bush signed H.R. 1471 in 2003, which authorized the creation of this museum. The doors to the museum were opened in September 2016 during the presidency of Barack Obama. Now, to celebrate the “golden age” of America, Donald Trump wants to erase the stories of African Americans.

Is it because of Trump’s jealousy and contempt for Barack Obama that he has decided to remove all vestiges of Black achievement in this country? Is that why he fired Gen. C.Q. Brown, a four-star general, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff? Is that why he wants

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to reduce or remove funding for HBCUs? Is that why he wants to remove references to Jackie Robinson and Harriet Tubman from all federal government websites?

Both April Ryan, the White House correspondent for TheGrio, and Nikole Hannah-Jones, who started the 1619 Project, are sounding the alarm about Trump’s intentions in the April 7, 2025 edition of the Black Press USA Newswire. So, too, is Khalid Gibran Muhammad in the April 7, 2025 issue of U.S. News & World Report.

Trump signed an executive order on March 27 that he calls “Restoring Truth in American History.” A more accurate way to describe what Trump is doing is telling “a big white lie.” ■

*The Rev. Dr. Marvin A. McMickle is pastor emeritus of Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. He also served as president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, New York, from 2011 to 2019.*

# The Bible According to the Department of Homeland Security

By Brian Kaylor

The social media feeds of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are mostly filled with arrest porn, like mugshots, images of immigrants being nabbed by federal agents, and conservative media articles about crimes allegedly committed by an immigrant. They also put in some glamor shots of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, including videos of her this week riding a horse in the Argentinian countryside (as she visited the country on taxpayer funds along with the man with whom she's long been rumored to be having an affair). DHS has also been posting nostalgic art with yearnings for a White America, like a Thomas Kinkade painting and a John Gast painting glorifying "manifest destiny."

In addition to the arrest porn, shots of "ICE Barbie," and kitschy art, DHS has recently thrown in a couple of Bible verses to justify their militarized efforts to hunt immigrants. Such kidnappings of Scripture for dehumanizing rhetoric and the flexing of imperial power stand out as particularly grotesque abuses of the Christian faith, even amid an administration constantly pushing Christian nationalism and attacking Christians who care for immigrants.

DHS isn't merely taking verses out of context; they're snatching verses that clearly don't apply to their work as they try to frame arresting, detaining, and deporting people as the result of a divine call from God. So this issue of *A Public Witness* opens up DHS's social media in one hand and an actual Bible in the other to consider the competing faiths.

### Homeland Heresies

This month, DHS shared two videos that use a biblical passage along with footage of militarized forces running around looking for immigrants. Both also used audio from movies, raising questions of whether they actually had the rights to do so. DHS is already facing claims from others that they used copyrighted materials without permission, including from the estate of Kinkade which called the use of his painting "unauthorized."

On July 7, DHS posted a video they titled "Here am I, send me" (along with an American flag emoji after that phrase). As the title suggests, they co-opted Isaiah 6, which is when the prophet Isaiah experienced

a divine call that included a vision of seraphim flying around, the voice of God calling out, and a hot coal placed on his mouth before he answers for God to send him.

The DHS video starts not with flying heavenly creatures but with helicopters carrying people in military-like garb and holding weapons as they look around for people to capture. Instead of a hot coal, the agents' faces are covered by masks (except for a cameo shot of Noem riding along where we see her whole face glowing in red light). At one point the footage switches to night-goggle vision to see not the throne of God but

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the people who are being hunted. Throughout the one-minute video, audio runs with the words also on the screen. Although not acknowledged, the audio was taken from the movie *Fury*.

"Here's a Bible verse I think about sometimes. Many times," we hear Shia LaBeouf say as the World War II tank gunner Boyd "Bible" Swan. "It goes: And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' I said, 'Here am I, send me!'"

With LaBeouf's uncredited words serving as a narration for the video, it makes it seem like a DHS agent is answering a call from God to go and serve in a mission to hunt immigrants. Joining DHS is baptized as a divine job, with DHS agents protecting the nation in this holy crusade.

Adding to that, the video also features background music that aids in elevating both the religious messaging and the glorification of militarized force: "God's Gonna Cut You Down." The song, which has been recorded over several decades by various artists, warns

criminals that they “can run on for a long time” but “sooner or later, God’ll cut you down.” In this new context, DHS clearly sees themselves as agents of God’s retribution (as opposed to those being warned by the song). The particular version of the song used in the video was recorded by the band Black Rebel Motorcycle Club. The band responded by criticizing DHS for “improperly using” the recording and demanding the video be pulled down.

“It’s obvious that you don’t respect copyright law and artists’ rights any more than you respect habeas corpus and due process rights, not to mention the separation of church and state per the U.S. Constitution,” the band added. “Oh, and go f... yourselves.”

On July 28, DHS posted another video exploiting both Scripture and immigrants. This 41-second film is also highly produced, featuring secretive agents in tactical gear and holding guns while bursting into buildings at night. At one point, a clip from a Batman movie is heard where the Dark Knight declares: “They think I’m hiding in the shadows. But I am the shadows.” That’s the voice of Robert Pattinson in the 2022 film *The Batman*.

Additionally, a Bible verse (in the King James translation) slowly appears on screen and then stays on for the rest of the video as agents run around pointing guns at empty spaces: “The wicked flee when no man pursueth; but the righteous are bold as a lion.” — Proverbs 28:1

Let’s put aside the poor choice of which Bruce Wayne alter ego to use (when the best is clearly Will Arnett in *The Lego Batman Movie*). The use of Proverbs 28:1 is even more ridiculous. Obviously, DHS thinks they are the “righteous” ones in the verse, but they must not be reading very carefully. You can’t claim to be “bold as a lion” while wearing masks, driving unmarked cars, and refusing to identify yourself. And while the wicked might flee when no one pursues them, in this case people are being pursued by DHS agents. So does that mean the people aren’t actually wicked since they’re literally being pursued? Thus Saith the Lord

Both DHS videos clearly misuse the Bible, twisting the holy words to justify something not intended by the authors. In fact, if DHS keeps reading, they’ll instead find a much stronger case against them with a lot of verses that offer strong critiques of DHS and the Trump administration more broadly. And I don’t even mean they need to keep reading the entire Bible; they could settle for just reading the rest of the Book of Isaiah or merely finish reading Proverbs 28.

The hermeneutical approach of Noem’s DHS

is basically akin to dragging a puppy to a gravel pit and shooting it. Far from an anti-immigrant demagogue, Isaiah instead warns the ancient Israeli Department of Homeland Security that they will fail to defend the nation — not because they didn’t crack down on foreigners but partially because they didn’t welcome them!

“Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees,” Isaiah urged the people. “Let the Moabite fugitives stay with you; be their shelter from the destroyer. The oppressor will come to an end, and destruction will cease; the aggressor will vanish from the land.”

“Bring water for the thirsty,” he added. “Bring food for the fugitives. They flee from the sword.”

Isaiah even declared that God would refuse to accept the prayers and religious expressions of those who oppressed others, which should serve as quite a warning to someone misusing a Bible verse to justify oppressing immigrants and refugees.

“When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are

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*Additionally, a Bible verse (in the King James translation) slowly appears on screen and then stays on for the rest of the video as agents run around pointing guns at empty spaces: “The wicked flee when no man pursueth; but the righteous are bold as a lion.” — Proverbs 28:1*

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full of blood,” Isaiah wrote, offering a word from God.

“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.”

As for Proverbs 28, even this book of wisdom literature packs quite a prophetic punch that should make DHS squirm. Here are a few other lines from chapter 28:

“A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops.” v. 3

“Better the poor whose walk is blameless than the rich whose ways are perverse.” v. 6

“If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.” v. 9

“The rich are wise in their own eyes; one who is poor and discerning sees how deluded they are.” v. 11

“When the righteous triumph, there is great elation; but when the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding.” v. 12

“Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a helpless people.” v. 15

“A tyrannical ruler practices extortion.” v. 16

“Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses.” v. 27

With biblical passages like those, I would be tempted to hide my face too. The only problem for DHS is that God can see through the masks. ■

*Brian Kaylor is a Baptist minister with a Ph.D. in political communication. He is president and editor-in-chief of Word&Way and writes for a broad range of publications about faith, culture and politics. He has granted permission to CET to publish this writing which first appeared July 31, 2025. Brian can be followed at: [publicwitness.wordandway.org](http://publicwitness.wordandway.org)*

## ***We Are the Fundamentalists***

*we are the fundamentalists  
not those who claim the name  
but those of us  
who believe in human rights  
for everyone*

*who believe in fundamentals  
of fairness  
of equality  
of equity*

*who believe in recognizing injustices  
of past of present  
and being accountable  
for ending them*

*who believe in caring  
for nature  
who believe in restoring  
in maintaining  
the environment*

*who believe in working toward peace  
toward freedom  
for all*

*yes we are the fundamentalists*

— by Charles Thomas on the website, [worshipweb@uua.org](mailto:worshipweb@uua.org).



# How the Catholic Church Helped Change the Conversation About Capital Punishment in the United States

By Austin Sarat

Thirty years ago, the film “Dead Man Walking” had its debut in movie theaters around the United States. It was a box office hit, and critics lavished it with praise. Lead actress Susan Sarandon won an Academy Award for her portrayal of Sister Helen Prejean, the spiritual adviser to a death row inmate played by Sean Penn.

But the film’s impact went far beyond the artistic realm. It exposed a mass audience to a perspective on the death penalty informed by the Catholic faith of a devout, if somewhat unconventional, nun.

The actual Sister Helen had published her memoir *Dead Man Walking* two years before, raising her profile as an activist against the death penalty. Recalling her experience outside the execution chamber of Elmo Patrick Sonnier, one of the people she counseled, Prejean later wrote: “I touched him in the only way I could. I told him: ‘Look at my face. I will be the face of Christ, the face of love for you.’”

She made it her mission to show that “everybody’s worth more than the worst thing they’ve ever done in their life.” As she once told an interviewer, “Jesus said, ‘Love your enemy.’ Jesus didn’t say, ‘Execute the hell out of the enemy.’”

That belief was featured prominently in the film and offered a counterpoint to the popular tough-on-crime rhetoric of the 1990s. Back then, 80 percent of the American public supported capital punishment.

Today, that is no longer true. Support for the death penalty has declined to around 50 percent. As a death penalty scholar, I have studied those changes. The church’s anti-death penalty teaching has helped provide both a moral foundation and political respectability for those working to end the death penalty.

## Church Teachings

But that teaching is relatively new in the church, dating back to the past half-century. For most of its history, the Catholic Church did not oppose the death penalty.

During the Middle Ages, the church endorsed the execution of heretics and held firm that secular authorities could and should put people to death for serious

crimes. And in the early 20th century, Vatican City’s penal code permitted the death penalty for anyone who attempted to kill a pope. Pope Paul VI changed that in 1969.

When John Paul II became pope a decade later, he pushed the church further away from its historic embrace of the death penalty, calling it “cruel and unnecessary.” And in 2018, under Pope Francis, the Vatican revised the section on capital punishment in the Catechism, the summary of Catholic doctrine.

The death penalty “is inadmissible because it is an

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attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,” and deprives “the guilty of the possibility of redemption,” the new version says. This teaching committed the church to work for its abolition.

In his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis stated that the death penalty is “inadequate from a moral standpoint and no longer necessary from that of penal justice.” In 2024, he again called for “the abolition of the death penalty, a provision at odds with Christian faith and one that eliminates all hope of forgiveness and rehabilitation.”

## Impact in the US

The changed situation of capital punishment in this country is largely attributable to a change in the strategy and tactics of the abolitionist movement. Instead of talking about the death penalty in abstract terms, activists began to focus on the day-to-day realities of

its administration.

Today, advocates in what I have called the “new abolitionism” focus on the prospect of executing the innocent, racial discrimination in capital sentencing, and the financial costs associated with the death penalty. Among Catholics working to end the death penalty, however, the moral questions about state killing have long been a central focus.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops focused on morality in its own campaign to end capital punishment, which was launched in 2005. And from time to time, popes have made special appeals to government officials in the US, asking them to spare the life of someone awaiting execution.

Legal historian Sara Mayeux argues that Catholic anti-death penalty activism in the US has been less intense than anti-abortion work. Nevertheless, the impact of the church is reflected in the fact that in the past 50 years, Catholic support for capital punishment fell more than it did among evangelicals, main-line Protestants, Black Protestants and other religious groups.

In December 2024, as the term of President Joe Biden, a devout Catholic, was coming to a close, the Catholics Mobilizing Network, which advocates against capital punishment, called on the president to commute the sentences of the 40 people then on federal death row. Francis, too, publicly prayed for their sentences to be commuted.

Biden did so for 37 federal death row inmates, changing their sentences to life in prison without parole.

### Anti-Death Penalty Superstar

As the church’s official position against capital punishment has evolved, Prejean has been a consistent voice asking Americans to recognize and respond to the humanity of all those touched by murder. She is, in words I am sure she would resist, a superstar in the movement, thanks to her countless public appearances, interviews, protests and actions to lobby legislators.

In 2021, she wrote: “I’m on fire to abolish government killing because I’ve seen it far too close-up, and I have a pretty good idea by now how it works — or doesn’t.”

Thirty years ago, “Dead Man Walking” gave its viewers a chance to see capital punishment close-up. It didn’t preach or hit anyone over the head with an overtly abolitionist message. Instead, it asked viewers to see the death penalty from many sides and make up their own minds about whether anyone should be put to death, even for the most horrible crimes.

Between then and now, America has undertaken precisely the kind of conversation about capital punishment that the film exemplified and inspired. ■

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*Thirty years ago, “Dead Man Walking” gave its viewers a chance to see capital punishment close-up. It didn’t preach or hit anyone over the head with an overtly abolitionist message. Instead, it asked viewers to see the death penalty from many sides and make up their own minds about whether anyone should be put to death, even for the most horrible crimes.*

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***“We follow a Jesus who transforms the world. Living as the body of Christ requires feeling and responding to the pain of all the members, and utilizing the gifts of each member—‘giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other’”***

*1 Corinthians 12:24–25. New International Version (NIV)*

# A Call for Repentance for the Anti-Immigrant Sins of a Nation

By Chuck Poole

Cruelty is a sin. That such a self-evident truth might need to be said aloud had never occurred to me until I witnessed my own nation's recent actions concerning migrants and immigrant communities within our borders.

Our nation is currently conducting a campaign of cruelty against immigrants. From the intentional deportation of undocumented immigrants to third countries where they have no family, to the revocation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for hundreds of thousands of persons who came to the US seeking refuge from danger, to the arrest of immigrants when they appear for their Intensive Supervision Appearance Program (ISAP) appointments, to the effort to annul birthright citizenship, to the ruthless creation and gleeful celebration of “Alligator Alcatraz,” our nation has embraced a campaign of cruelty against migrating families. People of faith need to respond to that campaign with a clear and united “no.”

Immigration enforcement concerned with public safety would focus its resources on detaining people who commit violent crimes. But rounding up law-abiding undocumented immigrants at worksites, clinics, houses of worship and parks is not about public safety; it is an institutionalized campaign of cruelty intended to intimidate. One small but painful example of this campaign's human cost — one I learned about literally while writing these words — comes from a church in the Texas border region. The church, fearing ICE detentions, deemed it necessary to cancel its Vacation Bible School (VBS) for weeks to protect the safety of its congregation.

What can people of faith do in the face of this campaign of fear against our immigrant neighbors? Here are a few possible responses to this critical moral moment — a moment when the soul of our nation is at stake:

1. We can carry with us, everywhere we go, a small card with some verses of Scripture that speak to God's concern for — and our responsibility to — migrating people. Among them are: “You shall not be cruel to the immigrant” — Exodus 23:9; “You shall love the immigrant as yourself” — Leviticus 19:34; “Because all the land in the world belongs

to God, in the eyes of God we are all immigrants” — Leviticus 25:23; “You shall not deprive an immigrant of justice” — Deuteronomy 24:17; and “Show kindness to one another, and do not oppress the immigrant” — Zechariah 7:9-10.

2. Those who are able can go in-person to the nearest Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office and register their opposition to the current ICE operations at worksites, schools, parks, clinics and houses of worship. I have made a handful of such visits, seeking to communicate that our

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nation's current approach to immigration enforcement is a campaign of cruelty against millions of our immigrant neighbors, and it needs to stop. I try to never come across as loud or dismissive, but instead to express my views in the way that Quakers call “gentle and plain” — with words that strive to be as clear as they are kind, and as kind as they are clear. There may be many ways to have such conversations.

3. As a small act of solidarity with our Spanish-speaking immigrant neighbors, we can learn an important sentence or two in Spanish. A few to consider include: “Ame al inmigrante como a sí

mismo” — You shall love the immigrant as yourself; “No oprimas al inmigrante” — You shall not oppress the immigrant; and “En el nombre y el Espíritu de Jesucristo, llamamos al gobierno de los Estados Unidos a arrepentirse de sus pecados contra los inmigrantes” — In the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, we call upon the United States government to repent of its sins against immigrants.

In the face of our nation’s institutionalized, weaponized, militarized xenophobia, such responses seem so small, like trying to move the ocean with a thimble. But to go about our ordinary church life, saying nothing and doing nothing concerning this moral crisis, would be — to borrow an overused colloquialism — to “fiddle while Rome burns.” And if we wait until we can do something big before we do something small, we will never do anything at all. In this moral moment of crisis, one thing is certain: doing nothing is not an option.

If any corner of our nation has reached the point of canceling VBS for fear of detention and deportation, then it is time for people of faith in every corner of our country to call on our government to repent of its present national sin, and to say, in words as kind as they are clear and as clear as they are kind: “En el nombre y el Espíritu de Jesucristo, llamamos al gobierno de los

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Estados Unidos a arrepentirse de sus pecados contra los inmigrantes.” ■

*Chuck Poole retired in 2022 after 45 years of pastoral life. He served churches in Georgia, N.C., Washington, D.C. and Jackson, Miss. Chuck has also served as a “minister on the street” and is an advocate for interfaith conversation and welcome. He and his wife Marcia live in Birmingham, Ala. where he serves on the staff of Together for Hope (<https://tfhope.org>).*

## **Unbelieve**

*if becoming a heretic  
is what I have to do  
to love people fully  
and completely  
it’s a sacrifice  
I’m willing to make*

— **by Marla Taviano**, found and followed at: [marlataviano.substack.com](http://marlataviano.substack.com)

This poem is from her book titled *unbelieve: poems on the journey to becoming a heretic*.



# The Silence That Speaks: Commentary on the Lived Effects of Immigration Policy

By Elket Rodriguez

The lawn hasn't been mowed. The gardener never showed up.

Behind our house, the construction site sits frozen — two homes never finished.

A car with no plates waits at the corner of the subdivision, parked too long, too still, like a quiet warning.

Above, a deportation flight slices through the blue sky as I run laps in the city park. This is what fear looks like in my community. It's seen not always in the headlines, but in the absences, in the silences. In the things that no longer happen. In the margins.

Even immigration officers — the same ones we greet at the grocery store, whose kids go to school with ours — walk with a visible emotional weight. They carry the burden of a job that increasingly targets their own neighbors.

The man two houses down has not touched his yard in months. He used to wave. Now there's a faded "For Sale by Owner" sign in front of his door. No one's seen him. A friend, after 25 years in the US, sold his home and returned to Mexico, defeated by a country he once tried so hard to make his own.

Whole families stopped coming to church. No explanation — just empty pews.

We see children who no longer have their parents with them. We hear about families who won't even go to the supermarket, out of fear they may not come back home.

We mourn the church that canceled Vacation Bible School, not because there weren't volunteers, but because immigration agents were patrolling the neighborhood, and the church didn't want to risk more children being separated. We grieve for the children who didn't get the opportunity to run, play, sing or have fun during VBS. No sticky fingers reaching for juice boxes. No songs sung with abandon. No joy.

Baseball and soccer teams are thinning out. Fewer kids are signed up — so few that coaches are now merging age groups just to have enough players.

There's an older Latina woman now selling flowers in front of the gas station. She wasn't there before. She should be resting. She should be cared for.

The taco stand is closed. The barbershop still opens,

but the barber who once cheered for Trump now avoids the topic — his undocumented parents are no longer safe under the policies of the man he supported.

This is not just political. This is deeply human. What we are living is not theoretical; it's tactile — visible in the slowed heartbeat of our community, in the kids missing from the playground, in the uncut grass, in the homes left behind, in the silence at church.

We are not okay.

Although I am not an immigrant myself and I live with privileges many of my neighbors do not, the pain of my community runs through me. I don't pretend to speak for them or to take a place that isn't mine.

But I walk with them, I grieve with them, and I hear the echo of their fear in the silence that surrounds us. What I share comes from that closeness — not from a personal experience of persecution, but from standing near those who endure it.

Fear has reshaped our routines and rewired our sense of safety. What once felt like ordinary life now feels like something borrowed, something at risk of being taken.

And yet, our people still hope. They still love. They still gather in hidden ways, still pray, still sing to their children at night. The soul of our community has not died. It's just hiding.

For now.

But we know this: a fearful people cannot remain silent forever. The silence may speak today, but one day, we will speak back.

This is what fear looks like in my community. Not always in the headlines, but in the absences, in the silences. In the things that no longer happen. In the margins. ■

*Elket Rodríguez is immigration advocacy specialist for Fellowship Southwest ([fellowshipsouthwest.org](http://fellowshipsouthwest.org)) and global migration advocate for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. On behalf of both these roles, he participates in Como Nacido entre Nosotros (CNEN) a network of faith leaders who serve migrants across Latin America*

# What is the CREC? The Christian Nationalist Group Has a Vision for America — and the Defense Secretary's Support

By Samuel Perry

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's affiliation with the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches — commonly called the CREC — drew attention even before his confirmation hearings in January 2025.

Hegseth's membership in a church that belongs to the CREC was noteworthy because prominent members of the church identify as Christian nationalists, and because of the CREC's positions on issues concerning gender, sexuality and the separation of church and state. More recently, media reports highlighted a Pentagon prayer led by Hegseth and his pastor, Brooks Potteiger, in which they praised President Donald Trump, who they said was divinely appointed.

As a scholar of the Christian right, I have studied the CREC. The organization is most easily understood through three main parts: churches, schools and media.

## What is the CREC?

The CREC is a network of churches associated with the congregation of Doug Wilson, the pastor who founded Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. Wilson grew up in the town, where his father was an evangelical minister.

Wilson co-founded the CREC in 1993 and is the public figure most associated with the network. Christ Church operates as the hub for Logos Schools, Canon Press and New Saint Andrews College, all located in Moscow. Logos is a set of private schools and homeschooling curricula; Canon Press is a publishing house and media company; and New Saint Andrews College is a university — all of which were founded by Wilson and associated with Christ Church. All espouse the view that Christians are at odds with — or at war with — secular society.

While he is not Hegseth's pastor, Wilson is the most influential voice in the CREC, and the two men have spoken approvingly of one another.

As Wilson steadily grew Christ Church in Moscow, he and its members sought to spread their message by making Moscow a conservative town and establishing churches beyond it. Of his hometown, Wilson plainly

states, "Our desire is to make Moscow a Christian town."

The CREC doctrine is opposed to religious pluralism or political points of view that diverge from CREC theology. On its website, the CREC says that it is "committed to maintaining its Reformed faith, avoiding the pitfalls of cultural relevance and political compromise that destroys [sic] our doctrinal integrity."

CREC churches adhere to a highly patriarchal and conservative interpretation of Scripture. Wilson has

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*The CREC doctrine is opposed to religious pluralism or political points of view that diverge from CREC theology.*

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said that in a sexual relationship, "A woman receives, surrenders, accepts." In a broader political sense, CREC theology includes the belief that the establishment clause of the Constitution does not require a separation of church and state. The most common reading of the establishment clause is that freedom of religion precludes the installation of a state religion or religious tests to hold state office.

The CREC broadly asserts that the government and anyone serving in it should be Christian. For Wilson and members of CREC churches, this means Christians and only Christians are qualified to hold political office in the United States.

Researcher Matthew Taylor explained in an interview with the Nashville Tennessean: "They believe the church is supposed to be militant in the world, is supposed to be reforming the world, and in some ways conquering the world."

While the CREC may not have the name recognition of some large evangelical denominations or the visibility of some megachurches, it boasts churches across the United States and internationally. The CREC website claims to have over 130 churches and parishes

spread across North America, Europe, Asia and South America.

Like some other evangelical denominations, the CREC uses “church planting” to grow its network. Plant churches do not require a centralized governing body to ordain their founding. Instead, those interested in starting a CREC congregation contact the CREC. The CREC then provides materials and literature for people to use in their church.

#### CREC Schools, Home Schools and Colleges

The CREC’s expansion also owes a debt to Wilson’s entrepreneurship. As Wilson’s church expanded, Wilson founded an associated K-12 school called “Logos” in September 1981, which since then has grown into a network of many schools.

In conjunction with its growth, Logos produces and sells “classical Christian” curricula to private schools and home-school families through Logos Press. Classical Christian Schools aim to develop what they consider a biblical worldview. In addition to religious studies, they focus on classic texts from Greece and Rome. They have grown in popularity in recent years, especially among conservatives.

Logos’ classical Christian curriculum is designed to help parents “raise faithful, dangerous Christian kids who impact the world for Christ and leave craters in the world of secularism.” Logos press regularly asserts, “education is warfare.”

According to the website, Logos schools enroll more than 2,000 students across 16 countries. Logos also has its own press that supplies the schools’ curriculum. On the heels of Logos’ success, Wilson in 1993 founded the Association of Classical Christian Schools (ACCS), an accrediting body for like-minded schools. The ACCS now boasts 500 schools and more than 50,000 students across the United States and around the world.

Additionally, Wilson founded New Saint Andrews College in Moscow, Idaho. New Saint Andrews is a Christian university that imports into higher education the classical Christian approach used in the Logos schools. Consistent with other CREC institutions, the New Saint Andrews College considers secularism a weakness of other universities and society more generally. Its website explains: “New Saint Andrews has long held a principled and clear voice, championing the truth of God’s word and ways, while so many other colleges veer into softness and secularism.” The school is governed by the elders of Christ Church and does not accept federal funding.

#### CREC Media

In addition to Logos Press, which produces the CREC school curricula, Wilson founded Canon Press. Canon Press produces books, podcasts, a YouTube channel and assorted merchandise — including apparel and weapons such as a flamethrower. The YouTube channel has over 100,000 followers.

Books published by Canon range from children’s picture books to manuals on masculinity. A number of them continue the theme of warfare. The politics page Canon Press contains many books on Christian nationalism. Christian political theorist Stephen Wolfe’s book *The Case for Christian Nationalism* is one of the most popular among these titles. The website has dozens of books on Christian nationalism and media dedicated to the construction of a Christian government.

Author Joe Rigney, a fellow of theology at New Saint Andrews College and an associate pastor at Christ Church, warns of the “Sin of Empathy.” Rigney claims that empathizing with others is sinful because it requires compromise and makes one vulnerable in the fight against evil.

#### CREC Controversies

As the church network has grown, it has drawn attention and scrutiny. Wilson’s 1996 publication of a book positively depicting slavery and claiming slavery cultivated “affection among the races” drew national attention.

Accusations of sexual abuse and the church’s handling of it have also brought national news coverage. Vice’s Sarah Stankorb interviewed many women who talked about a culture, especially in marriage, where sexual abuse and assault is common. Vice’s reporting led to a podcast that details the accounts of survivors. In interviews, Wilson has denied any wrongdoing and said that claims of sexual abuse will be directed to the proper authorities.

Hegseth’s actions as secretary of defense concerning gender identity and banning trans people from serving in the military — in addition to his order removing the name of gay activist and politician Harvey Milk from a Navy ship — have brought more attention to the CREC. I believe that given Hegseth’s role as secretary of defense, his affiliation with the CREC will likely remain a topic of conversation throughout the Trump presidency. ■

*Samuel Perry is an associate professor of Sociology at Baylor University. This article first appeared in The Conversation on June 20, 2025, and is published here with permission.*

# Resisting Stupidity, Injustice and Complacency: Words of Wisdom and Courage From Confessing Church Pastor Ernst Käsemann

By Cody J. Sanders

When I, as a Baptist, began teaching at a Lutheran seminary, I started steadily increasing my intake of Lutheran theological voices. In the lead-up to the 2024 election, as well as in the subsequent months, one of my most profound theological influences became Lutheran pastor and theologian, Ernst Käsemann (1906-1998). He's a figure many New Testament scholars know because of his immense contributions to the academic study of the New Testament — Käsemann's doctoral supervisor was Rudolf Bultman — but I was hooked by his theological insight for a different reason.

Partially, my intrigue was biographical. Ernst Käsemann longed for order in the 1930s Germany of his young adulthood and thus cast his vote for Adolf Hitler, as many German Protestant ministers of his era did. He soon realized his error but continued to believe that Germany could wait until the next election to correct its mistake of elevating Hitler to office.<sup>1</sup>

Soon, however, Käsemann recognized the urgency of the moment and joined the Pastors' Emergency League, founded by Martin Niemöller (of "First they came for ... and I did not speak out" fame), and they declared the Reich bishop a traitor to the church. Käsemann was denounced as a traitor to Germany and recommended for the concentration camp. On Nov. 15, 1934, in an even more brazen and unprecedented move, Käsemann and colleagues from the Confessing Church publicly dismissed by name 45 Deutsche Christen — supporters of Hitler — from his congregation and presented 45 Confessing Church members — opponents of Hitler — to replace them.<sup>2</sup> In about a year's time, Käsemann had evolved from voting for Hitler, to realizing his error but waiting for it to resolve itself, to publicly and audaciously opposing the Nazi regime at risk of his own life.

James Cone, father of Black liberation theology, who met Käsemann in 1973, said of him: "Among all the German theologians, or Europeans for that matter, whom I came to know when I began writing, Käsemann was the only one who understood me. He was a man of my own mind and heart."<sup>3</sup>

Käsemann's biography is far more extensive

than can be rendered here. Unlike martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer — a Käsemann contemporary in the Confessing Church who receives much more attention for his leadership in the Nazi resistance — Käsemann had nearly a half-century of life beyond the Nazi regime. During this time, he reflected on the rise of the Nazis, the captivity of the church to Nazi ideology, the resistance movements, and the warnings that had to be issued again and again to churches on the brink of complicity in great evil. It is out of that context that Käsemann developed his "apocalyptic theology of liberation."<sup>4</sup>

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## A Pithy Formulation of Original Sin

While I cannot summarize here the breadth and beauty of Käsemann's theology, I want to lift up several quotations from his essays and speeches that seem illuminating for contemporary life in the U.S. The first is Käsemann's definition of "original sin" — a concept with an often-problematic history of interpretation in Christian theology and one liberal Protestants often tend to ignore. In his pithy rendering of the concept, Käsemann stated: "Original sin — which manifests itself in stupidity, injustice and complacency — is not eradicated on earth, according to our faith. But this does not forbid us from denouncing it, opposing it with all our might, and limiting it where possible."<sup>5</sup>

I find this succinct definition of original sin helpful in pointing to some elements often overlooked in Christian theologizing about sin: stupidity, injustice and complacency. I want to focus not on the stupidity, injustice and complacency of *others* — though there



is much of it — but on *our own* stupidity, injustice and complacency that imperils our ability to meet the demands of this hour with wisdom and courage. If you run in similar liberal Protestant Christian circles, you might find that this speaks to your experience, too.

### Stupidity

In the circles I belong to, stupidity comes in many forms (and I myself participate in it more than I wish to admit). For example, one form of stupidity particular to liberal, highly educated circles is believing that if we have properly diagnosed a problem — i.e., if we've *thought* about the problem correctly — that we've somehow *done* something about it. We parse, we nuance, we define. All of that can be helpful in getting to an actionable theory about what exactly is going on in the world around us — politically, religiously, sociologically — but good theory should lead to praxis, making it possible for us to iterate on our strategies, improving their efficacy when we realize they're not as effective as we had hoped. Without theory-in-practice, or thought-toward-action, we are left with theoretical theology that never reaches the real world where people live their lives.

If thinking rightly about injustice and violence is where we end — perhaps posting our thinking on social media, but not much else — then we've fallen short of genuine engagement that intervenes in the death-dealing practices catching our neighbors in their grips.

Another form of contemporary stupidity suggests that if we can discern which lines surely won't be crossed — or if we can define just how *this historical moment* is different from the rise of totalitarianism in Germany or anywhere else — then we can put a little distance between then and now, them and us. But even as we strive to intellectually distance ourselves from the worst horrors of our historical consciousness, that gap is closing quickly.

This larger form of stupidity — *the stupidity of the comfortable*, we might call it — is evidenced in the belief that it isn't that bad, or it *won't get* that bad, or it's not likely to continue getting worse for very much longer. This includes the belief — of which we have probably been disabused by now — that the courts will save us or, as Käsemann believed earlier on, that the next election will set things right. This form of stupidity, akin to wishful thinking, occludes the ways that lives are being affected *right now* in a steady march toward death for those already pressed to the edge vulnerability's precipitous cliff.

Perhaps the first several months of this administration have shaken you out of these forms of stupidity.

Maybe this happened when the president deported 238 Venezuelan men to a maximum-security prison, called a “terrorism confinement center,” in El Salvador, from which, according to the Salvadorian justice minister, the only way out is in a coffin. The men were described as terrorists and violent gang members, yet 75 percent seem to have no criminal record at all.<sup>6</sup> Kilmar Abrego Garcia, the only man returned to the U.S. from that confinement center, has described the severe beatings and psychological torture enacted there: sleep deprivation, being forced to kneel overnight, being denied bathroom access, no windows, bright lights 24 hours a day, etc.<sup>7</sup>

Or perhaps you've been shaken awake to the urgency of the moment by the recent creation of “Alligator Alcatraz” in the Florida Everglades. This “one-stop shop to carry out President Trump's mass deportation agenda” — as Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier has described it — was built in a matter of days to detain 5,000 people and is being operated with FEMA funds designated for emergency disaster relief.

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Käsemann's injustice — a form that  
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“We'd like to see them in many states,” Trump himself said upon visiting the facility. “At some point, they might morph into a system.”<sup>8</sup> Now there's a line of merch — hats, beer cozies, T-shirts, etc. — that fans of this brutality can purchase to celebrate this cruelty camp in their daily lives.

### Injustice

Many years after his involvement in the Nazi-resisting Confessing Church, Käsemann wrote: “We can hide and blind ourselves to injustice, shamefulness and misery. This is happening everywhere in the world today to a degree no less than it once did under the Nazis. And, just as then, it is always happening among Christians.”<sup>9</sup> While injustice is on full display all around us, our own form of Käsemann's injustice — a form that also must be resisted, denounced, and opposed — lies in the quiet distance we put between

ourselves and others whose lives are being ripped apart.

While we might not condone — and may actively condemn — the forms of injustice we see taking shape, the more psychological distance we can put between the victims of our contemporary political death machine and ourselves, the wider we make the empathy gap. A lack of empathy is the fuel complacency needs to grow. This is where the recent conservative Christian attack on empathy becomes most dangerous.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes it's cognitive normalcy bias that creates the empathy-sapping psychological distance that leads us to believe that things can't be as bad — or get as bad — as some make out. So, we *underreact* to the unfolding horrors until it's too late. This normalcy bias manifests itself as a niggling doubt, so easily summoned, that suggests *maybe* they did something to deserve this, and that good people who follow the rules — *like us!* — will be just fine. It's a sentiment that was alive and in full force in the church of Käsemann's Germany.

All of it, nevertheless, leads to our own enablement of the injustices taking shape around us, sending our neighbors to camps in which many will die.

### Complacency

As it turns out, of the three components of Käsemann's tripartite definition of original sin, complacency is the easiest to spot among us.<sup>11</sup> Like original sin, complacency can arrive in several forms; I've seen Christians use their faith to distance themselves from political realities in a few specific and repeated ways. First, we use the fear of mixing faith and politics to rationalize our inaction, conveniently defining "politics" so broadly that it comes to mean the systems and structures responsible for the very destruction of our neighbors' lives. At the same time, we let our fear of edging too close to "works righteousness" cloud our call to acts of solidarity and service with our neighbors. In some cases, we rely on theologies so otherworldly that we, as contemporary Christians, have a hard time imagining what the call of discipleship looks like *now*, in the *flesh*, in *solidarity with our neighbors*. Käsemann addressed these forms of complacency, saying:

It appears to me to be a monstrous perversion when the gospel and confession are invoked and misused in order to be removed from the world of the abused and enslaved, to abandon them to their rulers, undisturbed by the horror of the victims, to seek after personal earthly and heavenly bliss ... Those who want to watch their

backs, who refuse to dirty their hands, and who cowardly seek to guard themselves from trouble cannot be their brothers' keepers, cannot advocate for what is human, cannot be servants of the Crucified. That is clear and simple to pronounce today.<sup>12</sup>

Friends, we cannot follow Christ and hold to the belief that the practice of our faith has nothing to do with the suffering of others or the unjust relations of society! That is heresy for those who claim to follow a crucified God risen in power over the death-dealing machinations of empire. As Käsemann put it, the church "is legitimately such only in the shadow of his cross ... For the people of God on earth are the multitude of those who are only allowed to wear the cross on their chests if they have previously carried it on their backs."<sup>13</sup>

Readers who wish to engage more with the work of Ernst Käsemann should consult his many reflections — very relevant for contemporary Christians

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*Friends, we cannot follow Christ and hold to the belief that the practice of our faith has nothing to do with the suffering of others or the unjust relations of society!*

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— on the German church's experience of Nazi complicity and resistance. In addition to the source cited in this article, other places to begin are his book *Jesus Means Freedom* (1968) and a collection of addresses and essays titled *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene* (2010). At this point in our history, time spent immersed in the words and wisdom of Käsemann will be well spent, and — if your reaction is anything like mine — will prove courage-inducing for those seeking to follow the ways of Jesus amid the stupidity, injustice and complacency we face in our current era of cruelty. ■

*Cody J. Sanders is Associate Professor of Congregational and Community Care Leadership at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN. An ordained Baptist minister, he is the author of several books and serves on the CET board.*

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1 Ry O. Siggelkow, "Editor's Introduction," in Ernst Käsemann, *Church Conflicts: The Cross, Apocalyptic,*

and *Political Resistance*, ed. Ry. O. Siggelkow, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), xi. Emphasis original.

2 Siggelkow, “Editor’s Introduction,” xi-xiii.

3 James H. Cone, “Foreword,” in Ernst Käsemann, *Church Conflicts: The Cross, Apocalyptic, and Political Resistance*, ed. Ry. O. Siggelkow, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), viii.

4 Siggelkow, “Editor’s Introduction,” x. Emphasis original.

5 Ernst Käsemann, *Church Conflicts: The Cross, Apocalyptic, and Political Resistance*, ed. Ry. O. Siggelkow, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 138-9.

6 Cecilia Vega, “U.S. Sent 238 Migrants to Salvadoran Mega-Prison; Documents Indicated Most Have No Apparent Criminal Records,” *CBS News*, April 6, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-records-show-about-migrants-sent-to-salvadoran-prison-60-minutes-transcript/>.

7 Josh Gerstein and Kyle Cheney, “Kilmar Abrego Garcia Describes ‘Severe Beatings’ and ‘Psychological Torture’ in Salvadoran Prison,” *Politico*, July 2, 2025, [https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/02/](https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/02/kilmar-abrego-garcia-salvadoran-prison-account-00438153?fbclid=IwQ0xDSwLTZ4BleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHsISQh1QmG2-kosGsLfDECHeT-ZTam-blM48HbTmWU8Rc2zfNrhlG1vgOZ2L9_aem_EmMk01Cx62lxC6vkckxxhw)

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8 Inae Oh, “The Cartoonish Cruelty of Trump’s Alligator Alcatraz,” *Mother Jones*, July 1, 2025, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2025/07/alligator-alcatraz-trump/>.

9 Käsemann, *Church Conflicts*, 159.

10 Rodney Kennedy, “Why Empathy is Under Assault Today,” *Baptist News Global*, March 11, 2025, <https://baptistnews.com/article/why-empathy-is-under-assault-today/>.

11 Importantly, I don’t want to confuse “complacency” with the communal trauma response of simply being so overwhelmed that we don’t know what to do...yet. That has been true for many of us trying to figure out what our work is in this moment and how we can band together to take action on the call to do something. Complacency, by contrast, rationalizes away our need to do anything *at all*.

12 Käsemann, *Church Conflicts*, 160-61.

13 Käsemann, *Church Conflicts*, 3, 13.

## ***Special Notice of Upcoming Issue of CET***

The fall edition of *Christian Ethics Today* will be a special issue devoted to the subject of Immigration. We are excited to have a group of well-qualified and intimately-involved writers who bring a comprehensive exploration of teachings in the Bible and the life and words of Jesus to this timely subject. Our guest co-editor is Cody Sanders of Luther Seminary in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota.

# I Spoke About LGBTQ+ Inclusion at Truett Seminary and Watched Bridges Being Built

by Georgia McKee

It is said the Spirit sometimes shows up in the most unexpected places. As a queer woman, I never thought that unexpected place would be at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary.

Two weeks after Baylor University made headlines for rescinding over \$640,000 in funding for LGBTQ+ research among congregations, I was driving from Dallas to Waco to present on LGBTQ+ inclusion in sports ministry at the very institution that had just drawn such a clear line in the sand. After the Baugh Foundation announcement was made, I waited for my phone to ring, telling me that my presentation had to be canceled, but the call never came.

The world of Christian sports ministry has long been dominated by organizations requiring "sexual purity statements" that exclude LGBTQ+ athletes from leadership. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Athletes in Action have created a landscape where queer athletes must choose between their faith community and their authentic identity.

Given this context, I wasn't optimistic when the Global Congress on Sport and Christianity team reviewed my conference proposal. Yet remarkably, they accepted it. Even after the host university's very public stance on LGBTQ+ issues, as seen in the Baugh Foundation controversy, my session remained on the program.

"Okay God," I said in my car on my way to the campus, "I'm going to need you to do something only you can do because, honestly, I'm terrified."

## Walking In

I'll admit, I felt like fresh meat in a shark tank walking into Truett Seminary. Surrounded by quarter-zips and name tags representing organizations I knew viewed my identity as sinful, I wanted to both hide *and* make myself known.

One by one, I introduced myself to chaplains, ministers, coaches and athletes, hoping to find allies. Or, better yet, someone like me.

I met representatives from Division I "Big Four" schools, professional leagues, and ministry organizations. We could all agree on caring about athletes' spiritual lives, but our approaches differed dramatically.

While others discussed salvation numbers and methods for gaining power and influence in athletic departments, I wanted to address the alarming connection between religious-identity conflict and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ youth in athletics. You could say we had slightly different agendas for the weekend.

As I headed to my session—the last one of the day—I expected to find a nearly empty room. Five minutes before we began, over 60 people had packed the small classroom, with attendees sitting on the floor as we scrambled for extra chairs. I was overwhelmed with gratitude. I took a deep breath, said a prayer, and began.

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*While others discussed salvation numbers and methods for gaining power and influence in athletic departments, I wanted to address the alarming connection between religious-identity conflict and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ youth in athletics.*

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I opened my presentation with Sarah's story.

Sarah was a devoted college athlete who served as her campus FCA leader, planning lessons, recruiting participants and leading worship until she came out as gay. Trusting her community to hold and love her, she opened up, only to receive that devastating blow so many queer athletes know: "You can worship with us, but you cannot lead us."

I could have shared identical stories from dozens of different athletes.

"The air felt so tense," someone told me afterward. Without a shadow of a doubt, at least 90% of the people in the room were not affirming.

Later, I learned one woman had even prepared to protest mid-presentation because of her convictions about "God's will" for marriage. Then I clicked to my next slide:



“You’re here today with one of three perspectives on LGBTQ+ inclusion: You’re welcoming and affirming regardless of who someone loves; you’re welcoming but not affirming of non-normative identity; or you’re neither welcoming nor affirming. Wherever you are on the spectrum, it’s okay. I’ve been there too, and I’m not here to change you. I just want us to understand each other better.”

“I felt disarmed,” she told me the next morning. “I had nothing to get angry about.”

Through further conversation, I learned she has a gay son getting married in a couple of weeks, and she still hadn’t decided whether to attend. “Maybe we can stay in conversation!” she said, handing me her business card.

I think she decided to go to her son’s wedding.

A WNBA chaplain and I connected over conference sessions before she approached me directly: “I’ll never agree with you or support your identity, but maybe you could help me with my language and terminology so I’m not so harmful to my players.”

I think I just helped players like Paige Bueckers and Natasha Cloud not have to face gay shaming from their chaplain.

In an empty hallway, a woman with an FCA sticker on her coffee mug found me. “I know I’ve hurt a lot of people, and I know that we’ve hurt you. I will never be able to make up for the hurt I’ve caused, but I want you to know that I’m sorry.”

When I asked her name, she wouldn’t give it to me. She could lose her job for her repentance. I hope she feels God’s mercy.

### **What Bridging a Divide Requires**

This week’s lectionary gospel tells the parable of Jesus at the Pharisee’s wedding feast, instructing listeners not to sit at the head of the table but rather

in the corner, waiting to be invited up, so they can be honored and included in the conversation.

Perhaps this is what bridging divides requires. Maybe lowering ourselves to equal ground, rather than coming in hot with judgments and critique, is how we get invited into the most vulnerable places of our “enemies” lives.

So, maybe—just maybe—instead of tearing our institutions apart, we need more story-sharing and listening. Perhaps we need more corner-sitting and table-waiting. Maybe we need to trust that the Holy Spirit is big enough to work in all of us, even when we can’t see it, even when we’re afraid to hope for it.

Because if the Spirit of inclusion, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness can move in the hallways of Truett Seminary, then the Spirit is moving everywhere. And that, my friends, is very good news indeed. ■

*Georgia McKee is a Pastoral resident at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, and co-founder of Christian Athlete Circle. She is a former college ath-*

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*A WNBA chaplain and I connected over conference sessions before she approached me directly: “I’ll never agree with you or support your identity, but maybe you could help me with my language and terminology so I’m not so harmful to my players.”*

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*lete and graduate of Wake Forest University School of Divinity. This article was first published in Good Faith Media ([goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)) on August 28, 2025 and is reprinted here with permission.*

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# Books Considered

## *Abundance*

By Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson (New York: Avid Readers Press, 2025, 289 pages)

*Reviewed by Fisher Humphreys*

This is a book about how to make the world a better place. “To have the future we want,” the authors write, “we need to build and invent more of what we need. That’s it. That’s the thesis.” I came to the book looking for fresh ideas about how to make the world better. I was not disappointed.

Republicans today tend to believe that government can’t make things better, only worse. They try to shrink government so it will do as little harm as possible. They believe in supply-side economics, by which they mean allowing rich people to keep most of their wealth. They think the wealthy will invest their wealth and thereby create more wealth which will trickle down to the wider society. The authors say this never works. Instead, the rich get richer and the poor stay poor.

Democrats, on the other hand, believe that government can make things better, and they try to make that happen. Usually they do this by means of demand-side economics. They provide those who need help with resources such as tax credits, food stamps, health insurance, housing vouchers, and grants to go to college. Klein and Thompson support this, but they insist that it isn’t enough. They say that Democrats also need their own version of supply-side economics, by which they mean that government should help America produce more of the things that people need to make life better—in other words, to create abundance. I’ll come back to this in a moment.

The authors criticize Democrats for slowing down economic development by over-regulation. This happens from small-scale matters such as zoning which inhibits housing construction, to massive building projects. In 1982, for example, California launched a project to build high speed rail from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Today, 43 years and billions of dollars later, there is still no high speed rail. In the same period of time, China has built 23,000 miles of high speed rail.

The authors recognize that government regulation can be a good thing. It can promote safety and require good wages for workers, for example. But they

emphasize that it can also inhibit the kind of development that will make the world a better place. They urge Democrats to recognize that creating abundance is as urgent as regulation, and to act accordingly. They do not offer a list of things to do to make this happen. What they offer is a lens through which to see what needs to happen.

Two things occur to me about the call to create abundance. First, I think Democrats have done this better than the authors acknowledge. President Biden is an excellent example. In his first year as president he oversaw the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law which provided \$1.2 trillion for improving nation’s highways, public transit, water, electricity, and broadband. The following year he pushed through the passage of the CHIPS and Science Act which

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*“To have the future we want,” the authors write, “we need to build and invent more of what we need. That’s it. That’s the thesis.”*

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authorized spending \$280 billion to stimulate the manufacture of semiconductors and scientific research of various kinds. These seem to me to be exactly the kind of supply-side projects that Klein and Thompson believe in. I find it baffling, therefore, that when they mention these things, they do not hold them up as examples of what it looks like to carry out their proposal.

Second, the authors’ word “abundance” and their phrase “the future we want” feel utopian to me. Their thesis is an economic one. It is true that the future we want includes economics: better health care, enough housing, good jobs, efficient communication and transportation systems, and so on. But that future also includes issues for which economic policies can provide no more than a partial solution. For example, we want the future to be more just about race. Some of the mistreatment of racial minorities is economic, of course, but a lot of it concerns attitudes and social arrangements which can’t be addressed by economic policies.

This is a readable and informative book brimming

with insights about public life in America today. For me, its most important contribution is the authors' argument that people who want to make the world better need to adopt a new theory of supply-side economics. I don't think the Christian faith requires us to do this, but I do think the theory is consonant with the Christian faith. It helps those who can't compete successfully in today's capitalistic system.

I suspect that working for abundance may be closer to some biblical teachings than the counter-cultural, anti-empire, small-is-beautiful ideas promoted in some progressive churches today. The theory has the feel of a society-wide version of the biblical instruction to "labor and work . . . so as to have something [abundance] to share with the needy" (Eph. 4:28). ■

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*For me, its most important contribution is the authors' argument that people who want to make the world better need to adopt a new theory of supply-side economics. I don't think the Christian faith requires us to do this, but I do think the theory is consonant with the Christian faith.*

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*Fisher Humphreys is Professor of Divinity, Emeritus, of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. He serves on the Board of Christian Ethics Today. He and his wife, Caroline, live in Birmingham.*

## ***Christian Nationalism is Not the Gospel of Jesus Christ***

"The gospel of Jesus Christ isn't the same as the "gospel" of Christian nationalism. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that the Creator has entered human history in the person of Jesus to reconcile all creation through his life, death, and resurrection. It proclaims that God's reign is breaking in, marked by forgiveness, liberation, justice, healing, and the restoration of all things. In this kingdom, the last are first, enemies are loved, the poor are blessed, and peace is made through self-giving love. It's a kingdom not of this world's systems, where power is redefined through the cross and life emerges from the empty tomb. This gospel calls all to repentance, faith, and discipleship in the way of Christ, embodying the values of God's reign here and now...

...In contrast, the "gospel" of Christian nationalism is a political vision that fuses national identity with a particular expression of Christian faith. It claims that the security, moral health, and future of the nation depend on preserving its "Christian" character through political dominance, cultural control, and alignment of church with state. It tends to define faith in terms of protecting borders, preserving cultural traditions, securing influence, and wielding power to legislate morality. In this vision, loyalty to the nation is often intertwined with loyalty to God, and political victories are seen as spiritual triumphs."

*Source: An excerpt Graham Joseph Hill's Spirituality and Society with Hilly at grahamjosephhill@substack.com August 23, 2025*

# The Heart is a Little to the Left

Walter B. Shurden

I walked up to the clerk, a late-50-ish woman, at Barnes & Noble in Macon, Georgia, and said, “I want to order five copies of William Sloane Coffin’s book, *The Heart is a Little to the Left*.” She did not respond with, “Yes, of course,” or “Give me the author’s name again,” or “I will be glad to help you.” She exclaimed with spontaneous delight, “Oh! What a gorgeous title!”

When I returned several days later to collect my order, the same clerk waited on me. “I am here to get my five copies of the book by William Sloane Coffin, *The Heart is a Little to the Left*.” She said, “I remember you. I read it. It’s marvelous. I ordered copies for each of my three grown children.”

I was proud of myself. My unintentional evangelism had reaped benefits.

In his book — the full title of which is *The Heart is a Little to the Left: Essays on Public Morality* — Coffin recounts a time when he heard Archbishop Helder Camara of Recife, Brazil, speak. With a broad smile and charmingly accented English, Camara said, “Right hand, left hand — both belong to ze same body, but ze heart is a little to the left.”

Like Coffin and Camara, I, too, believe that the heart is a little to the left.

Coffin’s book addresses seven subjects: (1) the spiritual benefits of higher education, (2) the politics of compassion, (3) homophobia, (4) the authority of the Bible, (5) self-righteousness, (6) war, and (7) democracy. It is a brief book, only 81 pages. But here is my selling point to you: it was published in 1999, a quarter of a century ago, but it reads like it was published yesterday.

At our monthly “Four-for-Lunch Bunch” on July 10, 2025, Dan, Kenny, Stan, and I gathered to discuss the book. Because I had read it a couple of times previously, I decided this time I would use Coffin’s magical words to craft prayers for us to share before the meal. In preparation, I wrote my prayers on the blank pages of Coffin’s book, using first-person pronouns. I will use plural pronouns below, because I want to include all of us. Coffin’s words are in italics and the pages quoted from the book are in parentheses.

**As I share this now with you, I ask, “Hear these prayers, O Lord,” — 26 years later.**

Dear God, we confess that *the way we are cutting taxes for the wealthy and social programs for the poor, you’d think the greedy were needy*

*and the needy were greedy.* (22)

We confess also, Lord, that *the proposed school vouchers . . . are but disguised welfare checks for the rich, many of whose children are already in private schools at the expense of the public school system.* (22)

Eternal God, teach us that *if we are to be equal to the times we live in and to the problems the future will bring, we had better learn to scorn trifles and engage the essentials: love of You, our neighbors, and Your world.* (ix)

Forgive us, O God, as we *craft tax breaks for billionaires while claiming that the sky would fall were the minimum wage raised to anything approaching a living wage.* (x)

And teach us also that *if we want peace, we will have to work for justice . . . that justice is the ethical test of any form of spirituality.* (ix, 2)

Hear our confession, O God: *All of us tend to hold certainty dearer than truth. We want to learn only what we already know; we want to*

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**Coffin recounts a time when he heard Archbishop Helder Camara of Recife, Brazil, speak. With a broad smile and charmingly accented English, Camara said, “Right hand, left hand — both belong to ze same body, but ze heart is a little to the left.”**

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*become only what we already are.* (3)

*Let wonder keep dazzling us.* (3)

We praise you, O God, that *Your prodigal love insists that we get not what we deserve but what we need — forgiveness and a fresh start, that there is more mercy in You than sin in us.* (11)

Teach us that *if we fail in love, we fail in all things else.* (12)

Forgive us, Merciful One, *our limited sympathies and unlimited certainties.* (29)

Forgive us, also, *when our fears have blown out the lamp of reason.* (30)

We confess to You, Loving Lord, that *homophobia is the last “respectable” prejudice in America.*

Keep before our eyes that gravestone of a Vietnam veteran in a Washington cemetery: *When I was in the military, they gave me a*



*medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one. (27, 37)*

*We thank You for Holy Scripture, that we read the Bible because the Bible reads us . . . our excuses . . . our envy . . . our promise-making . . . our promise-breaking.*

*But teach us that the authority of the Bible does not mean the infallibility of the Bible and that the Bible is a signpost, not a hitching post, that it points beyond itself to God. (41, 42, 49)*

*Let us not forget, O Lord, that it is a mistake to look to the Bible to close a discussion, for the Bible seeks to open one. You have led with a light rein, giving us our heads and minds. (49)*

*Teach us again in America, every Fourth of July, that the best patriots are not uncritical lovers of their country, any more than they are the loveless critics of it, that true patriots carry on a lovers' quarrel with their country, a reflection of Your eternal lovers' quarrel with the world. (57)*

*Reframe our consumerism, Lord, for we pay for that we don't need, and we need things that we are not willing to pay for.*

*Forgive us, Holy One, we've become the people of the bomb. (62) Do not, we pray,*

*permit our technology to surpass our humanity. (63) Before another generation dies, let us see*

*all nuclear missiles beaten into homes for the homeless and land for the landless, into day care centers and good schools for our poorest kids and compassionate care for our elderly. (66)*

*We confess that [w]e did not make the planet, we do not own the planet, and we have no right to wreck the planet. (65)*

*O God who is more comfortable with diversity than we are, help us not to fear our differences but to celebrate them. We acknowledge that people everywhere are today very much alive to their own nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation — all those legitimate differences within our common humanity.*

*Teach us that we are significant as individuals so that we may learn to serve a greater whole. (69, 70)*

*We thank you, Mighty God, that our freedom is real. Help us to use Your gift of freedom not to do as we please, but as we ought. (78)*

*Amen. ■*

*Walter "Buddy" Shurden is Emeritus Minister at Large, Mercer University. He and his wife, Kay, live in Maryville, TN. Buddy calls this post his Episodic Email from the Smokies, 1:2 July 20, 2025.*

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# *No Tide Rising: Theology, Economics, and the Future*

By Rieger, Joerg

(Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2009) 192pp.

Reviewed by Michael D. Royster

As a Systematic Theology scholar at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, the author Joerg Rieger has consistently challenged conventional theological discourses that disregard the harsh realities of economic crises. *No Tide Rising* addresses Western Christianity's collective underestimation in collapsing financial market's disturbing effects on humanity, and its theological implications. Rieger warns readers that economic instability and pessimism will inevitably escalate without a substantive individual and institutional shift in trajectory. The text implicitly denounces the ideology of micro-level charity as sufficient, while refraining from structural adjustments as an essential part of Christianity's role in actively transforming society as an agent of justice. In five concise chapters, Rieger dispels the myth that faith and religion function independently from economics, while exposing how the 'sub-middle class' suffers from religion perpetuating the myth.

The first two chapters present the civic dogma of "the rising tide" as a 19<sup>th</sup> Century socially constructed scam, which has undergone globalization and recent exposure. Rieger critiques the "middle class church" as having collective guilt for contributing to a broad ecclesiastical culture's unsustainable false sense of economic security. The author effectively expresses the state of the church from a marginal perspective to a greater extent than most relative systematic theological understandings. Such perspective entails a belief that the Horatio Alger myth of the universal accessibility of upward social and economic building contradicts reality. Furthermore, Rieger draws attention to the over-spiritualization of theological praxis which removes the racial economic disparity from the dialogue.

Chapter three focuses on the trend of mainline churches becoming increasingly influenced by the permeation of "prosperity gospel" elements. The belief in a benevolent "invisible hand" in control of free markets reinforces social-Darwinist ideological thought both inside and outside the church, such that direct market intervention becomes discouraged during crisis. Under such social and religious tenets, the overt expression of a lack of faith in the free market or its rhetorical references equates to civic blasphemy. Rieger stresses that "if religious people want to talk

about how faith can impact their use of money, they first need to understand how the use of money impacts their faith." (79) The author further argues that adherents to mainline Christian culture collectively deny that capitalism contains the basic elements of religion. Classical sociological theorist Emile Durkheim would argue that capitalism contains rituals, a moral community, and a set of beliefs. Rieger further argumentatively opposes the conventions of "invisible hand" ideology with an additional reference to classical sociological theorist Thorstein Veblen. "Economic institutionalism, a school of economics based on the work of Thorstein Veblen, notes for instance, that the market is never a purely formal entity but rather is already shaped by interest." (81) Prior to the 2008 U.S. economic meltdown, economic prosperity excluded the masses, yet the author finds it perplexing why the church strictly adheres to *laissez-faire* socio-religious discourse rather than develop alternatives.

In Chapter four, Rieger challenges the myth that humans have the innate will to consume endlessly and

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*In five concise chapters, Rieger dispels the myth that faith and religion function independently from economics, while exposing how the 'sub-middle class' suffers from religion perpetuating the myth.*

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unyielding by giving account to the atrocities of economic loss have on entire social sectors. The author is one of a growing number of clergy and theologians who hold the church and other forms of organized religion as accountable for contributing to the socio-economic status quo. "Religion is frequently the ally of free-market capitalism." (98)

The fifth chapter stresses empowering the common person as compared to conventional aristocracy-like systems of social engagement which have long proposed an ecclesiastical endorsed system of unrestrained consumption and waste as the solution to social problems. Rieger further supports such claims by critiquing the truncated interpretation of Christian creeds which embrace beliefs, yet ignore the implications of the life and ministry of Christ.

Throughout the text, Rieger raises the theological issue of the problem with habitual consumption as a means and unsuccessful attempt to fill a spiritual void.

Due to human's insatiable appetites, mammon itself becomes empowered to function as the ultimate false-god. In his critique, the author takes a sympathetic approach towards "fiscally conservative" policy per se if it involves a broad commitment to justice. However, he essentially equates the economic reality of such policies as the proliferation of greed and deprivation. Such irony has been overlooked by large sectors of the American culture until recently. Rieger's bold assertions about the church and the markets involve a degree of risk due to an escalating, hostile polarization which permeates both civil society and the church.

An indigenous perspective would have further

strengthened Rieger's arguments. In the long run, the relatively small fraction of the world's population grows increasingly addicted to excessive overindulgence which also defies their self-interest due to the near-irreversible ecological destruction which results from humanity's primary materialistic resource upon self-reliance. ■

*Michael D. Royster is a professor in the Division of Social Work, Behavioral and Political Sciences at Prairie View A&M University. He is an Itinerant Elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.*

## **Political Endorsements by Churches...A Dangerous Shift**

*By Amanda Tyler*

**B**y recasting pulpit endorsements as 'a family discussion concerning candidates,' the IRS upends decades of established guidance and would permit churches to take sides in electoral contests while retaining their tax-exempt status. That shift threatens to turn churches into PACs and undermine the core mission of religious communities, which will become targets for candidates from all parties.

The law has never prevented clergy from speaking out on moral issues or engaging their congregations in civic life. But green-lighting tax-exempt churches to endorse candidates from the pulpit creates new pressure on religious leaders to align with partisan candidates and risk division within congregations and entanglement with campaign agendas.

Polling consistently shows that the majority of Americans, including clergy, oppose pulpit endorsements. They know that sacred spaces should not become platforms for political candidates.

BJC will continue to advocate for clear, bright lines that protect both religious liberty and charitable mission. The Johnson Amendment has served those ends for nearly 70 years. Diluting it now threatens the very integrity it was designed to uphold.

BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty) is an 89-year-old religiously based organization working to defend faith freedom for all and protect the institutional separation of church and state in the historic Baptist tradition. BJC is the home of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign.

*This is a statement from Amanda Tyler, executive director of BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty), on the IRS's court filing regarding political endorsements by churches. Media Contact: Israel Igualate | [iiigualate@BJCOnline.org](mailto:iiigualate@BJCOnline.org)*

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"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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- Address readers at both intellectual and emotional levels
- Honor the insight of Baptists and others that the best way to provide all citizens in a diverse society with maximal religious liberty is to maintain a separation of church and state
- Support Christian ecumenism and inclusivism by seeking contributors and readers from all denominations and churches and from none.
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