Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics Volume 37, Number 1 Aggregate Issue 139 Winter 2026

Pastoral Questions in Our Conflicted Era

Cody J. Sanders, guest co-editor

The questions I am most often asked by students preparing for ministry in our era of intense division and political conflict are usually not about what is right or wrong to believe. They often already know where they stand on many of the biggest issues of justice, politics, social and environmental wellbeing, and the like.

Their questions are most often about how to work with people they disagree with, and congregants who will disagree with their stances. Questions about how to be true to their convictions while pastoring churches that won't necessarily agree with them, or even understand their convictions as having anything to do with the practice of Christian faith. They're questions about how to help move people toward convictions that are more shaped by the gospel's penchant for peace rooted in justice in the flesh and blood realities of life, rather than a detached individualistic spirituality focused on comfort in the present and security in the hereafter.

My students ask good, practical questions about what it is to be a pastor right now, and I don't always have the best answers. But here are a few attempts at conveying lessons I'm learning as I grow into what it means to be a pastor today. This pastoral advice won't save the world, win arguments, or persuade the masses. But I believe they point to helpful pastoral practices in an era when it's become difficult to be a pastor (though it's still the best job I know).

Move Toward Others, Rather than Away

I was speaking to a colleague once about another ministerial figure who had made some unusual public statements on an issue that set him at odds with many clergy-types within the same general theological fold who held very different perspectives on the matter at hand.

"What in the world was he thinking?" I asked.

"I can't quite imagine what was behind that."

"Well," my colleague said, "I called him up and invited him to lunch so I could understand where he was coming from."

In moments like these, I realize I'm not as mature as I wish I were. Why didn't I think of that? Taking him to lunch. Asking questions. Listening to a story. Not necessarily coming to any agreement, but at least coming to some sense of understanding of another with whom you are bound in this large, loose collective of Christian ministry praxis.

We talk a lot about polarization these days. It's perhaps not as comprehensive a diagnosis as we believe for the troubles we face. But what we usually mean is *ideological* polarization. Two parties hold extremely divergent perspectives on issue like immigration policy, trans rights, etc., and never the twain shall meet. But there are other types of polarization to which social scientists point.

Affective polarization describes the growing animosity between people in different parties, different churches, different sides of big social issues. It's more about the ways we *feel* toward the other than it is how our thinking differs from theirs. Outrage at the other fuels this type of polarization, and our algorithmically curated online lives accelerate the blaze.

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False polarization occurs when we overestimate the degree of difference in point of view between us (and those in our camp) and "the other side." When we believe we differ so dramatically from the "other," we tend to interpret anything we see or hear or experience from that other through our lens of false polarization – perhaps believing that there is nothing we could ever agree on. They think X, so we could never see eye-to-eye on Y or Z! When our views on many concerns may very well be much closer to one another than we are able to see.

False polarization invites an imagination about what the other is like that may not be quite accurate. We can easily imagine that someone who thinks *that* wouldn't be someone I'd want to share a meal with. But this becomes a dangerous form of polarization when we're sharing the same pews, the same denominations, the

same institutions.

So, the pastoral advice: Invite someone to lunch with whom you disagree on something that matters to your common life and have a real conversation. Ask really good, curious questions that are framed with compassion and to which you genuinely don't know the answer. Listen with deep interest to the mystery of the other. And ask if they're interested in hearing how you came to see the issues at hand the way that you see them. Then tell a good story, rich with detail. Reveal the complexities where they exist in your own thinking, too. Shed the talking points and the pretense of ideological purity.

How we came to think the things we think and believe the beliefs we believe is often far more interesting and helpful in understanding one another than simply knowing the thoughts and beliefs themselves. What are the values behind our beliefs and positions? How did we come to appreciate these values? What is feeling like a threat to us and/or our values, or those we love and care for? What are our best hopes for the community we wish to live within, and what would it mean if those hopes came to fruition? Where do we find our own values and hopes and commitments resonating with those of the other? Understanding these things can begin eroding the affective and false polarization that may be keeping us from getting somewhere in conversation on a concern of importance. (A helpful resource for developing your skill with this kind of conversation is Mónica Guzmán's 2022 book, *I Never Thought of it That Way*.)

Commit Yourself to Relationships, Not to Platforms

In a moment of righteous zeal, I once took to social media to rail against a local establishment that had wronged a dear friend of mine in what was, by all accounts, an act of ableist discrimination in a public establishment. I wanted people to call, to write, to boycott over the injustice done to my friend by this place and its proprietors.

I was *absolutely right* about the matter. No question about it. But a local minister saw my social media post and commented something to the effect of, "I know this place. Let me reach out and see what's going on."

He went down to the establishment himself and reported back that the issue had been one predicated on some cultural differences and misunderstandings and that the proprietors were very sorry for how they had handled the situation and wanted to apologize personally to my friend.

Why didn't I think of that? It was probably two miles from my house. I could have gone down and advocated for my friend and asked for some clarity and understanding on the matter. Instead, I took to social media. And despite being right about their actions, I was ineffective in building the community that I wanted to live in, for myself and for my disabled friend.

This pastor, on the other hand, was committed to more than being right. He was committed to a person-centered approach to the situation. He wanted to weave a stronger relational tapestry in his neighborhood. My allyship was platformed and rather performative, morally right though it may have been. His was relational and communal.

The pastoral advice: Be more committed to relationships in person than to platforms online. It seems like pedantic advice for people in a profession predicated on relationship. But sociologically, it's necessary right now.

Marc Dunkleman in his book, *The Vanishing Neighbor*, explains the ways that our intimate circle of relationships – family and close friendships – has grown tighter over the past few decades with the rise of social media and connective technology. (How many of you keep up with your kids or grandkids a thousand miles away with apps on your phone or tablet?) And our connection to those in our "tribe" – those with whom we share some affinity or political commitments or religious similarities, even if we don't know them personally – has also strengthened. (The algorithm feeds us more of what we like and shows us the posts of people with whom we agree.)

The pastoral advice: Be more committed to relationships in person than to platforms online.

What *has* diminished in recent decades is our connection to the familiar-but-not-intimate neighbor – those in our "village." The people we meet in third spaces like restaurants and coffee shops (where we still go but are mostly on our phones and devices when we get there). The people who live on our block who get home and go straight inside and don't come out until they go to work again in the morning. The people we encounter in public but don't engage because we're looking down, engaging our friends, family, and tribe on our phones instead. These are the "vanishing neighbors" in Dunkleman's book title. And these are the relationships where we learn to live with people who are different from us and who think differently from us, to figure out ways of getting along with those with whom we disagree, to appreciate perspectives we

wouldn't otherwise encounter and learn from them, even if we don't agree with them.

Pastors can often garner larger audiences online than they have flocks in their congregations. Sometimes this can be used for very helpful and effective ministry. We shouldn't discount it. Yet, within the reign of algorithmic capitalism, committing ourselves to people over platforms – and helping our congregations to do so as well – is an act of resistance to the commodification of our attention (which, says Simone Weil, is the same thing as prayer), and resistance to the erosion of relationships of potential solidarity-across-difference.

Speaking to Be Engaged, Not just to Be Right

Many years ago, I visited a church for the first time during the Advent season. The preacher began his sermon with the words: "I want to preface this sermon by saying that I don't believe in the literal virgin birth." With that, a woman in a pew down toward the front of the sanctuary got up, scooted out to the center aisle, and clomped her high heels very loudly down the long stone path to the back of the church, slamming the doors behind her as she exited. No one said a word the entire time it took for her to make her exit. I'll never forget that scene.

The pastor awkwardly continued his sermon by saying something like, "If she had stayed a little longer, she would have heard me say, 'But I do believe in the miracle of Christmas,'" or something like that. It was a very good sermon. And nothing about it was predicated on the pastor or anyone else needing to believe or disbelieve the literal virgin birth.

I could never figure out why he needed the congregation to know he didn't believe in the literal virgin birth before he preached to them the gospel that came through in the sermon after those words. There was so much goodness to be engaged in the sermon that pastor delivered, both by people who believed in the literal virgin birth and by those who didn't.

The pastoral advice: Don't swallow the words you need to speak. But say them in a way that people can hear them and engage them, not just agree or disagree with them. Audre Lorde, in her famed *The Master's Tools* book, wrote, "Without community, there is no liberation...but community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist." Sometime our differences need to take center stage in a conversation within community. If we leave our differences on major concerns at the door of the church, then we're submitting to the reality that the gospel will likely have about two hours of airtime a week – at most – in many of our congregants' lives as they consider the biggest issues we face in the world, and cable news and talk radio and social media feeds and podcast hosts will possess all the rest of their waking hours.

Some messages necessitate a prophetic stand on the side of those pushed to the precipice of our contemporary life in the world. Pastoral words spoken for LGBTQIA inclusivity and justice, for standing in solidarity with our immigrant neighbors, resisting our slide into fascism, siding with the poor in our communities over the greed of billionaires, and so much more. And we may find ourselves with an invitation to leave our ministries over the stands we take and ask others to take alongside us on these matters. (I was fired from the second ministerial position I ever held in a circumstance filled with some of these very dynamics. It's not fun. But who would I have been if I had swallowed my words and subjugated my conscience?)

But at times, we say the things we need to say in a way that only invites people to take a side and defend it even when the stakes aren't as high as those named in the paragraph above. We demand ideological purity from our conversation partners before we can truly engage in dialogue. We refuse to converse with those who disagree with us about X, even if the conversation is about Y or Z. (*If you don't agree with my critique of capitalism, then how could we ever talk about anti-racism?*)

Sometimes we get it wrong, or we speak too slowly, or we don't quite have the words to say but are trying to find them. Sometimes our congregations need to witness us faithfully struggling with these important concerns.

I'm not an advocate of the take-it-so-slow-that-you-don't-ever-get-there approach to important concerns of justice, which is the prevailing ethos in many parishes. But neither am I a fan of the if-your-church-doesn't-address-X-this-Sunday-then-find-a-new-church ethos that is often promulgated online after any event of national importance transpires. Pastors are growing in our understanding of the gospel's implications for our life in the world, too. Sometimes we get it wrong, or we speak too slowly, or we don't quite have the words to say but are trying to find them. Sometimes our congregations need to witness us faithfully struggling with

these important concerns. They need to be invited into conversations that are not choose-a-side-and-defend-it style conversations but are, instead, dialogical explorations of complexities with compassion and curiosity and criticality and, yes, even the *provocation* of some conflict over matters of importance. Ideological purity won't get us there, and being right won't mean much when there's no one left to engage in the communal practices of the gospel alongside us.

Root it in the Gospel, Not in Talking Points

So often, students will ask how they speak prophetically about concerns of justice in a congregation that holds a diversity of opinions on the matter, or where the majority may disagree with their stance on poverty or trans rights or immigration, etc. It's a helpful question in our congregationally conflicted age. I've known churches where nothing of importance is ever said from the pulpit for fear of offending, or dividing, or turning certain people off, or seeming too political, and the "gospel" is tepidly reduced to something akin to "believe in God and be nice to everyone." And I've known churches where every week the sermon is a social justice rally speech, only tangentially connected to the day's biblical texts, where everyone in the congregation already agrees with what the preacher is saying and feels good about hearing it, but no one grows in their spiritual grounding or rootedness in the faith.

Both, to my mind, are ineffective in speaking prophetically about concerns of justice.

The pastoral advice: Root it all in the gospel. There's too much thin progressive, peace-and-justice Christianity that espouses all the right ways of thinking and being and belonging in the world, but is not sufficiently engaged with the biblical text or traditions of faith, or rooted in the gospel, or confounded by the mission, message and ministry of Jesus. And there's too much tepid Christianity that is entirely disengaged from the lives of the people and world that Jesus loves, promoting a navel-gazing spirituality and a go-along-to-get-along ecclesiology that is the dry rot of Christianity in the U.S. (There are also plenty of churches espousing the heresy of White Christian Nationalism and the like, but I'm doubtful they are reading this article.)

Root your perspective on divisive issues that are causing our congregations and communities great conflict right now firmly within the gospel. Preach the biblical text with close, critical attention and the assumption that *even your own views* (right though they may be) will be challenged by the subversive message of scripture. It won't *not* get you fired. It won't be the trump card that wins the argument or brings together a divided congregation. It won't even resolve all the conundrums of our current era.

But without a rootedness in the gospel, what are we even doing? ■

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Before there were any witnesses to the risen Christ, there were witnesses to Jesus mocked, tortured, and murdered by the Roman empire. And that's part of the Christian call of faithfulness — to stand in witness to the brutality, inhumanity, domination, sin, and evil of the empires of this age. Because, before good news, the news can be very, very bad. Very bad indeed.

—Diana Butler Bass

After Ten Years: A Reckoning Made in December 2025

Ryan Andrew Newson

In 1943, following a decade of resistance to fascism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sketched out an essay that was eventually published under this very title, in which he sought to make sense of what had become of Christianity and Germany under the Nazi movement.

I would like to take the opportunity of being invited to write this essay to similarly reflect on where we are in the United States, following 10 years of Donald Trump as a presidential figure. It was about 10 years ago—June 16, 2015—that Trump announced he was running for president, ushering in (or accelerating) the political and ideological forces we now face. Personally, I can never think of Trump's announcement without also thinking of the horrible events of the following day, when Dylann Roof entered Mother Emanuel AME Church and murdered nine Black congregants. The past 10 years have in many ways felt like being stuck in an ever-widening gyre, though the swirl of reaction began well before the summer of 2015.

What do I mean? The popularization of Christian nationalism (what Dorothee Sölle called Christofascism) or cruel, violent, racist immigration enforcement; the rise of ICE as a paramilitary force whose budget rivals that of many country's entire military; continued Islamophobia; conspiratorial thinking and the erosion of shared consensus reality; the demonization of LGBTQ people (especially but not limited to trans folks); the continued gutting and privatization of almost every public good created in the mid-20th century; ongoing imperial war, not least the genocide in Gaza; I could go on. For the most part, the Democratic establishment has either actively participated in these developments (on Palestine, for instance) or offered tepid forms of "resistance," seeking some way back to the "normal" that got us here in the first place. At the time of my writing, Trump and others in his orbit are openly flirting with violating the 22nd amendment, running for a third term in 2028. I cannot help but be reminded of Carl Schmitt's invocation of Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution to expand executive authority during states of emergency.

I mention all this because, as a Christian ethicist, I agree with H. Richard Niebuhr that before you can answer the question, "What are we to do?" we must answer the prior question, "What is going on?" In our current political climate, which is increasingly allergic to the truth, this may not be easy and may come with a cost. Authoritarianism thrives on self-surveillance and obfuscation. And yet I am not being hyperbolic when I say that the only question I am interested in right now is how to *counter* these forces. The MAGA movement did not emerge *ex nihilo* in 2015, but it has accelerated forces within the United States that are completely misaligned with truth, wisdom, faithfulness to Jesus, and the movement to liberate the oppressed which Jesus inaugurated (Luke 4).

And so, in this essay, I write for those of us who know the reality we are facing, and who seek strategies for living and moving faithfully in this context. How can Christians and Christian congregations be "of any use" in the pursuit of liberation from all that binds and oppresses? If we are, what we shall need (Bonhoeffer writes) "is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward people."[1] And this *is* the question, it seems to me: our usefulness in pursuit of liberation. Otherwise, we are but salt that has lost its saltiness—and thus, fit for being trampled under foot.

And this is the question, it seems to me: our usefulness in pursuit of liberation. Otherwise, we are but salt that has lost its saltiness—and thus, fit for being trampled under foot.

Appeals to Dialogue and Civility

To begin, a common and tempting response to these political crises is to lament a lack of dialogue across difference (perhaps with an appeal to social media), and a lack of "civility" when such encounters do occur. To be sure, I deeply value listening as a theological and political practice and have written about this value at length.[2] But I also have written about how appeals to qualities like "civility" are of limited value. That is,

"civility" (however defined) is not an inherent good, but can be either good or bad depending on who is invoking it, when and for what reason.[3]

Even so, many are attracted to the idea of discussion as a panacea for what ails us, committed to aesthetic values like niceness and calmness to such a degree that they have a difficult time seeing when discussion must end. If we are discussing strategic matters about how to best empower the poor in our community, then indeed, listening and something like "civility" is good. But if the matter up for discussion is, "Are immigrants people?," then to even entertain the question is to concede something that ought not be conceded.

Despite so much evidence to the contrary, many cling to the desire to fact-check or "talk" our way out of this, or pretend that the problem is "polarization," as though there are not things from which we should be polarized. I am not here recommending anything positive, but rather pleading with people to let go of a commitment to dialogue as *alone* capable of getting us out of this predicament. It will not. Commitments to being moderate or neutral in this time and place are not only delusional; they side with the encroaching reactionary forms of government and Christianity, whether one realizes that or not.

And anyway, there is no virtue in being calm and collected in a moment in which people are being kidnapped off the streets by masked agents of the state, in violation of moral and constitutional law. To echo Thomas Aquinas, one can sin by *not* being angry when one should be—when one ought to be upset with injustices occurring in the world but is not, out of some misplaced commitment to *apatheia* or neutrality.

Tell the Truth

Given the forces of dis- and misinformation coming from the Trump administration and exacerbated by social media, one positive and urgent task for Christians in this context is to tell the truth. Bombing boats in the Caribbean purportedly carrying drugs into the United States is not a just exercise of war; it is a war crime, and bombing people floating on the debris is outright murder. As an example.

I can already hear the bad-faith response from my interlocutor: "Oh, but these truths are contested! How do you know who is really telling the truth or not?" The ironic reactionary appeal to relativism, and accidental postmodernism meant to mask a will to power. I am not speaking to such people here. I have very little hope that it is possible to convince sophists of this sort, but our commitment to truth-telling is not for them. I agree with Bonhoeffer that the problem that leads to support for fascism is not really a lack of information; it is a *moral* failure that leads one to see fascism as good and beautiful and true. What binds one to such projects is grievance; it is what Bonhoeffer calls "folly" or "stupidity." He says,

> *Folly is a more dangerous enemy to the good than evil. One can protest against evil; it can be unmasked and, if need be, prevented by force. Evil always carries the seeds of its own destruction, as it makes people, at the least, uncomfortable. Against folly we have no defence. Neither protests nor force can touch it; reason is no use; facts that contradict personal prejudices can simply be disbelieved – indeed, the fool can counter by criticizing them, and if they are undeniable, they can just be pushed aside as trivial exceptions. So, the fool, as distinct from the scoundrel, is completely self-satisfied; in fact, he can easily become dangerous, as it does not take much to make him aggressive. A fool must therefore be treated more cautiously than a scoundrel; we shall never again try to convince a fool by reason, for it is both useless and dangerous.*[4]

Telling the truth—like courage, like authenticity, like vulnerability—is contagious and, while it is not a sufficient response to fascism, it is certainly a necessary component of any commitment to justice and (eventually) reconciliation in the years ahead.

Why then this commitment to truth? Not to convince, but to keep ourselves tethered to reality. Authoritarianism thrives under the threat of violence (whether overt or through the threat of loss of employment, public shaming, and the like). Such mechanisms intimidate people into silence and self-policing. Remaining committed to telling the truth is vital for those seeking to lead *prophetically* in the days ahead. Telling the truth—like courage, like authenticity, like vulnerability—is contagious and, while it is not a sufficient response to fascism, it is certainly a necessary component of any commitment to justice and (eventually) reconciliation in the years ahead.

External Liberation Preceding Inward Liberation

Given the nature of "folly," Bonhoeffer does not think we can convince such people by reason. For

Bonhoeffer, partisans of the Nazi regime seem almost to be possessed by an external force, merely repeating words, phrases and grievances fed to them by the regime. "One feels in fact, when talking to [the fool], that one is dealing, not with the man himself, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like, which have taken hold of him. He is under a spell, he is blinded, his very nature is being misused and exploited."[5] Analogies to contemporary defenders of MAGA are not hard to make.

Hardly a comforting thought. And yet herein lies Bonhoeffer's advice for how to deal with the fool as well, both then and today. The path is to attend to the structural rather than the personal. There is a tendency in our culture to think that the path to liberation must primarily and ultimately involve liberation of individual conscience. Convince enough individual people to change their minds and this will bubble into systemic change. But Bonhoeffer directly inverts this focus. In the great majority of cases, he writes, individual liberation is preceded by systemic liberation; one's culture shifts, policy changes, and by top-down effect, individual conscience changes as well. This is a dialectic, of course: there is no structural change without individual participation, and no individual change without a structural shift. But structural causation seems too-often neglected in these discussions, and there is a lot of wisdom in Bonhoeffer's drawing our attention there when it comes to navigating and countering such ideologies. Structural evil, after all, is real and outstrips any individual's ability to counter it alone and, as such, structural evil calls for structural change.[6]

What this means practically for this moment is that pursuing policies that address the material realities of people's lives—universal health care, rent freezes and increased renter power, wage increases, eliminating barriers to unionization—are fruitful paths to pursue in the world that is coming and even now is here. Trying to "convert" every individual who is variously attracted to the MAGA movement is certainly inefficient, as well as (probably) hopeless. Certainly, it has not proven to be a scalable solution. But seeking to change the conditions that produce people who are attracted to Trump in the first place, while also difficult to implement, is not impossible to imagine. We remain in need of people—teachers, preachers, community activists, people of all stripes—who pursue this path.

Resist in Solidarity

Directly following from the commitment to seeking structural change is to seek, and hold fast, to fellow workers in the struggle. Liberation will not be achieved alone. "Without community there is no liberation," to invoke Audre Lorde. Isolated, we are not as organized, we are more likely to give in to the temptation to despair, we are more likely to think we are alone, even when we are not. And so the simple (if difficult) act of organizing in one's community is critical. Liberatory action is the antidote to despair. (It is also strong medicine against conspiratorial thinking).

As Bonhoeffer puts it, "One cannot write about these things without a constant sense of gratitude for the fellowship of spirit and community of life that have been proved and preserved throughout these years."[7] A gift I have discovered over the last decade are the bonds of affection forged across and between anyone working for liberation. Trump has clarified who my enemies are in this moment, called as I am to love them. But I have also discovered deep friendships, and otherwise just fellow workers, that have made it such that no matter how distressed and depressed and angry I have been with the state of the world, I have not despaired.

Such people, I hasten to add, need not be one's closest friends and partners. Many, probably most, will fall into the category Alice Walker named when describing her relationship with June Jordan: "We were the kind of friends, instead, who understood that we were forever on the same side; the side of the poor, the economically, spiritually and politically oppressed, 'the wretched of the earth.' And on the side, too, of the revolutionaries, teachers and spiritual leaders who seek transformation of the world... It seems a model of what can help us rebalance the world. Friendship with others: populations, peoples, countries, that is, in a sense, impersonal."[8]

But I have also discovered deep friendships, and otherwise just fellow workers, that have made it such that no matter how distressed and depressed and angry I have been with the state of the world, I have not despaired.

Resisting MAGA and building for a world after MAGA (and preparing for future iterations of similar phenomena) simply require finding fellow workers in the struggle. Appeals to a narrowly ecclesiocentric vision of working for the common good will not cut it.

Bread and Roses

We fight for bread, yes—but roses too. The practice of any creative pursuit in days such as these may feel

indulgent, like a luxury of the few or the checked out. But nothing could be further from the truth. Fascism abhors humanity—actual humanity with all our variances and beauties and weirdnesses, differences that fascism interprets as deviance.[9] Thus, MAGA and Christian nationalists' hyperfixation on and anxiety about LGBTQ folks and especially trans people.

As such, all people, not least communities of faith, should foster spaces where the arts can be freely pursued. Not, I hasten to add, art for some didactic purpose, to convert or convince. I mean art as exploration. All fascist movements seek to subsume individuality into a wider whole, a machine that maximizes profit for the good of a constructed in-group—"blood" and "people." What would it look like, then, for communities of faith to do the opposite of this: to be funders of, hubs of, and (in some cases) producers of art for art's sake? Such would not be mere indulgence. It would preserve something crucial that pushes against fascist imaginaries, and may produce people who value the arts as they worked, organized, voted and resisted.

Art alone cannot save us, of course. That's not the point of art. Art doesn't have a point. Like prayer, perhaps like creation itself, the process is the goal; the churn is the thing itself. But art has a way of creating community in a non-fascist way, and it reminds us of the world we are fighting for. Thus, weird or counter-intuitive though this may sound, resisting so-called AI-produced art and valuing actual human creativity is a vital part of navigating the world we are in faithfully. It should be a natural and intuitive outgrowth of Christian commitments.

Die on Every Hill

These are only brief sketches of ideas about how to navigate our political climate, and I personally am open to any and all ideas about how to resist moving forward. I welcome any such ideas.

Perhaps a closing image from Bonhoeffer, then, is one of endurance. Who stands fast? Bonhoeffer asks. Amidst the exhausting grind of working for liberation, who will endure? Bonhoeffer says it is the person who is willing to let go of all they thought they knew (reason, principles, conscience, freedom, virtue), and instead seek "obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God."[10] Perhaps the final temptation is to simply give up, or sacrifice some such struggle on the altar of expedience or effectiveness. Instead, Bonhoeffer tells us, the one who stands fast is the one who acts out of a sense of responsibility to God and neighbor; who refuses to leave *any* of one's neighbors in the lurch.

Over a decade ago, a friend of mine—Jacob Cook, now at Eastern Mennonite Seminary—was attending a panel where evangelical leaders were discussing LGBTQ justice and the church. During the panel discussion, one person, attempting to give a "moderate" position, said, "Look, I'm not gonna' die on this hill." Afterwards, Jake noted this line, and that it did not take seriously the stakes of what was being discussed: the dignity and belovedness of actual human beings who are ostracized, marginalized and demonized by the church and society alike. "No," Jake said in response. "We die on every hill."

I've thought about this sentiment often in the years since. It is built on a profound trust that one's death is not the end. It is built on the correct sensibility that the movements for liberation are not built on one person, and our job is to be faithful to the task before us. We do not need heroes, but people willing to be responsible for trying to shape how the next generation will live.[11] And it is built on the conviction that we cannot sacrifice any person or group's need for liberation on the altar of expediency. Not every fight is yours to fight specifically, but every fight needs fighting. Die on every hill. Have courage. Take heed. Live humanly.

Not every fight is yours to fight specifically, but every fight needs fighting. Die on every hill. Have courage. Take heed. Live humanly.

None of us until all of us are free. ■

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Beneath the Shouting: Leading with Contemplative Presence

Julie Pennington-Russell

"Look at the fig tree," Jesus once told his disciples. "When it sprouts leaves, you know summer's coming."

It's strangely comforting to me that even 2,000 years ago, Jesus was reminding his followers to pay attention. To be mindful. To see what was in front of them. Jesus was incredibly attuned to the things around him. He was actually childlike in that respect—he had a child's fascination with his surroundings. He looked down at his feet and noticed the flowers there. Or a little dead sparrow. He held a tiny mustard seed in his palm, marveling at how something so small could contain such potential.

If Jesus needed to call 1st century disciples—living at an agrarian pace—back to the presence, how much more do we need that invitation today, careening through our rapid-response, media-saturated lives?

Pastoring in Polarized Times

The morning after the 2024 election, I rode the tall escalator out of the Dupont Circle Metro station in D.C. alongside hundreds of other commuters, many of them federal workers. Some faces carried triumph, others grief. Many wore the blank expression of emotional exhaustion. In our sanctuary just blocks away, our congregation would gather soon—Democrats and Republicans, Hill staffers and activists, some carrying the weight of collective grief, others uncertain what to feel.

This is the pastoral reality of shepherding a church in the nation's capital during another fractured period in American life. And yet, this divided moment leaves me wondering: What if our best response to polarization isn't found primarily in conflict resolution techniques or carefully worded statements—but in something far more ancient and radical—the practice of contemplative presence?

I live in what may be the least contemplative city on earth. Nobody comes to Washington for its chill atmosphere. Yet whether because of the nature of this city or this tumultuous season in American life, contemplative practices have become essential—not optional—for my survival as a pastor.

What Does It Mean to Be Contemplative?

Pastors sometimes believe we can think, write or preach our way through polarized situations. "If I just find the right words, the perfect sermon illustration, the most nuanced statement, I can navigate my church through these treacherous waters." It's tempting to believe that with enough strategic planning and careful messaging, we can control the outcomes. But the contemplative tradition teaches us something different.

What does it mean to be a contemplative pastor? I'm no expert. Most of the time I feel like my friend Mary, a Lutheran pastor who—like me—carries an internal scorecard with her wherever she goes. She says that while she's meditating in silence, she's repeating this mantra: "I'm failing contemplative prayer...I'm failing contemplative prayer."

One of the beautiful things about contemplative spirituality is that it's not about "getting it right." It's about being present with God.

Fortunately for flawed contemplatives like Mary and me, for centuries women and men—soul pilgrims—have left behind field notes and trail markers. The 17th-century Jesuit priest, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, was one of them. He wrote that when we are fully present with God, the soul is "light as a feather, liquid as water, simple as a child, and easily moved as a ball by every inspiration of grace."[1]

Contemplation. From the Latin *contemplari*—to gaze, to behold, to observe. Stated simply, a contemplative is someone who's learning to be fully present in whatever moment she or he happens to be. Someone who's learning to pay attention to divine presence, to see beneath the surface and listen beneath the noise—as Elijah did outside his cave, straining to hear the still, small voice. As Mary did at the Annunciation, absorbing the angel's impossible words into the pores of her soul and pondering them in her heart.

One of the beautiful things about contemplative spirituality is that it's not about "getting it right." It's

about being present with God. It's not about castigating yourself for "getting it wrong," but about gently bringing yourself back to your center when you realize you've wandered away. My favorite mantra is: "Oops…Pause…Breathe…Return."

Three Practices for Grounded Leadership

If we want to be someone who lives and leads from a grounded place with God at the center, there are practices that can help. I offer three areas of awareness:

Notice Your Velocity.

First, let yourself notice when the velocity at which you're moving and thinking exceeds your ability to be fully present.

We live in a rocket-speed world, but we carry within us wagon-train souls.

If we're going to be present with the tasks and people in front of us, we need to tap into what the 20th century contemplative Gerald May called "The Power of the Slowing."[2] Learning how to downshift, not just with the body but with the mind which is constantly in motion: planning, anticipating, strategizing, compensating.

Here's what surprises me about Washington: The pace of inner-city life feels slower than when we lived in the suburbs or out in the country. And I think it has to do with walking.

In Waco and Atlanta, I zipped everywhere in my air-conditioned car—windows up, music blaring, racing from meetings to hospital visits.

But DC is a walking city. We abandoned our car five years ago. Now, as I walk up Massachusetts Avenue to our church each morning, I try to remember to go slowly. To pay attention to the feel of my feet on the pavement. Every step grounds me in this moment—this breath—this face coming toward me on the sidewalk.

It's a gift.

Recognize Your Ego Self.

Second, be aware when you find yourself operating primarily from your ego self.

To be sure, your ego is not the enemy. Our sense of self is a gift from God that helps us function in the world. And yet, when we identify with our ego self as our ultimate identity more than our grounded-in-God identity, we filter everything through that narrow self-centeredness: "How will this affect me? What's in it for me? What will people think of me if I do this, say this, post this?"

One of the many gifts of living and leading from a place deeper than our ego is that we don't become distracted when someone wants to put us on a pedestal—or when they want to knock us off.

I remember two messages I received years ago on the very same day. The first, in the form of an email: "Julie, everything good God is doing in our church right now is all because of you. Any future we have as a church depends on your leadership—you are the best pastor this church has ever had."

Message two: an anonymous, handwritten card slipped under the door of my church study: "Julie, you are, without a doubt and going back 150 years, the worst pastor this church has ever had. I don't know why the search committee decided to inflict you upon us in the first place, but I pray every day for your hasty departure."

Ouch.

But it's not only other people's vacillating opinions of us. We're also subject to our own up-and-down opinions of ourselves. If we are living primarily from our ego self, then we're always vulnerable to that brutal cycle of self-adoration followed by self-loathing.

One of the many gifts of living and leading from a place deeper than our ego is that we don't become distracted when someone wants to put us on a pedestal—or when they want to knock us off.

But when the work we do—the ideas we offer, the leadership we give, the conversations we have, the prophetic actions we undertake—are grounded in the healing, life-affirming presence of the Beloved rather than our ego, we find freedom from that exhausting cycle. We can see and listen and live from our deepest, truest identity.

Move Beyond Your Analytical Mind.

Finally, throughout the day, pay attention when it occurs to you that you're operating mostly from your analytical mind.

As with our ego, the rational, analytical mind is not our enemy. Our mind is a gift from God. And…the mind is relentlessly dualistic. It knows by comparing, opposing, judging, differentiating. (Some of you may be operating that way even now: "I like this article…I don't like this article. The ideas are great...the ideas are weak.") And our mind assigns binary labels: good/evil,

beautiful/ugly, black/white, smart/dumb, right/wrong.

As long as we're aware of this, we can receive and appreciate our rational mind for what it is—helpful in many ways, and yet wholly inadequate for dealing with life's greater mysteries: God. Love. Pain. Wonder. Forgiveness.

If we want to be fully present with God, our dualistic mind can't get us there. William C. Martin captures this beautifully in his book, *The Art of Pastoring*. In a wisdom poem called "No Thinking," he writes:

> *The Word is easy for a pastor to hear,*
> *and simple to practice in the parish.*
> *Yet if she tries to understand it*
> *with her rational mind,*
> *she will miss it.*
> *If she tries to practice it*
> *from her head*
> *she will fail.*
> *It is counter to conventional wisdom*
> *and must be known with the heart…*[3]

Contemplation as Sustainable Action

Some may hear "contemplative practice" and assume it means withdrawal from prophetic witness or abandonment of justice work. In my experience, the opposite is true. Contemplation doesn't pull us away from the world's suffering—it grounds us more deeply in it, giving us the capacity to stay engaged for the long haul, anchored in something more enduring than outrage or obligation.

The calling is clear enough: justice, compassion, equity, hospitality, Shalom. These are God's loving intentions for the world. God's invitation is to do justice in ways that reflect the heart of the Divine. In other words, to do this work from our spiritual, prayerful heart.

Ten years ago, during the demonstrations on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, people from around the world, both religious and non-religious, came to protest the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline (which now runs beneath land considered sacred to tribe, including Lake Oahe, the only source of fresh water for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe).

Upon arriving, each new group of demonstrators would meet with one of the camp leaders—often an elder of the Tribe, who would say to every group of new arrivals: "I see many of you who are new to camp walking around looking for action. I remind you now that prayer is action."

The activists and supporters were asked to remain in a constant state of prayer. Those who felt the impulse of anger or violence overtaking them were asked to step aside and pray until they could respond from a place of peace and compassion.[4]

The contemplative path and prophetic action aren't separate—they feed each other. In the middle of Moses' burning bush encounter, Yahweh declares, "I have heard the groaning of my people in Egypt. Go and confront Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go." A mystical moment becomes an immediate call to social, economic and political liberation.

And sometimes it works the other way: Engagement with the world's suffering sends us running to God, seeking relief for our exhausted souls.

Listening Beneath the Noise

In social justice work, with so much pain and need and injustice, there is encouragement from all kinds of sources to just "plunge in and *do* something, for heaven's sake!" And sometimes we do—we answer the moment with our action.

But in the larger, sustained work for God's Shalom in the world over time, as we pray and as we attend to God's loving presence, we begin to see more deeply.

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I remember hearing Krista Tippett interview Parker Palmer years ago. During the interview, Palmer talked about activism and he said, "You may be asking: 'What can I do?' For me, the answer begins within. I must own up to my fears, confess my ignorance and arrogance, seek forgiveness from those I've wronged, practice humility, and learn to listen beneath my own and other people's political rhetoric. Beneath the shouting there is suffering. Beneath the anger, fear. Beneath the threats, broken hearts."[5]

Prayerful contemplation—a deep awareness of God's loving presence and an unflinching attention to the world as it is—holds both at once: the holiness of each person and the brokenness of our systems, the image of God in my enemy and the real harm they may cause.

The Gift of the Long View

One more gift of contemplative practice: the long view. Political polarization feels urgent—and in many ways it is. Lives hang in the balance of policy decisions. Justice delayed is justice denied. The contem-

plative path holds this tension: We act as if everything depends on us today, while trusting that God's redemptive work stretches far beyond what we can accomplish or control.

For five years through the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, I've come alongside clergy seeking a Christian contemplative orientation that encourages awareness of divine presence, deep listening to the Spirit, and freedom to embrace a new way of being—personally and pastorally. Again and again, I've watched contemplative practice do its work: loosening our grip, opening us to the Spirit's leading, building our capacity to trust God's unfolding even when we can't see the path ahead.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once said that the highest use of a shaken time is to discover the unshakable. This is the Church's task in these tumultuous days. As the political, social and religious structures roll and quake beneath our feet, we return again and again to that which cannot be shaken.

In our congregation, we are learning that lasting change doesn't come through dramatic pronouncements or forceful positioning. It comes through showing up—day after day—to pray and serve and love across lines of difference.

One of our members, a career federal employee, told me recently: "I don't come to church to escape politics. I come to church to remember who I am beneath my politics." That's the gift contemplative practice offers in polarized times—not escape, but grounding. Not answers, but presence. Not certainty, but trust.

An Invitation to Begin

For pastors and church leaders navigating ministry in this fractured moment, the work begins within: Notice your own velocity. Pay attention to when you're operating from ego or analytical mind. Find a spiritual director, join a contemplative prayer group, develop a friendship with silence.

This isn't optional work for a few mystically-inclined clergy. This is essential formation for anyone answering the call to shepherd God's people in an age of polarization.

When we lead from this grounded place—when we pastor from contemplative presence rather than anxious striving—we become instruments of God's peace in a polarized world.

And that, I believe, is what our world most desperately needs from pastoral leaders: not more certainty, but more presence; not louder voices, but deeper listening; not stronger arguments, but wider welcome; not winners and losers, but beloveds all—grounded in the God whose name is Love.

Some days, that feels like everything. ■

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A trained spiritual director, she co-led the Clergy Spiritual Life and Leadership program for the Shalem Institute from 2020-2025 and currently serves as co-leader of Shalem's pilgrimage to Iona.

Regarding Footnotes and References

To accommodate all articles, we have omitted footnotes and references from the printed journal. However, readers can find the article's document, including footnotes, on our website at **www.christianethicstoday.com**

“I have not come to bring peace”: On Embracing Theological and Political Conflict

Isaac Horwedel

Christianity is constituted by conflict.[1] Like most of the world’s religions, it presupposes that things are not as they should be. The eschatological inversions proclaimed by Jesus in his most famous sermon, in which he announces that the first will be last and the last will be first, are the mirror image of a topsy-turvy world that needs to be set right.[2]

The long history of attempts to grapple with what has gone wrong and how it might be made right has left a pile of books, bodies and burned bridges in its wake. As such, it is not difficult to understand why certain Christians long for the Church to be a place of unity amidst the ubiquity of political division and polarization. This desire is especially reasonable insofar as community cohesion seems so radically absent amidst the present realities of stress, pain and anxiety pressing in upon us in all directions with such momentous force. The need for pragmatic solutions that might inch us toward a better world takes on an air of common sense. Who could be against the unity and constructive proposals to get us there?

However understandable these hopes may be, there is an inherent risk in prioritizing practicality and constructiveness as a response to the kinds of substantive political and theological problems facing churches and other theological institutions today. What appears intuitive may only be so because we’ve gotten used to seeing things upside down.

The desire for pragmatic responses to difficult problems can easily mask a desire for easy steps to stop the bleeding long enough that we can get back to business-as-usual. In the case of political conflict and polarization, bracketing concern for *the truth* or *the right thing to do* for the sake of doing *what works* often leads to unity via exclusion. After all, one of the most expedient and effective solutions to political divisiveness and polarization within a given community is to simply expel the troublemakers who seem intent on interrupting normalcy.

What is and is not considered *practical* depends on your perspective. Too often, we construe our problems according to the solutions that seem most feasible, affordable or even profitable. Institutional leaders typically do not want to hear proposals like sell all of your possessions and give the money to the poor; disavow all tangible financial and institutional associations with the American military, its police, and its hyper exploitative corporations; pool all your resources with other area churches and distribute them according to whose needs are greatest; call the bigoted and the hateful to repentance and then shake the dust from your feet and move on without them if they refuse. These are all more or less accomplishable options with solid biblical and theological precedent.

The fact that these sorts of proposals might threaten the existence of our theological institutions is further proof that their sustainability depends upon proper functioning in a dysfunctional world. It is no secret that the realities of capitalist society require us to pursue our personal and institutional projects as they are mediated by money and the ever-increasing accumulation of value. Churches, schools, and non-profits require money to operate. This is true regardless of whether we want it to be. As Marika Rose writes, “Even if we believe that the value of a human life is infinite, or that you can’t put a value on kindness, we are constantly forced to act as though that’s not true.”[3] The work of the gospel appears to be limited to what is accomplishable by the work of the dollar.

Following the gospel, then, may be irreducibly polarizing, divisive and unsustainable. Jesus seems to suggest as much in Matthew 10:34-39

The gospel, on the other hand, appears to call for more than feasibility, effectiveness and sustainability. It might not *work* at all according to these metrics. Jesus’ lonely bloody death on a cross at the hands of Imperial Rome was not pragmatic or effective in any recognizable sense; nor was the preaching and teaching that illuminated the shadowy path of his easy yoke. This is no path of self-preservation in a world in need of reform. It seems like a path of self-sacrifice in a world that must come to an end.

Following the gospel, then, may be irreducibly polarizing, divisive and unsustainable. Jesus seems to suggest as much in Matthew 10:34-39: “Do not think

that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother…and one's foes will be members of one's own household." The gospel brings polarization in a polarizing world. We will all be judged.

Charting a way forward at the individual or institutional level in a way that is truly faithful to the Good News that divides like a sword may be impossible in such a situation. Any hope in the meantime would seem to require us to, at minimum, begin by reframing our conception of political conflict and division itself. Histories of prophetic witness and political struggle toward liberation suggest that conflict, divisiveness and polarization are not necessarily indicative of *error*. They often result from clashes with the imposition of a desired state of agreeableness that obscures voices of suffering. Our task, therefore, is not simply reducing conflict to harmony.[4]

The very discourse around political polarization and civility (or lack thereof) taking place in churches and other theological institutions is itself the site of political and theological struggle. As Ryan Newson writes, "what counts as civility is essentially contested and discursively constructed; one person's civility is another person's incivility, and vice versa."[5] The question is not whether or not it is ever appropriate to be civil or courteous in community life, but we must question whose interests are being served in these calls for togetherness and unity.[6] There are many things about which we ought *not* be civil, to which we ought not allow ourselves to be well-adjusted, about which opposing sides cannot be reconciled.[7]

Newson continues, "One cannot value 'both sides' on homophobia and LGBTQ inclusion, or white supremacy, or universal healthcare, or empowering women in ministry, or class struggle. One must choose." There are no apolitical options on matters of importance, and, as such, there are no apolitical churches. Lukewarm attempts to cater to both bigots and the targets of bigots, exploiters and those they exploit, oppressors and those they oppress, is a political position that justifies and reproduces bigotry, exploitation and oppression. When theological institutions make such attempts, wittingly or unwittingly, they "(baptize) Jesus into a vision of neutrality that is most suited to life in the suburbs but less so elsewhere."[8]

Attempts to combat polarization tend to assume that its antidote is a kind of middle ground to be achieved by both sides accepting some shared responsibility and finally learning their respective lessons. There is no harm in wishing for peace and unity. Indeed, there is a kind of earth-shattering power in the image of the wolf and the lamb lying together in eternal kinship. But wolves and lambs do not have equal lessons to learn on this side of the horizon because lambs do not stalk and eat wolves. Put more straightforwardly, the victims of ICE raids do not have a lesson to learn; neither do the brave communities chasing the authoritarian menace out of their neighborhoods or those simply calling for an end to it all. Political division on such an issue is the direct result of one side's attempts to justify unjustifiable political violence.[9]

This is not unique to the situation of ICE, but remains true for ostensibly "divisive" issues like the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons, the genocide in Gaza, the ongoing realities of white supremacy and patriarchy, the stark realities of wealth inequality as a result of the private accumulation of wealth, and the remainder of politically significant issues that make up our social reality. We must all take stances that will necessarily alienate current or prospective members on the other side of the issue, regardless of the side. Choosing the middle, in these cases, is choosing the side of the oppressor's knife against the neck of the oppressed.

Lukewarm attempts to cater to both bigots and the targets of bigots, exploiters and those they exploit, oppressors and those they oppress, is a political position that justifies and reproduces bigotry, exploitation and oppression.

Embracing such a self-consciously politicized orientation as one enters into conflicts for the sake of inverting the inverse world has practical implications beyond the contents of sermons and other kinds of institutional programming. This orientation might also encourage us to work toward a political and theological imagination at the level of our institutional structures. This means thinking critically and faithfully about whose labor goes into making a given church or institution operational and how those workers are compensated and protected in an increasingly precarious job market. It means questioning the types of people we might assume belong on boards of directors and the types of people we might assume must only relate to our organizations as recipients of charity. It means thinking faithfully and creatively about the use and purposes of our private properties, including the use

of buildings and the land they're on. It means paying close attention to the ongoing conflicts in the community and seeing them as opportunities for new lines of solidarity as more and more people face the stressors of economic insecurity and authoritarian aggression exacerbated by the ongoing hierarchies of race, gender, and sexual orientation.[10]

The desire for solutions and proposals that are merely feasible within the logic of our inverted world risks dulling our senses to the catastrophes around us. The reality is that people are still sleeping outside our spacious heated homes and churches. Documented and undocumented immigrants are being hunted down, torn from the supportive wombs of communities and families. The people of Gaza are sleeping in tents amongst the rubble while the waters rise and the bombs continue to rain down from across the death camp walls. This is but a sliver of the normal hells we are facing today and the next day to which we cannot help but respond.

Most people preaching quiet caution or optimism in the face of the catastrophe have little to lose so long as it is maintained. Just the knowledge of such realities, to say nothing of experiencing them, justifies a glowing rage beyond comprehension. Churches have, at times, been a space for people to channel this rage toward change, however imperfectly, or at the very least to find a modicum of rest, solidarity, and strategic dialogue with fellow travelers in the long meantime. To the extent that the desire for unity and workability dulls our critical awareness of suffering or impels us to quiet the voices of those sounding the alarms of complacency, it must be disavowed. The hell of our present calls us to be self-consciously political, polarizing, and divisive for the sake of all whose suffering is taken for granted. ■

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Diana Butler Bass "Witnesses to the Bad News"

...They followed the torturers through the streets. They cried and cried out. They wiped the victim's face. They carried the cross. They prayed, they probably swore at the soldiers. They wouldn't turn around. They wouldn't be dissuaded. They watched. They saw the Roman soldiers laugh during the nailing and the bleeding; ridicule and taunt the victim as his body broke under the midday sun. Yes, the witnesses watched. And they would tell what they saw.

They watched an innocent man killed by a cruel state. To make an example of troublemakers who taught traitorous things like loving one's neighbor.

https://dianabutlerbass.com/the-cottage/ January 14, 2026

When the Left You Ignore Is the Faith You Forgot – The Tradition of American Social Reform

Charles Marsh

If a federal agent intent on advancing an "America First" agenda in the nation's universities were to review the syllabus of my undergraduate course, the Kingdom of God in America, they might assume I was a reliable ally of the campus's conservative minority. "Why the Woke Left Makes Nothing Happen" was the title of one section exploring the late 1960s countercultural movements.

Yet if they came to my classroom looking for MAGA-ready sound bites, they'd leave with little to show for it. While my course is unapologetically and pervasively Christian, being Christian is not synonymous with being politically conservative. Neither do the Christians I introduce throughout the semester resemble the "stupid white hippies," so named by Stephen Miller, accused of blocking the road to American greatness. The Christians encountered in our readings and field trips and discussions represent a different cast of characters.

Some who have shaped the tradition of American Christian social reform are familiar; many who number among these righteous souls are less known: men and women like Walter Rauschenbusch, Howard Kester, Ella Baker, Rachel Carson, Mary Paik Lee, César Chávez, John Ryan, Sister Mary Stella Simpson, Fannie Lou Hamer, Daniel Berrigan and Lucy Randolph Macon, who, between the years 1900 and 1964, worked within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong, out of deep Christian conviction.

Consider also the intentional community called Koinonia Farm, founded in 1942 near the southwest Georgia town of Americus. The word *koinonia* comes from the Greek New Testament, meaning "fellowship," "deep communion," or "beloved community".

Envisioned by Clarence Jordan, a New Testament scholar and Baptist minister, with his wife Florence and a cadre of fellow "Bible-believing Christians," Koinonia sought to embody the teachings of Jesus with an unflinching, if not literal, clarity. In the Jim Crow South, this meant an interracial community of shared possessions, worship and labor – a living example of the communal fellowship described in the New Testament Book of Acts that proved costly. Their witness drew hostility from neighbors, excommunication from local churches, and a season of Klan terrorism that left farmhouses riddled with buckshot and children traumatized.

Remaining steadfast in its calling, Koinonia's scars attested to a stunning paradox: The most Christian region in the most Christian nation on earth had grown afraid of the religion of Jesus.

Throughout the 1960s, Koinonia would serve as a place of hospitality for human rights activists and southern dissidents. Civil rights workers too might stop in for a home-cooked meal, a hot shower, or a nap. Some years, as many as a thousand people came to the farm for the restorative powers of pecan groves and gospel music.

Out of these 400 acres of red clay soil emerged one of the world's most successful philanthropic initiatives. Among the visitors was a restless young millionaire named Millard Fuller. With the help of Clarence Jordan, Millard and his wife Linda developed the model of "partnership housing," where families in need of decent shelter worked side-by-side with volunteers to build simple, affordable homes. Koinonia is the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity.

Not to be forgotten, the first generation of pro-life organizers were Roman Catholic Democrats committed to New Deal liberalism; adherence to natural law doctrine undergirded their support of the legal recognition of workers' rights and protections for minorities, immigrants, and women.

The faith-shaped tradition that gave rise to Koinonia and Habitat also inspired campaigns for the dignity of work, betterment in the care of the mentally ill, the civil rights movement, and organizing innovations such as the Southern Tenants Farmworkers Union, the YMCA and YWCA, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Not to be forgotten, the first generation of pro-life organizers were Roman Catholic Democrats commit-

ted to New Deal liberalism; adherence to natural law doctrine undergirded their support of the legal recognition of workers' rights and protections for minorities, immigrants, and women.

These theological campaigns, and those who inspired them, exist like wild and crooked trees in the landscape of American political life. Their practitioners worship the God born homeless in a manger, sent "to proclaim good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, and to preach liberty to the captives." They believe "in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light," and the truth claims of historic Christian orthodoxy.

But you are unlikely to hear their praises sung at AmericaFest, CPAC, or Hillsdale College; nor are their names likely to appear in academic seminars on race theory or gender studies. Within the humanities and in scholarly literature, you will quite often find the tradition of American Christian social reform de-sacralized and absorbed into the study of American progressive movements. On this point, the MAGA right generally accepts the scholarly consensus—while going on to claim that progressive hopes such as universal healthcare, robust climate policy, enfranchisement for the formerly incarcerated, stricter gun safety polices, and a living wage are woke ideas and must be defeated.

If one hesitates to call this Christian tradition the "Left," it might be because the reformers who achieved so much are more faithfully described as practicing what the evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock once named "public discipleship"—a Christian engagement with economic justice, political repression, racism, and militarism rooted not in secular ideology, but in the Word and command of God. Their commitments, animated by caritas and eschatological hope, reflect a form of patriotic love that resists both idolatry and cynicism. The Project on Lived Theology has recently completed a two-volume biographical history of the Christian Left in the United States. To read these vivid theological lives is to encounter a form of Christian conviction that is at once Christ-centered and worldly.

Such "demonstration plots for the Kingdom," as an early Koinonia gate sign read, offer us urgent lessons about the spiritual sources of civil courage and responsible action. They resist easy assimilation into the polarized categories that dominate public life: the "woke" Left's graceless dogmas, which reduce human beings to their injuries, identities and privileges, often leaving no room for forgiveness or renewal; and the MAGA movement's deliberate shrinking of American compassion.

The point is not that Christianity stands serenely above politics, but that its deepest commitments push against the certainties of both camps.

Where the woke or cultural Left too often traffics in shame, the Christian reform tradition is bound to the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. Where the MAGA Right peddles in fear and exclusion, the Christian reform tradition is radical in its demand for equity, unsentimental in its view of power, and unyielding in its call to holiness. Justice without grace curdles into cruelty, and conviction without curiosity into self-worship.

The witness of Koinonia, and of the many others who have followed, is no relic of a vanished past. We might speak of them as the unwoke Left. Pointing beyond the rituals of grievance and the liturgies of outrage, their charity, gentleness, and hands-to-the-plow realism are qualities we will surely need in the uncertain years ahead. ■

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The Art of the Gospel: Christian Ethics, Racial Terror, and Moral Imagination in a Time of White Christian Nationalism

Elijah R. Zehyoue

Walking to Church in a Militarized City

I was in Washington, D.C., on a Sunday morning, walking toward Metropolitan AME Church, one of my favorites in the city. It was early, quiet and unusually tense. National Guard troops patrolled the streets—rifles visible, uniforms crisp, bodies stationed at intersections where tourists would normally gather. Concrete barriers lined the roads. The city that I loved felt unrecognizable, suspended somewhere between wariness and fear that perhaps our democratic aspirations had collapsed.

As I walked toward church, I found myself holding two images together: armed soldiers guarding the symbols of American power, and congregations gathering to worship a crucified Jesus. The juxtaposition was jarring, yet familiar. Christianity and political power have long occupied the same spaces; but that morning the relationship felt more intense, perhaps because it was more in my face. And because it was Sunday morning. The threat that required this show of force had been animated, in part, by Christian language, symbols and appeals to divine authority. White Christian nationalism was no longer an abstract concept or academic category. It was part of the air I was breathing, the streets I was walking on as I headed on my way to worship.

That walk clarified something I had been sensing for a long time as a Christian leader. *We are living in a moment when racial terror, political violence, and Christian identity are once again dangerously entangled in a way that too few people see.* Pastors are trying to lead congregations shaped by fear, exhaustion and competing moral visions. Some parishioners long for order and stability at almost any cost. Others are haunted by the persistence of racialized violence and by the church's apparent inability—or unwillingness—to confront it honestly. In this climate, pastors often feel caught between two unsatisfying options: silence, in the hope of preserving unity, or sharper moral argument in the hope that clarity will restore control.

Yet neither silence nor argument alone seems to address what is most at stake. What that morning in D.C. made clear to me is that the crisis we face is not simply one of political disagreement or ethical confusion. It is a crisis of moral imagination. We possess the language of Christian ethics, yet we struggle to see rightly—to perceive how power, race and violence shape our common life, and how Christianity itself has been formed within those realities.

This struggle is not new. It has deep roots in American and Western Christian history, from enslavement through the era of lynching, when white Christians worshiped faithfully while racial terror unfolded in public view. Then, as now, the problem was not the absence of moral language, but the absence of people who truly understood how to be moral beings in the world today.

In this climate, pastors often feel caught between two unsatisfying options: silence, in the hope of preserving unity, or sharper moral argument in the hope that clarity will restore control.

Yet we can overcome this problem when we turn to the Gospel's passage of Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–26) for it offers a vital resource for pastors navigating this moment. Through Luke's reinterpreting of Jesus essential teachings, we see living and leading like Jesus as an art and not a science. *The art of the gospel* is an aesthetic and embodied ethical imagination that traffics in creativity, refuses domination, and forms communities capable of moral courage based upon how we practice our day-to-day lives.

Drawing from Kelly Brown Douglas' analysis of Christianity's complicity in racial violence, I contend that white Christian nationalism flourishes where Christian ethics has been severed from vulnerable bodies and where faith no longer requires proximity to suffering.[1] Luke's Jesus begins ethical formation not with certainty or control, but by standing on level ground and retraining how his followers learn to see and then move as artists who have the power to create a differ-

ent type of world.

Luke's Sermon on the Plain and the Reordering of Moral Vision

Luke situates Jesus's first major teaching not on a mountain, but on "level ground" (Luke 6:17). This narrative detail is ethically significant. Jesus descends rather than ascends. He stands among the people rather than above them. Ethical authority here is not established through distance or elevation, but through proximity.

The blessings and woes that follow enact a moral reversal that unsettles deeply held assumptions about God's favor and human worth. "Blessed are you who are poor…hungry…weeping," Jesus declares, followed immediately by woes addressed to the rich, the full, and those who are publicly praised. Luke's emphasis is unmistakable: Bodily conditions—hunger, grief, poverty, exclusion—are not morally incidental. They are ethically revelatory.

This teaching does more than promise future consolation. It renders judgment on present arrangements of power and value. Luke forms moral agents by reshaping what they are trained to notice, whose suffering counts and which lives are deemed worthy of concern. The Sermon on the Plain trains ethical perception before it prescribes ethical action.

Christian ethics often approaches scripture as a source of principles to be applied to moral dilemmas. Luke approaches scripture as a practice that forms vision. Ethics emerges not primarily from extracting rules, but from sustained exposure to a world reordered by God's justice. To stand on level ground with Jesus is to have one's moral field of vision disrupted and re-formed.

This disruption is precisely what white Christian nationalism resists. Moral systems built on hierarchy and exclusion depend on not seeing too clearly—on maintaining distance from bodies marked as expendable. Luke's Jesus refuses that distance.

When Christian Ethics Becomes Disembodied

Kelly Brown Douglas offers a crucial diagnosis of how Christian ethics became capable of accommodating racial terror. In *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies, Christian Souls*, she argues that dominant forms of Christian theology developed within a "platonized" framework that separated soul from body, elevating spiritual purity while rendering material bodies morally suspect or expendable. When combined with what she calls closed monotheism—a theological posture that treats one's own understanding of God as absolute and violent toward alternatives—Christianity became capable of sanctifying domination.

Lynching reveals this ethical failure with devastating clarity. White Christians sang hymns, attended worship, and spoke fluently about salvation while participating in or condoning racial terror. This was not a failure of ethical knowledge. It was a failure of ethical perception. Black bodies were no longer recognized as bearing moral claim.

White Christian nationalism inherits this disembodied ethic. It proclaims Christian identity while abstracting faith from the concrete suffering of marginalized communities. It appeals to moral order while remaining indifferent—or hostile—to the bodies harmed in the name of that order. The danger is not merely political idolatry, but ethical blindness.

Christian ethics fails when moral reasoning is allowed to proceed without interruption from suffering bodies. Once bodies are detached from ethical concern, violence becomes imaginable, even righteous. Douglas' work reminds us that ethics must be accountable not only to theological coherence but to bodily consequence.

Christian ethics fails when moral reasoning is allowed to proceed without interruption from suffering bodies. Once bodies are detached from ethical concern, violence becomes imaginable, even righteous.

The Art of the Gospel as an Ethical Practice

Against this history, I propose *the art of the gospel* as a way of practicing Christian ethics. By "art," I mean a way of knowing what matters that is shaped through imagination, narrative, memory and embodied encounter. Art trains perception before it adjudicates behavior.

Jesus teaches ethically as an artist. He employs parables, reversals, metaphor and embodied presence to expand moral imagination. His teaching resists closure and certainty, inviting participation rather than compliance. Ethical insight emerges not through mastery but through engagement with a world rendered strange and newly visible.

The Sermon on the Plain exemplifies this artistic ethic. Its blessings and woes disrupt settled moral categories, exposing the gap between social valuation and divine concern. This disruption is not rhetorical

flourish; it is formative work. Ethics, in Luke's vision, is learned through proximity, attention and transformation.

This does not mean abandoning moral reasoning. It means recognizing that reasoning is only as trustworthy as the imagination that undergirds it. Without formation of vision, ethical principles become tools of self-justification rather than instruments of liberation. The art of the gospel insists that Christian ethics must begin with learning to see.

Pastoral Formation in a Time of White Christian Nationalism

For pastors, the implications are unavoidable. Pastoral leadership is always a form of ethical formation. Sermons, liturgies and communal practices shape how congregations learn to see the world. The question is not whether pastors form moral imagination, but toward what ends.

In a moment when white Christian nationalism offers a compelling but destructive moral vision, pastors are called to form communities capable of seeing differently. This work cannot be reduced to denunciation or debate. It requires practices that cultivate proximity to suffering, honest engagement with history, and resistance to abstraction.

Preaching, then, is an art of the gospel and so are the other ministries of pastors. It can reinforce distance or cultivate attentiveness. It can harden fear or open imagination. Practices of lament, remembrance and embodied witness—such as attending to the history of lynching and contemporary racial violence—are not distractions from faith. They are essential to ethical formation.

Christian ethics cannot be reduced to teaching what is right. It must also form communities capable of recognizing what is wrong. The art of the gospel invites pastors to embrace formation as slow, risky and deeply embodied work.

Conclusion: Learning to See before We Act

Walking to church through a militarized city made visible what Christian ethics often obscures: That the struggle before us is not simply about positions or policies, but about what we see or choose not to see. Luke's Sermon on the Plain confronts the church with an ethical vision that refuses abstraction and demands accountability to suffering bodies before us.

In a time marked by racial terror and the resurgence of white Christian nationalism, Christian ethics cannot remain disembodied. The art of the gospel names the kind of ethical imagination required for faithfulness today—one shaped by encounter, memory and moral reversal. Only by learning to see rightly can the church hope to live justly. ■

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Walking to church through a militarized city made visible what Christian ethics often obscures: That the struggle before us is not simply about positions or policies, but about what we see or choose not to see.

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Womanist Witness against White Christian Nationalism

Angela N. Parker

A nation's religion is its life, and as such white Christianity is a miserable failure.
W.E.B. Dubois[1]

"Jesus did not come to 'Make Israel Great Again!'" These words often get a rise out of my students when I am teaching Luke 4:14-30. As I read this text with students, I note that Luke's Jesus thinks ethnoracially when he highlights that the widow of Zarephath or Naaman the Syrian received blessings from Elijah and Elisha. Thereafter, when Jesus's Nazareth neighbors realize what Jesus is actually saying, they immediately want to throw Jesus over a cliff. How dare Jesus insinuate that he has come for the foreigner or the stranger and not the hard-working Israelite! Doesn't Jesus know who the Israelites are and to whom God has given the land?

As a biblical scholar, I see the Nazareth people as examples of White Christian nationalism today. Instead of serving as witnesses to Jesus's life and ministry, White Christian nationalists hold onto their constructed Jesus who invokes certain political ideologies that are antithetical to the actual gospel. The question then becomes, for me, as follows: What are some tools and tactics that more progressive leaning Jesus followers can engage which combat the beliefs of White Christian nationalism? Pondering this question, I propose Womanist[2] witnessing which is an oppositional type of witnessing against current injustices occurring in society and politics today. White Christian nationalism is one such injustice.

Defining White Christian Nationalism

Similar to Jesus' neighbors in Nazareth, White Christian nationalists have an understanding of election and divine giftings by God which defines their "deep story."

> *White Christian nationalism's "deep story" goes something like this: America was founded as a Christian nation by (white) men who were "traditional" Christians, who based the nation's founding documents on "Christian principles." The United States is blessed by God, which is why it has been so successful, and the nation has a special role to play in God's plan for humanity. But these blessings are threatened by cultural degradation from "un-American" influences both inside and outside our borders.*[3]

The political worldview of White Christian nationalism dictates the embrace of "proper" stances on marriage and family, Israel, religious liberty, abortion and immigration. This also means that a connection to a faith that is related to the life, ministry and death of Jesus Christ becomes usurped by a faith in a Whiteness that emerges from a White Christian nationalist identity. Some have even argued that Jesus is too woke! The goal of White Christian nationalism is to make the United States a theocratic nation that re-inscribes patriarchy and heteronormativity. Therefore, as a Womanist New Testament scholar, I must return, again and again, to the Scriptures in order to find Womanist ways of witnessing so I may combat White Christian nationalism. Thus, in this brief reflection, I offer two ways that I hope White Christians join me in the ways that I provide an oppositional witness to White Christian nationalism in today's society and politics.[4]

"Jesus did not come to 'Make Israel Great Again!'"These words often get a rise out of my students when I am teaching Luke 4:14-30.

Womanist Witness to (White)[5] Men's Mediocrity

Many people may grow up with an inflated sense of ego. Now, I am not put on this earth to judge one's ego or put down a person's ego or sense of self. However, I do feel that as a thinking person on God's green earth, I can rightly critique fallacy in thought when I witness such fallacy. I believe many witnessed such a fallacy within systems of hierarchy especially in politics when Black women overwhelmingly voted for Kamala Harris instead of Donald Trump.[6] We recognized the overqualification of Kamala Harris, but still the mediocrity of Trump won the day.

With such an observation as noted above, society should not be shocked when one Trump administrator, Darren Beattie, states that the world needs to be run by competent White men.[7] His idea is to preserve the uniformity of White male leadership which is extremely problematic to my Womanist sensibilities. However, it is even more problematic when such leadership constantly proves their incompetence.

What sociologists find when an entire group of people (i.e. White men) are conditioned to believe that they are entitled to a path of prosperity is that they do not have to work hard. However, the groups that are not those men are conditioned to live on fewer resources, but end up working harder and becoming more resilient and creative as a result. Therefore, the groups with less actually begin to thrive. For example, many hear the statistic that Black women are the most educated constituency in the United States of America, demonstrating that thriving occurs even though we make less money and have fewer resources.

The privileged group (White men) ***witness*** groups developing thriving muscles; but rather than saying "let's do better," they dig into wells of anger and grievance and decide to take opportunities away instead of building muscles of resilience so they can compete better. It must hurt to actually have to compete with all people!

I know that these words are tough, but we are living in times where the lack of clear speech and capitulation to the little foothold of White Christian nationalism has allowed so many people to suffer. Gone is the opportunity for easy, breezy words. Hell on earth has arrived and we must fight it with every inch of our being. Thus, everyone must be an oppositional witness to the lies that mediocre (White) men should run society.

Being an Oppositional Witness Is Not Safe!

Safety is not guaranteed. Proximity to Whiteness does not save. Unfortunately, our Latinx friends are finding that out in the midst of mass deportations. Indeed, Luke has already confirmed Jesus as the holy one in the early parts of his Gospel. However, we have to note that even holy Jesus is not safe from being hurled over a cliff in Luke 4. The idea of lack of safety reminds me of John Lewis' concept of "good trouble."

Good trouble is Lewis' shorthand reference to creative disruption undertaken to promote social justice. This phrase became Lewis's signature motto to "find a way to get in the way."[8] As Christians who read the Gospels and attempt to witness to the life and ministry of Jesus, I believe that finding "a way to get in the way" is part of our witness in society and politics. As Lewis writes:

> *. . . we must accept one central truth and responsibility as participants in a democracy: Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society. The work of love, peace, and justice will always be necessary, until their realism and their imperative take hold of our imagination, crowds out any dream of hatred or revenge, and fills up our existence with their power.*[9]

Being an oppositional witness against White Christian nationalism toward a multi-ethnic democratic society, particularly for White Christians, means the "good trouble" that you all have to engage runs along the lines of being called "race traitors." Jesus does not act "cowlor-blind" in Luke 4. Jesus actually speaks about different ethnicities as he reads Isaiah and then expounds upon the reading with the people of Nazareth. Just as our Christianity is not "color-blind," your "good trouble" is recognizing that the United States was founded on a racial hierarchy. Rather than honor the words of the Constitution, White Christian nationalism would burn the country down before allowing everyone full democratic participation. Therefore, my question to my White Christian friends who have family members espousing White Christian nationalism would be: "What kind of good trouble will you get into?"

His idea is to preserve the uniformity of White male leadership which is extremely problematic to my Womanist sensibilities. However, it is even more problematic when such leadership constantly proves their incompetence.

Conclusion

I began these reflections with the sentiment that Jesus did not come to "Make Israel Great Again!" As I read Luke 4, for the Israelites, the religion of the nation of Israel was of utmost importance, rather than engaging with the healing of nations other than Israel. Such an idea is similar to the epigraph which begins

this essay. W.E.B. DuBois, the first African American to graduate with a Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University, stated that a "nation's religion is its life, and as such white Christianity is a miserable failure." DuBois could not have envisioned that the White Christianity that he saw in 1920, which began lynching African Americans and squashing their civil liberties, would morph into the White Christian nationalism that we witness today. DuBois wrote this line in 1920, more than 100 years ago.

Dubois wrote his works as a witness against White Christianity. Similarly, African-American scholars continue to witness against White Christian nationalism today. However, as my reflections show, we need more than witness. Part of my reflections invite White Christians who do not espouse White Christian nationalism to join in Womanist oppositional witness against White Christian nationalism in more concrete ways. Do White Christians have the tenacity and fortitude to witness against White men's mediocrity when necessary? Do White Christians have the strength to "get in the way" even when their safety is not guaranteed?

Do White Christians have the tenacity and fortitude to witness against White men's mediocrity when necessary? Do White Christians have the strength to "get in the way" even when their safety is not guaranteed?

Only time will tell. ■

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Becoming Antonio

Angela Denker

Antonio (name changed for privacy reasons) wasn't sure he'd be able to talk with me on that blustery January day we' had originally scheduled for an interview. He was working on boats, as he often did, during a break from seminary. The East Coast had been rattled with blizzards, heavy snowfall and roaring winds for the past few days. Antonio wasn't sure he'd have a reliable cell phone connection, much less a quiet place for us to talk and for him to tell me the story that had brought him to this place after years of confusion, tragedy, pain, trauma, forgiveness, grace, searching, rejecting and finding God.

A writer friend of mine had taught Antonio in a few courses, telling me a curious story about how he, a trans man, had found himself in almost "ad hoc" counseling and care conversations at right-wing Christian rallies with mostly white, middle-aged Christian men. He'd written a paper on the subject for his master of divinity degree, with a concentration in chaplaincy. The paper was titled, in part: "The Jihad of Liberation."

After growing up the child of a former evangelical pastor, homeschooled in conservative Christian traditionalism, Antonio said he now practiced both Muslim and Christian traditions, while holding onto faith in Jesus as a central figure of devotion, but not necessarily of divinity. All this likely would have sounded heretical to young Antonio and he likely never would have believed he would find himself at a Christian seminary studying such things, potentially even pursuing a career as a chaplain. But then, as I'd already seen in the story of so many young, white Christian men whom I'd been studying, and in my own life—God moves through our lives in mysterious and even meandering ways, if only to finally arrive at a place of greater love, understanding, acceptance and grace.

That word—grace. I kept returning to it as I heard the unfolding of Antonio's story.

He was brought up in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a conservative branch of American Presbyterianism founded in 1973 in Birmingham, Alabama. Its predecessor body was the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), originally the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States in America. The PCA split off from the PCUS rather than submit to a merger to become the PCUSA. The PCA is loath to admit the role of racial disunity—during the civil rights movement in the South, in its formation. But the denomination has again and again taken positions against progress and inclusion for all sorts of marginalized groups, beginning in the South with the segregation of Black Americans, and continuing with a refusal to ordain women or LGBTQ people, or to allow gay marriage. New York City pastor and Reason for God author. Tim Keller, is probably the most well-known PCA leader, though the denomination was also home to former Republican vice president Dan Quayle and former senators Jim DeMint (R-SC) and Ben Sasse (R-NE). The PCA, like its leading champion, Keller, had a penchant for making its exclusionary beliefs seem somehow anodyne and even aligned with pop culture and a forward-looking church, even as its leaders fought vociferously against social movements

God moves through our lives in mysterious and even meandering ways, if only to finally arrive at a place of greater love, understanding, acceptance and grace.

like those supporting gay rights, abortion rights, or feminism. Antonio's dad had been a church pastor, but he lost his job when Antonio was a baby and became what Antonio remembers as "leadership-adjacent" in their new church so that Antonio and his younger brother still felt like "PKs" (pastor's kids).

While Caleb's family emphasized a sort of blue-collar, hard-working, freethinking, western version of conservative Christianity, Antonio's family was even more rooted in the academic discipline of raising their children according to conservative Christian principles. Antonio remembers being homeschooled until middle school—and his brother until high school—with his mom as their only teacher, using fundamentalist Christian curriculum. Meanwhile, his dad got a PhD in economics, writing a dissertation wondering if God was an economist. He was perhaps perfectly situated, then, to grow in prominence in an American conservative church culture that had come to emphasize economics and recruit "businessmen" under the church growth model popularized by pastors Warren

and Hybels. Still, Antonio's dad never quite settled professionally. He worked low-paying teaching assistant jobs and other side jobs to try and pay the bills, supplemented by Antonio's mom's inheritance after her mother's death. The family was surely not well-off, but they lived in economically depressed areas, and were relatively affluent compared to their impoverished neighbors; so Antonio didn't notice the financial worry much. He had other demons to battle.

For years, hidden and concealed from the rest of the family, Antonio's father had been sexually abusing his child. Antonio tried to tell his mom, but he said she didn't believe him. "She thought it was anti-Christian rebellion," Antonio said, because, at the very same time, Antonio was starting to question the misogyny and patriarchal structures of their church. He had begun to question things as he left the family home more often, beginning at a Christian charter school with other homeschoolers for the first two years of middle school and then starting an early college program at the community college at age 14.

Around that time, Antonio (who was born biologically female) started to realize that he was queer, though he didn't quite have the language for what he felt inside. "I knew there was something different about me," he said. "At the time, I would have said I was experiencing same-sex attraction. I wasn't sure if God made people gay. I knew God didn't want me to act on my same-sex attraction."

Instead of hearing her child's cries for protection, Antonio's mother cracked down on her teenage daughter. She was practicing what Antonio now calls "punitive parenting." Life at home had become unbearable. But outside the home, Antonio was meeting new people and feeling more confident in his queer identity. He got a full-time job and moved out the day he turned 18. Nine months later, then still living as a woman, he was married to a community college classmate, a man a decade older. "It was definitely some purity culture stuff," Antonio says, looking back at the quick marriage. "I wanted the stability of marriage. I was thinking that was the only option."

At the same time, Antonio was wrestling with his faith. "I knew that the Calvinist God would be evil for condemning us to hell, as people with original sin. I just kept thinking that if all this is true, then God is either evil or God doesn't exist."

Antonio says his husband at the time was gentle and patient, giving him the reassurance he'd never had that "I was gonna be OK." He desperately needed that reassurance, because in sharing about his queerness publicly, Antonio had been "pushed out" by his church. "A lot of the community just stopped talking to me," he said. "I really experienced the loss of support and community through that experience. [My husband] was really a rock in that time."

Antonio also connected with his then-father-in-law, and the two of them would go clamming, or out on the boat, or do construction work together. These were simple but deeply meaningful experiences for Antonio, who never got time like that with his own father. "He was, in many ways the father that mine was not," Antonio said.

As Antonio leaned more and more into this new supportive community surrounding him, he felt his understanding of his own identity continue to shift. He realized that he was not just queer, but transgender and he started to begin the transition process from female to male, and to use he/they pronouns. (His gender identity is still evolving today and Antonio says he is "tired of all the gender wars.")

"Basically, what I tell people is I feel much more comfortable in a masculine expression. I feel like my spiritual work is to exist as a man in the world."

In July of 2020, he and his husband were divorced after four years of marriage, though Antonio says they still have positive regard for one another and did not end on bad terms. "We were on a similar journey of self-discovery," Antonio said. "We were both just going in different directions."

His ex-husband wanted to remain in the Pacific Northwest town where they'd met, but Antonio was on the move. He spent the next few years before entering seminary working for environmental nonprofits, continuing to do the work with his hands he'd always loved to do, as well as working with mutual aid groups to address homelessness and overdose prevention. The work was active and meaningful, but Antonio missed the rites of faith and religion he'd grown up with, divorced from the baggage of his abusive and angry parents. Eventually, during a sweep of a houseless camp where Antonio and his fellow workers were attempting to assist people, he met a Mennonite pastor who was "yelling about Jesus." Antonio and the pastor ended up meeting every week to talk about theology. He started reading voraciously, finding liberation theology and ideas about communalism, libertarian socialism, and anarcho-communism. True to his western roots, Antonio says, "I'm big on autonomy, but I don't want to be individualistic about it."

As I watched Antonio's deep-set eyes bore into mine as he shared passionately about his calling to Christian anarchism, I saw within his face and heard within his words so many of the other young, white Christian boys and men who have been a part of my research

journey, and a part of my life in general. I think back to the restless isolation and uncertainty that turned to racist hatred in the case of mass shooter and white supremacist Dylan Roof. I think back to Connor, lining up for drill at the Citadel, and still finding a place for his tears to flow after the overdose death of his friend. I think of the confirmation students in the rural Midwest who dreamt up an idyllic paradise with only white boys and naked girls; of the rural teenage boys learning at the feet of an ex-military couple of pastors, in a garage on an autumn night in Minnesota, down the road from the white supremacist Hof, and how they told me that to be a man was to be kind, and that Jesus wasn't white after all. I think of small, angry screaming Pastor Mark Driscoll, desperate to reclaim his manhood by the repression of women and anyone who might reveal his own thinly-veiled inadequacy. I think of my blond-and-red-haired sons, running blithely down the city sidewalk, telling me they liked to hear me preach, getting in trouble at school for playing too rough; they were brave, kind, nervous, afraid, hugging me, ignoring me, loving the world and the people they meet, growing up and into men, with fits and starts and imperfections.

Antonio told me that what made him go to seminary was in part a calling back to some of the same "themes in the spaces in which I was raised," even though those same places and themes he also now saw as at least partially Christian nationalist. "There's a libertarian bent," he told me, of his conservative Christian upbringing. "An emphasis on freedom and community-building. A deep community and relationship to land, even if sometimes in an extractive way. There's a relationship to place. It's been a long road, and it will continue to be a long road for me."

Antonio said he's been through years of therapy and is "as healed as someone can be" who has a history of sexual abuse. Through that process, he found a way to forgive his dad. "I realized that had I been socialized as a boy, and gone through some of the experiences my father experienced, who's to say I wouldn't have become like him? Seeing my dad's dysfunction has increased my compassion."

Antonio's process of forgiveness and grace is not prescriptive or even necessarily recommended for other survivors, each of whom has their own paths to follow. I include his story here not to recommend others do the same, but instead to lift up his uniqueness, and the inescapable power of grace in everything Antonio had explained to me. This was especially moving because I understood that I had not often expressed that same sense of grace toward trans people in my own Christian past. In my own growing-up faith development, tangential to the '90s evangelical purity culture, I learned not only to repress and be ashamed of my own femininity and sexuality, but I also learned fear and shame related to LGBTQ people, something that has taken me a long time to undo, even as I have socially and theologically supported full affirmation of LGBTQ people in the church for more than a decade now.

The miraculous and hopeful part of this story for young, white Christian men in America can find its culmination here, because here we have Antonio, who spent his childhood abused and victimized by a father who'd been shaped by a harsh masculine mold and a Christian culture that did not leave space for men to be vulnerable and seek love. Here we have Antonio, who in his own transgender masculinity has found a deep well of compassion and understanding for the very men who propagate the culture of Christian masculinity that terrorized his childhood years.

Here we have Antonio at the right-wing rallies, off to the side, talking to men about construction and "bro-ing" out, wearing coveralls, but then also talking about fathers and grandfathers and pain and longing and God. At a Proud Boys rally in Oregon during Trump's presidency, Antonio and nine of his "comrades," including community organizers, social workers, biker moms in recovery, public defenders, and other friends, formed an impromptu "de-escalation cooperative." This group of 10 dispersed themselves, standing between protesters and counter-protesters, something Antonio described as "creating space for activated people to reconsider their actions." Antonio talked to militiamen, "using humor to diffuse tension," and "asked questions about their lives." He wrote later of the experience, "My goal was to humanize myself as a queer person and to help the agitators feel heard in their distress." Later that day, a rally attendee and Iraq war veteran named Mike, wearing a baton and a loaded .45 on his hip, shared with Antonio about his "key formative experiences, all of which had been traumatic."

Writing later of that experience, Antonio wrote: "When I consider Mike's childhood, I am overcome with empathy for his search for safety." He felt not only compassion, but deep connection to Mike's story, adding, "While I cannot deny that I hold contempt for Mike's Christian nationalist and fundamentalist evangelical beliefs, I remember how well they served me as a teenager. These doctrines were a fortress of cosmic security in the face of political unrest, financial instability, and familial abuse. However, it was also through my experiences of suffering that I was able to grasp the existence of systemic oppression. Had I not been

raised as a girl under patriarchy, were I not bisexual and transgender, I may have found myself standing by Mike's side as his comrade."

Antonio said he first entered into Christian nationalist and right-wing spaces because, in some way, they represented where he had come from—people he had formerly known and even loved—and he wanted to cling to a sense of common humanity. Even despite the challenges and pain his life has wrought, Antonio still has a desperate and deeply-rooted hope for the future. He sees the spirit of God working change in his own life, in powerful ways, and he can't help but believe that the spirit of God could also be at work in changing these Christian nationalist men.

"They're just men," Antonio says. "I don't always like the phrase 'Christian nationalist,' even though I use it. They're shaped by culture and experiences just like me. With my own healing journey, it has really blurred the line between oppressor and oppressed . . . it shifted things for me. We are all harmed. I noticed cycles of harm. None of us are innocent."

Antonio said his father's dad had four affairs and was "married to his work." His mother once told him that his father had "eaten his dad's cigarettes in order to feel close to him."

The pain and sorrow and shame of generations can run deep, like a river, through our lives, twisting and turning and shaping us and our paths in ways we don't always understand. But here we have Antonio: the transgender seminary student reading his Bible next to his Qur'an. He's still young. He's still figuring it out. His manhood is in process, revealing itself—like how all boys become men, like how God reveals Godself, as the Apostle Paul writes, as in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face-to-face," (1 Corinthians 13).

Author's Note: When I first received an invitation to write for this issue of Christian Ethics Today, I knew that I wanted to tell a story that illustrated pastoral and hopeful ways to engage together in communities and push back the rising tides of hatred, disinformation, white Christian Nationalism, and violence. As I thought about how to tell this story, I kept returning to the story of Antonio, whom I interviewed for my recent book, *Disciples of White Jesus*. What makes Antonio's story so powerful is the way that he embodies both the trauma, abuse and isolation that can arise within church communities and also an almost inconceivable response of resurrection, hope and grace. When I began writing a book about right-wing radicalization of young white men and boys, I didn't think that one of the stories I would tell would be of a transman who grew up in purity culture and now frequented right-wing rallies to serve as a peacekeeper. But I think that element of unexpectedness is part of what makes Antonio's story so compelling and even relatable. This essay is an excerpt from my latest book, Disciples of White Jesus: The Radicalization of American Boyhood, (Broadleaf, March 25, 2025), reprinted here with permission from the publisher. ■

Rev. Angela Denker is an award-winning author, ELCA Lutheran pastor, and veteran journalist. Her first book, Red State Christians, was the 2019 Silver Foreword Indies award-winner for political and social sciences. Her second book, Disciples of White Jesus: The Radicalization of American Boyhood, came out on March, 25, 2025. Pastor Angela also serves Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church in Minneapolis as pastor of visitation and public theology. You can read more of her work on Christian Nationalism, American culture, social issues, journalism, theology and parenting on her Substack, I'm Listening.

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"Love casts out fear, but we have to get over the fear in order to get close enough to love them."

—Dorothy Day

The Lie That Killed Renee Good Is Strangling Democracy: How a casualty of America's culture wars clarifies our task in this moment

William J. Barber, II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

On the morning of January 7th in Minneapolis, Minnesota, ICE officer Jonathan Ross shot and killed Renee Good. "I'm not mad at you," were Good's last words to Ross, seconds before he pulled the trigger three times as she tried to drive away from their encounter. On the video that he recorded, Ross called Good an expletive for a female dog in heat as he watched the vehicle she was driving roll into a telephone pole. At a press conference hours later, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem called Good a "domestic terrorist."

How did these representatives of the US government know what they claimed to know about their fellow citizen?

"Renee was a Christian who knew that all religions teach the same essential truth: we are here to love each other, care for each other, and keep each other safe and whole," Good's wife, Rebecca, said in a statement over the weekend - the first public comments she has made since witnessing her wife's murder. Good's smile, it seems, was meant to communicate her conviction. "I'm not mad at you," was her expression of the love of Jesus to someone whose actions she opposed.

Why did her words enrage Jonathan Ross? What was he trying to kill when he shot her three times at point blank range?

Ross' father, Ed Ross, told the *Global Mail* that his son is "a committed, conservative Christian, a tremendous father, a tremendous husband. I couldn't be more proud of him."

Jonathan Ross shot and killed a fellow American and a fellow Christian. His father couldn't be more proud of him. What would make a Christian father feel pride after watching his son kill his sister in Christ?

Two decades before the United States erupted into Civil War in the 19th century, every Christian denomination split over the question of slavery. Since launching a moral fusion movement in the 1830s, abolitionists had insisted that the humanity of enslaved people was not a political difference, but a moral issue. If a government insisted that some people could be denied their liberty, then it was an offense to God and a threat to all people. Those people who pledged their allegiance to the authoritarian slaveholding regime could not worship a God who granted all people liberty, whatever the color of their skin. They seceded from their churches two decades before they seceded from the Union. As one leading Virginian in the 19th century wrote, the "Northern crusade aimed at the sin of slavery" was a "religion of hate."

How did Jonathan Ross hear hate when a young white woman looked at him and said, "I'm not mad at you"? How did he tell himself, as he no doubt wrote in his after-action report, that he "feared for his life"?

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When Ross' father called his son a "committed, conservative Christian," he identified him with a division that happened in the American church in the 1980s. In his 1994 book, Culture Wars, James Davison Hunter wrote, "America is in the midst of a culture war that has had and will continue to have reverberations not only within public life but within the lives of ordinary Americans everywhere." Describing the institutions that had lined up across from one another on the battlefield of public life, Hunter noted that historic divisions in America had shifted. Increasingly, Hunter observed, Americans saw themselves on one side or the other of a war between traditional morality and progressive values. This wasn't just about left versus right in politics, though the culture wars inevitably shaped where people stood on political issues. The divide between orthodoxy and progressivism was more fundamental, Hunter observed. People on each side increasingly understood their way of seeing the world as fundamen-

tally incompatible with the enemy across the battle line.

This battle line has been manufactured and reinforced by a well-funded network of organizations that believe they can maintain power by dividing the American public. Donald Trump did not create the culture wars, but he has exploited them. An authoritarian regime controls the US government today because religious nationalists who call themselves "conservative Christians" have been persuaded that neighbors who believe "we are here to love each other" are their enemies.

Jonathan Ross did not know as much as we now know about Renee Good. He gathered that she opposed the extreme enforcement action that he believes to be a righteous crusade. He heard her say, "I'm not mad at you." He saw her smile. But he judged her a mortal enemy because he has lived his whole life in a culture war that pits so-called "conservative Christians" like him against fellow Christians who believe that "we are here to love each other."

Bad theology kills. As teachers in the church, we have a responsibility to make clear there is no such thing as a "conservative Christian" - nor a "liberal" or "progressive" Christian, for that matter. To commit one's life to the way of Christ is to accept that all people are created in God's image, that life is a gift to treasure, that the dividing line between good and evil runs through each of us, and that we are called to love our enemies, not exterminate them. No one who calls themselves "Christian" - us included - is a perfect example of Christ. But we deceive ourselves and mislead others if we pretend that that a failure to follow the way of Christ can be justified by adding an adjective in front of "Christian."

If the lie at the root of our nation's crisis is a theological lie, then Christian preachers like us have a special responsibility to proclaim in public the good news that can save us from destruction. We are not hell bent on destroying one another so that greedy oligarchs can extract from the US government as much wealth as possible.

We do not have to accept the lie that our neighbors - even our own kin - are our enemies. We can embrace the moral values of love, mercy, and justice that have pushed this nation toward a more perfect union in its past, and we can use the nonviolent power of truth to build a movement that takes back the tools of our government to reconstruct democracy. ■

From https://ourmoralmoment.substack.com/ January 12, 2026. William J. Barber, II (@williamjbarberii) is President, Repairers of the Breach, & Founding Director & Professor, Yale Center for Public Theology and Public Policy and an author and public witness. Bishop Barber, along with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, leads "Our Moral Moment", a movement and publication focusing on social justice and moral issues in contemporary society. Jonathan is a spiritual writer, preacher, and community-cultivator. He serves as Assistant Director for Partnerships and Fellowships at Yale University's Center for Public Theology and Public Policy. Jonathan lives with his family at the Rutba House, a house of hospitality in Durham, North Carolina.

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Christian Ethics Today…For Such a Time as This

Pat Anderson, editor

The articles found herein express the thoughts and analyses of the plight of Jesus-followers in 2026 America. I use the word "plight" because that is the condition in which we are living. The Cambridge Dictionary definition of that word: **an unpleasant condition, especially a serious, sad, or difficult one**. Well, yeah that's where we are.

But the plural "plights" is the more appropriate word as our current situation is not the result of a single unpleasant condition. Our writers deal with several of those conditions: theological and political conflict, racial terror, transgender (and other) abuse, fascism, violent murderous attacks on human beings in this country perpetrated by fellow Americans who blindly follow government authorities who cultivate hatred, fear and domination.

Also, however, our writers encourage us to seek contemplative patience, to join with other Jesus-followers in resistance, to unleash our moral imagination, to remember the tradition of American social reform, to emulate the thoughts and practices of Bonhoffer, to follow the example of Jesus who faced plights much like the ones we face today.

As I was putting the finishing touches to this issue of *Christian Ethics Today*, an emphatic exclamation point interrupted my thoughts when Renee Good was shot and killed in Minneapolis by an ICE agent. It shook me, pressing upon me a fresh reminder of the urgency of the moment.

I cannot meaningfully add to the words expressed in these pages. Indeed, the content of this journal shows that many variable strains characterize the current plight of the church, any one of which can cause great damage to a congregation. Cody Sanders gives us a marvelous introduction to the content of the journal and his own engagement with students and practitioners who struggle to minister to a lost and hurting society. Our writers have presented significant thoughts, analyses, inspiration, admonishment and gospel-focused affirmation to help us be and do what we profess.

After Renee Good's murder, I read the Substack post by William J. Barber, II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove in which they draw an encompassing thought for me on the question of "How Can We Be Faithful Witnesses in This Time of Peril." I placed it at the end of this collection of articles. Their words place our dilemma in bright illumination:

> *If the lie at the root of our nation's crisis is a theological lie, then Christian preachers like us have a special responsibility to proclaim in public the good news that can save us from destruction. We are not hell bent on destroying one another so that greedy oligarchs can extract from the U.S. government as much wealth as possible.* ■

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Amen and amen. Selah.

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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

MISSION

The mission of the Christian Ethics Today Foundation is to publish Christian Ethics Today in order to help laypersons, educators, and ministers understand and respond in a faithful Christian manner to ethical issues that are of concern to Christian individuals, to the church, and to society today.

PURPOSES

In order to be an effective, progressive, prophetic voice for Christian ethics, the journal endeavors to:

- Work from the deep, broad center of the Christian faith
- Draw upon Christian experience, biblical truth, church traditions, and current research in ethics
- 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.
- Inform and inspire a lively company of individuals and organizations interested in working for personal morality and public righteousness.

From the beginning the purpose of the Journal has been "to inform, inspire and unify a lively company of individuals and organizations interested in working for personal morality and public righteousness."

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We do not sell advertising space or otherwise commercialize the journal. We are funded by the financial gifts from our readers which is greatly needed, urgently solicited, and genuinely appreciated.

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Manuscripts that fulfill the purposes of Christian Ethics Today may be submitted (preferably as attachments to email) to the editor for publication consideration and addressed to: drpatanderson@gmail.com

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