

Christian Ethics Today

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Looking for Hope and Finding It

Patrick R. Anderson

Good news seems to be in short supply for me these days. Hopeful words of encouragement and inspiration get lost like water from a leaky faucet trickling into a vast desert. Meanwhile, the steady flow of malfeasance and prevarication almost washes me away me like water from a fire hydrant blasting water on already saturated soil. “Try to be more positive, look on the brighter side” I am told. Okay.

For this issue I have found some silver linings behind the troubling storm clouds of current events. While many other examples exist, I confess to not having sufficiently sought them heretofore. I offer calm and assuring words from two companions on the challenging journey that writers and readers of *Christian Ethics Today* travel. One is from a sister I met recently. The other is from a brother I have known for several years. Both are pastors.

I met Sarah Thomas, associate rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara, California, while reading her sermon on the Diana Butler Bass podcast, *The Cottage*.¹ My wife Carolyn had shared the written version with me as she often does. Sarah described the “awe that came upon everyone,” as recorded in Acts 2:43-47, or what she called “the spiritual high” the early believers experienced at Pentecost. The full sermon is published below, and I encourage everyone to read it. Part of what caught my attention is this:

During Holy Week this year, four humans left Earth, launched into space at 25,000 miles-per-hour to achieve a first for humanity: a mission around the back side of the moon. Some of you followed it closely. Some of you may have missed it in the flood of everything else. I'll admit, I was captivated. ...I was riveted to the live feed because the way they were all speaking to each other was so different from what I've become accustomed to hearing in public discourse. Apparently, I have become accustomed to snark, mistrust, disrespect, competition. But now I was hearing something different. There was humor. Competence. Supportive clear communication. Real teamwork. The mere words “copy that” made me tear up a little. (They said it a lot.) “Copy that”: “I hear you. I believe you. I will address that.” The Artemis II mission didn't just show us space. It showed us our better selves.

The second example comes from another podcast that I regularly listen to, *The Bulwark*², hosted by former Republican political operative and commentator, Tim Miller. Miller conducted an hour-long conversation with U.S. Senator and Ebenezer Baptist Church pastor, Raphael Warnock. I first met Warnock several years before he entered electoral politics, when we were both invited by fellow Baptist, Jimmy Carter, to meet regularly with him and others as part of Carter's project, “A New Baptist Covenant,” which in part sought to address the harmful and counter-productive divisions between the disparate understandings of the Gospel by those claiming the name “Baptist.” Representatives of all the Baptist denominations in America, except the Southern Baptist Convention, par-

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ticipated in these meetings. Carolyn and I worshipped at Ebenezer while we were in Atlanta for almost a year.

In the *Bulwark* conversation, Raphael Warnock addressed his personal approach to the Gospel of Jesus, the place of faith in public policy, and the role of religion in a free society. He spoke candidly about these things. When I first listened to that conversation, I found myself smiling, saying things out loud like “Yes!” “That's right!” “Preach it, Brother Raphael!” “Oh, my! I wish I'd said that!”

I came away from that experience joyful, hopeful, encouraged, motivated, elevated, inspired, blessed. I encourage everyone to listen to the podcast, or if you cannot, ask me for a transcript. I think you will be glad you did.

Tim Miller asked Warnock about what motivated him to run for the Senate, and now to serve:

Well, you know, look, I'm a pastor. I'm a Christian. And my faith is what drove me into this work. And the issues that you hear me talking about—health care, dealing with poverty—these are things that I talked about from my pulpit long before I entered a race for the Senate... you know, the scripture says everyone who cries Lord, Lord doesn't mean that they're going to enter in. And Donald Trump is many things. A man of faith, he certainly is not. And I think he mocks God. I think Donald Trump in the secret moments when behind closed doors, laughs at religious people. He's deeply cynical. He doesn't believe. He doesn't believe in anything other than himself and his own self-aggrandizement and self-enrichment; and, if religion gets in the way of that, he and J.D. Vance...they'll throw the Pope, the faith and everything else under the bus. I think Democrats should not be shy in owning their faith. There's a way to live out one's faith and talk about it that does not force it upon others in the public square.

So, part of what it means for me to be a person of faith is to recognize that I live both in my faith and under the law. And that this grand experiment we have, as we approach the 250th anniversary of the U.S., is that we are a diverse, multifaceted democratic republic that creates space for people to live freely in their various faith traditions. I think I owe it to the covenant we have with one another to speak up every time Islam is condemned and Muslims are condemned just for being Muslims, and to stand up for my Jewish sisters and brothers, and for those who claim no faith tradition at all...Here's how my faith lives in my work.

It's reality; it's not my creed. When I come to this office to do this work, it's not my creeds that I bring to the work. It's my values: Love, justice-making, truth-telling, empathy, centering on the poor. And guess what? Those are values that are

resonant in all of the great faith traditions and in people of moral courage who claim no faith at all. The covenant we have with one another is that we ought to be able to engage in that conversation in a respectful way and hopefully create something that looks like the kingdom of God, a country that's big enough to embrace all of our children.

Tim Miller asked about how he talks with his children about his jobs and the situations he faces:

I mean, I talk to them, but first of all, I just try to model the life that I want them to live. And I try to model kindness and love, and I teach them to respect their neighbor. And they learn about the faith. They're sitting there listening to their dad preach. They're not impressed.

It's in those quiet moments when I'm sitting with my daughter and my son, as my parents did with me right before bedtime, when I read the stories of our faith to them and we pray together and you hope that in the midst of that they get it, they

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catch it.

I think they're more likely to catch it than my giving it to them. And so, I try to live my life in a way that they catch what gives their dad hope even in a dark moment like this.

Selah. ■

1 <https://www.substack.com/dianabutlerbass>

2 <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/raphael-warnock-fight-for-your-democracy>

Planet Earth: Do You Copy?: How the Artemis II Mission Showed Us Our Better Selves.

Sarah D. Thomas

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.
(Acts 2:43-47).

Awe came upon everyone” – these people were experiencing a spiritual high. They were becoming a new kind of community in those post-Easter days. They called themselves “the Way.” A Greek word used to describe their life together is *koinonia*, which means fellowship, communion, shared life. To our ears their new way might sound simple, quaint or idealistic. But to Jesus’ early followers, it was electric. Risky. Brave. Awe had come upon them and they were reoriented to living differently.

We have all just lived through something like this, something electric, brave and risky.

During Holy Week this year, four humans left Earth, launched into space at 25,000 miles-per-hour to achieve a first for humanity: a mission around the back side of the moon. Some of you followed it closely. Some of you may have missed it in the flood of everything else. I’ll admit, I was captivated. I marveled that I was able to watch live video footage inside a space capsule floating 250,000 miles away from Earth.

The first thing that really hit me wasn’t the technology, but the *conversations* that took place between the astronauts in space and the scientists on the ground. The way they spoke to each other was respectful. Attuned. Intelligent. Kind. Even though I didn’t understand any of the scientific language they were using, I was riveted to the live feed because the way they were all speaking to each other was so different from what I’ve become accustomed to hearing in public discourse. Apparently, I have become accustomed to snark. Mistrust. Disrespect. Competition. But now I

was hearing something different. There was humor. Competence. Supportive clear communication. Real teamwork. The mere words “copy that” made me tear up a little. (They said it a lot.) “Copy that”: “I hear you. I believe you. I will address that.” The Artemis II mission didn’t just show us space. It showed us our better selves.

And then there was a moment I can’t forget: As the crew passed the farthest point from Earth any humans have traveled (a record set by Apollo 13 over 50 years ago), they paused to mark it – not with data or achievement, but with love. They wanted to name two craters on the moon. One they named “Integrity,” after

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the spirit of their mission. And the other they named “Carroll,” after the late wife of one of their crewmates, who had died a few years ago. “Copy that,” said mission control. At the moment they were the farthest yet from Earth, their first instinct was to care for one another.

I pulled my car over and watched them. Their voices wavered and there were some tears. They formed an unplanned group hug and their legs drifted upward in zero gravity, forming a web of connection. This moment spread quickly on social media. Suddenly the whole world was paying attention. Because when humans act like this, it draws us in. Their survival depended on it. They needed each other. They shared everything: tight quarters, weird space food, exhaustion, wonder. Together, they looked back at Earth, just a small blue crescent as they drifted behind the moon. It did something to them. And by extension, it did something to us.

When they returned and spoke at a press conference one day after “splashdown,” their words were unpolished and emotional. Astronaut Christina Koch said this: “What struck me wasn’t necessarily just tiny Earth; it was all the blackness around it. Earth was just this life boat hanging undisturbingly in the universe.”

And then she said something that sounds remarkably like our reading from the Book of Acts.

She said, “A crew is a group of people that is in it all the time no matter what, that is stroking together every minute with the same purpose, that is willing to sacrifice silently for each other, that gives grace, that holds accountable. A crew has the same cares and the same needs, and a crew is inescapably, beautifully, dutifully linked. I know I haven’t learned everything that this journey has yet to teach me, but there is one new thing I know. And that is: Planet Earth, you are a crew.”

Listen again to Acts:

“Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Awe came upon everyone. And it made them see life differently. Jesus’ followers experienced his risen presence in the days following that first Easter morning. It was shocking and surprising. And it changed them. It made them want to be together, to share all they had; to care for each other, to care for those in need. They had glad and generous hearts and had the goodwill of all the people. They became a crew.

This is what it means to be saved – not saved for some kind of afterlife, but to experience something in this life that leaves us in awe; to have our hearts opened to realities we often don’t see; to be filled with gladness and generosity; to let that spill over into the world. This is what being saved means. Those four astronauts experienced a kind of salvation, too. Awe came upon them. They were shaken into what is real: Earth is tiny, we need each other, and there is great love when we bear witness to that together.

On this Earth Day Sunday, could there be any better message for us to hear? We are here on this tiny lifeboat floating in space, together. One small fragile crew. And yet, we have a hard time living that way.

Every day we see division, greed, violence and systems that pull us apart.

But we’ve also seen something else: a mirror held up to us, reminding us of what is also true. Bill McKibben, a famous environmentalist, spoke at UCSB a few days ago. While his talk was full of sobering and alarming science regarding climate change, his message was also hopeful. Solar and wind energy are accelerating at a very fast pace. He said that the past 36 months have made all the difference in ways many of us don’t really see. The earth is producing roughly a third more power from the sun this spring than it was last spring. China is at warp-speed-ahead on solar energy. We are almost too late, but if we can continue to speed this up, we have the ability to make a difference for the future. The problem is, the progress is being slowed by those invested in fossil fuels.

A journalist summed up McKibben’s main point: “Time is short. The technology is here. The obstacle is power. Fortunately, sunlight is much harder to hoard – or to wage war over.”^[1] A student in the audience

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asked, “What can I do?” And McKibben replied, “We need to stop thinking of ourselves as individuals, as an ‘I,’ and join others. Join a movement.”

In other words, become a crew!

Astronaut Jeremy Hansen, in his little speech right after splashdown, asked his fellow astronauts to stand up there next to him. They put their arms around each other as he said,

“What you saw is a group of people who loved having meaningful contribution, and extracting joy out of that, and what we’ve been hearing is ... that was something special for you to witness. If you look up here, you’re not looking at us. We are a mirror reflecting you. And if you like what you see, then just look a little deeper. This is you.”

The Artemis II mission became a mirror reflecting ourselves back to us in a way we needed to see. We

saw teamwork, we saw sacrifice, we saw humble intelligence put to use for a greater good; we saw humans trembling with awe and wonder at the mystery of our universe, and we saw deep love. When I looked into that mirror, something in me shifted, and I haven't been able to shake it for days.

We must take care as we look into the mirrors that are around us. There are plenty that distort, magnifying fear, division and scarcity. But there are other mirrors that remind us who we are at our best, and mirrors that connect us to awe and the wonder of life itself. When the church is at its best, it gets to *be* one of those mirrors – a people of *koinonia*: a community of joy and shared life, with glad and generous hearts, sharing presence and resources with those in need, and reminding the people of the world that it is a crew, held together in the love of Christ.

“Awe came upon everyone” and reoriented them to

becoming a new kind of community.

Awe is a renewable resource! And one that we can easily harness if we cultivate it, if we become a crew. Our salvation depends on it.

Copy that? ■

Sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Santa Barbara, on the Sunday after Earth Day, April 26, 2026 by associate rector, The Rev. Sarah D. Thomas. This was first published by Diana Butler Bass in The Cottage on May 5, 2026 at substack.com/dianabutler-bass and is reprinted here with permission.

[1] Ella Heydenfeldt, “‘Here Comes the Sun’ Author Bill McKibben Shares Climate Message, with Gallows Humor and Hope, at UC Santa Barbara,” *Santa Barbara Independent*, April 22, 2026.

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Artificial Intelligence (A.I.), Christian Education & Human Dignity

Mark Osler

Big money is pouring into the effort to convince us that A.I. can make everything better: Business presentations, sermons, teachers' lesson plans, cooking—well, pretty much everything. But there is a risk to the soul in all this, both the soul of our own beings and the soul of our society. As someone whose vocation is rooted in faith, I'm compelled to throw a red flag of caution amid the cascade of marketing.

I recently attended a session on artificial intelligence and law school teaching at a large symposium. There was clearly a divide among those attending: Some were excited about the potential of A.I. to make teaching more efficient, while others were frustrated by students who used A.I. to write their assignments. The presenter eagerly showed off tools that allow a professor to use A.I. to first create prompts for a student essay, then grade the resulting efforts and offer comments on what could be improved. A voice behind me began to murmur. "So, where we're at," a woman said, "is that A.I. will prompt the students, the students will use A.I. to write the essay, and then A.I. will grade it?"

A long, still silence followed. What we were contemplating was a dystopian future where the professors didn't teach and the students didn't learn; instead, computers would simply simulate the entire educational dialectic. Not only is there no room for human dignity, but there is no real human involvement at all.

As a teacher at a faith-based institution, I found the prospect particularly disheartening. Our mission statement sets out an ambitious goal, instructing that "The University of St. Thomas School of Law, as a Catholic law school, is dedicated to integrating faith and reason in the search for truth through a focus on morality and social justice." And here is the funny thing about that mission statement: People take it seriously. Actual disputes are resolved among the faculty by referring to it. Every year, we give out awards to those who live and work according to each principle. Sadly, none of it—faith, reason, truth, morality, social justice—is easily propelled by artificial intelligence, which is fundamentally amoral by design. It is a machine for brutal efficiency.

A.I. enthusiasts argue that it can make the art of teaching more efficient and, that if we teach our students how to use it, we are preparing them for the future. Sure, we teachers can use A.I. to create our

prompts and do our grading, then insist that students not use A.I. to do their work. Unfortunately, that demand is nearly impossible to enforce, especially as A.I. improves at the task of writing student essays. But there is a deeper problem. It is what we model—that is, what the students see us *do*-- as much as what we *say* that teaches. If students see us relying on A.I. to do our work, it sends a strong message about what is allowable and desirable. We lose the moral authority to insist that they do their own work and expose their own authenticity when we are passing off our own deeply human tasks to computers.

While I understand the appeal of A.I. to businesses,

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where the efficiencies of A.I. can create greater profits, teaching isn't about profits and learning is rarely about efficiency, particularly if the learning we are pushing for has a faith component. It's not efficient to struggle through developing a personal theology, understanding great literature, or work through successive drafts of an essay, but it is in that inefficient struggle that actual learning occurs. It's like bodybuilding; you must do the repetitive, time-consuming work to have the muscle. Taking a pill or pressing a button on a keyboard just isn't the same as sweating in the gym or reading *Moby Dick* and struggling through its meaning.

For those of us in institutions of faith, the need to push students to engage in the rough edges of learning is even more important, as we are adding an additional layer of meaning to the material taught at every school. Faith, after all, is in part something that is *felt* rather than merely thought; machines just can't go there with us, as churches are learning. Not long ago, I

sat in a pew listening to a sermon that was particularly flat and vaporous, given by a very young Episcopal priest. After the third or fourth cliché, it came to me: I was listening to a product of A.I. I recognized the same soullessness that we see in student papers. When Jesus taught, those in the audience went away in joy or angry or baffled. The A.I. sermon threatens none of that.

As with preaching, the cost of A.I.'s replacing teaching and learning is profound, and not just to the individuals who never learn to read deeply and write authentically. What can be lost to our society is the ability to tell stories that reveal the nooks and crannies of lives where our humanity is inscribed. It is those stories that are at the center of our culture and identities, that make great art worthwhile, that mark a book or movie or television show as meaningful.

My father was an artist, and I loved to watch him paint a portrait (another function that A.I. can now replace) from a photo he clipped to the edge of his canvas. Often, he chose to paint outside, on an easel set up next to the garage or on a rock outside a cabin. He took great joy in watching the person he was painting appear and become real as his own t-shirt, jeans, face and arms became daubed with color. There was always a story in the finished work, something beyond the static image of a person. It was never purely representational, like a photograph; but he said that imperfections and what he added let it be "realer than real." Truth is in that roughness, he taught me.

The following generations of my family are full of educators, and the frustration with A.I. is real and overwhelming when we gather. The near-effortless creation of an A.I. essay replaces everything a student is supposed to do in many courses: read a book, discern meaning, and write about it. Instructors at every level are now inundated with mediocre essays written by A.I. When students are caught doing this, they are sometimes confused by the condemnation they receive by instructors. They simply don't understand why they are in trouble for not writing their own work. Having watched so many messages promoting A.I., the prospect of a computer accomplishing the task of writing an essay bearing their name doesn't feel like cheating to them—rather, it is just the way things work, and exactly what they want to be trained to do.

Of course, it is not just faith and education that are at risk as computers take over our interpersonal relationships. A growing industry¹ provides lonely people with fake-friend chatbots that the user can program to be "agreeable," "introverted" or "violent," with some platforms reporting user engagement for over an hour every day. Perhaps more troubling still is the

trend towards computers taking over things like denying medical insurance claims², even as denials reach record highs.

All of it is driven by money. Tech companies are investing about \$1 trillion—that's \$1,000,000,000,000—on A.I. according to Goldman Sachs³, and the marketing messages seeking to ensure that this investment yields sufficient returns are already inundating us. We are being told that A.I. is the future, but not much about what that future will look like for our families and towns and beautifully imperfect human relationships. Decades ago, Wal-Mart was the future of retail, which turned out to include hollowed-out downtowns lined with shuttered storefronts. Then smart phones were the future, and that included the end of eye contact at too many meals. Each new well-marketed development increases profits and efficiency but pulls apart our social fabric (including our connection to institutions of faith). A.I. forthrightly promises to be the biggest change of all.

Within education, the A.I. revolution threatens to

Yes, facts will be conveyed, but so many fewer truths. Our challenge as educators should not be to help tech companies promote A.I.; it should be to teach students alternatives to A.I.—like writing your own damn essay.

extinguish those charged with preserving our human dignity: the storytellers. For Christians, the faith is centered on a remarkable storyteller; it's not for nothing that Jesus taught through parables that remain relevant to us today, rather than simply laying out rules, arguments, and platitudes. The gift of imbuing a story with what is genuine, beautiful, true and awkward will be lost when we delegate that task to computers. Yes, facts will be conveyed, but so many fewer truths. Our challenge as educators should not be to help tech companies promote A.I.; it should be to teach students alternatives to A.I.—like writing your own damn essay.

Part of my work as a professor is leading a small clinic that prepares clemency petitions for people in prison. The work I do with my students in our clemency clinic is entirely consistent with both the Constitution (and its pardon clause) and the faith mission of my school, which is centered around a Savior

who taught that when you visit those in prison, you visit him. In that sense, my students have a sacred task: they will tell a story that may be a key to literal freedom, or at least to a recognition of human dignity that people in prison rarely receive. My students must spend two days with our client in prison before they begin to write. The world knows one part of that imprisoned person's life-- the crime-- and our job is to tell the rest of it. The stories they come back with are never simple or linear. The lines are crooked and

broken and veer into deep vulnerability for both the imprisoned subject and the student storyteller. In that process of telling a story lies our deepest humanity, our connection to God and to neighbor, and it is there that A.I. imperils us most. ■

Mark Osler is a professor at The University of St. Thomas School of Law and is a frequent contributor to Christian Ethics Today.

Sharing Around the Campfire

Christian Ethics Today depends on financial support from our readers. As you consider your personal stewardship of your resources, please consider the importance and quality of the content of the journal, and the efforts of the wide array of progressive Christian (and other) writers who share their informed insights with us. As our friend and long-time supporter, the late Bill Moyers, said:

“Look upon these pages as you would a campfire, around which we gather to share our life experiences—the stories, ideals, and hopes unique to our understanding of faith. Then imagine what we lose if the fire goes out.” ...Bill Moyers

After Old Testament Virtue: Retrieving YHWH Christology for Ethics

David E. Wilhite

Two challenges in contemporary theology normally not thought to be related, need to be revisited. The first is how Jesus has been disconnected from the Old Testament depiction of God. The second is how contemporary Christian ethicists have been unable to use the Old Testament for constructive purposes.

As for the first problem, most modern Christians assume that Jesus does not appear until the Gospels. In this way of thinking, the God of the Old Testament is the Father. Jesus may be prophesied, foreshadowed or prefigured, but he is distinct from the God of Israel.¹ This view, however, is a modern invention. Ancient Christians assumed virtually the opposite: all Old Testament theophanies are Christophanies.² When this was normative, Christians encountered Jesus directly throughout their canon.

As for the second problem, alongside the rise of historical critical readings of the Bible, Christians had to rethink how to accommodate the accounts of God in the Old Testament in relation to moral theology. The images of a jealous God (jealousy, remember, is a vice, not a virtue) who commands things like genocide were relegated to the context of the Bronze Age. Thus, the Old Testament God's command to "be holy as I am holy" (Lev 19:2) became something affirmed only in the abstract, not in specifics.

In what follows, both of these losses will be traced to show how we arrived at our current state. The joint solution I will offer, is a retrieval of YHWH Christology. YHWH Christology, put simply, is the classical Christian belief that Jesus is the "Lord" who appeared to Israel. Recently, a few New Testament scholars have approached this position. At least, some have acknowledged that "YHWH texts" from the Old Testament are applied to Jesus by some New Testament authors.³ Or, they can speak of the way that Jesus shares the "divine identity" or how he is "mapped onto" the divine identity.⁴ Or, they can describe Gospel writers as depicting Jesus "as" or "like" YHWH.⁵ To take these insights to their logical conclusion, the way most ancient Christians did, one would simply say that Jesus *is* the "Lord" of the Old Testament.⁶ However, since even these scholars do not do so, and since Jesus is seen to be the Son of the God of Israel, not the God who appeared to Israel, the

distinction, if not an outright Marcionite disconnection, remains.

To see this more fully, I will now explain what I mean by the loss of biblical ethics by tracing the history of biblical interpretation. Then, after we see what and how we lost biblical ethics, I will offer some ways forward to reclaiming biblical ethics once again by showing the possibilities that open up when reading in light of YHWH Christology.

Biblical Ethics...Lost

How have we lost our ability to read the Old Testament in a way that can provide ethical guidance

It is widely acknowledged that Protestant ethics usually entail some sort of contrast, or at least tension, between Law and Gospel, works and grace. More generally, Protestants along with Catholic and Orthodox Christians, usually base their ethics on the teachings of Jesus in particular, not on the whole of biblical canon.

to Christians? That story is complex and long, but it can be summed up by looking at key developments in modernity. It is widely acknowledged that Protestant ethics usually entail some sort of contrast, or at least tension, between Law and Gospel, works and grace. More generally, Protestants along with Catholic and Orthodox Christians, usually base their ethics on the teachings of Jesus in particular, not on the whole of biblical canon. It is important to note in this last clause that there is already a built-in assumption that Jesus' teachings are only found in the Gospels, while the teachings found in the Old Testament are those of the Father. After all, there are no red letters in your Old Testament!⁷ With this came a larger problem of how to read the scriptures, especially the Old

Testament in a theological framework, instead of a strictly historical-critical one.

How did Christians lose a theological reading of their Old Testament? Let us go back and see how the earliest Christians interpreted Israel's scriptures, and from there we can better trace where things went wrong. We will first begin with the earliest recorded Christian interpreter of Israel's scriptures, the Apostle Paul.

Paul famously makes a distinction between the spirit and the letter: "...ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). Not only does Paul identify a spiritual reading, he demonstrates how to apply one. One key example is in 1 Corinthians 9, when he stipulates,

*For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop.*⁸

Note that Paul refers to the Law (Deut. 25:4), but instead of reading it in its historical context, Paul applies this to his audience. On a literal historical level, the author of Deuteronomy seems to be giving ancient Israelites advice about how to care for livestock, but Paul assumes that God was not merely doing that. To expand Paul's question ("Is it for oxen that God is concerned?"), the apostle seems to be implicitly asking, "Did God speak forth an infallible, authoritative, inspired utterance in order to explain to Israel how to care for a *literal* ox?" Then, he provides the explicit answer to his rhetorical question, for which his audience surely already knows the answer: this Law was "written for our sake," that is, for the audience of Paul's time. Paul does not in any way deny the historical meaning (as if one *should* muzzle the ox when it is treading out grain), and so I take him to be assuming a two-fold reading: a reading according to the letter, and a reading according to the Spirit.

Paul's reading established precedent for later Christian interpreters. One key example is found in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (c.135). In fact, there are key items in Paul's comments from 1 Corinthians 9 that appear in (Pseudo-)Barnabas and other later interpreters. First, in the example from 1 Corinthians 9 cited above, Paul (coincidentally?!) speaks about himself and Barnabas.⁹ Second, immediately after offering his two-fold reading of the Law, Paul makes explicit the distinction between "material things" and "spiritual things."¹⁰ This is important because in the *Epistle of*

Barnabas the author repeatedly makes the same distinction and follows Paul's formula for how to read the scriptures in a two-fold way – that is, a material and a spiritual way. For example, after citing texts about Zion's hope in "a precious stone" (*Ep. Barn.* 6.2, citing Isa 28:16), (Pseudo-)Barnabas opines, "Does our hope, then rest on a rock? By no means! But he says this because the Lord has established his flesh in strength" (*Ep. Barn.* 6.3). Notice, this follows the same line of questioning as Paul: cite a scripture about a literal/material item (ox/stone); then ask if this is (just) about a literal/material item (ox/stone), then answer that is not (only) and offer a spiritual reading (in addition). While we must admit that the *Epistle of Barnabas* is filled with examples of what we would deem problematic interpretations, at the heart of the text's hermeneutic is the attempt to see beyond the "according to the flesh" meaning and find the "according to the Spirit" meaning, which is to follow Paul's practice.¹¹

Soon after the *Epistle of Barnabas*, this two-fold reading is first explicitly explained to outsiders by Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (c.155). Trypho, a Jew, challenges Justin's claim to follow the law of Moses, since Justin's community does not follow food and sabbath laws. Justin has several responses, many of which are problematic for their supersessionist and antisemitic claims.¹² We must not sweep those under the rug, because contemporary Christian interpreters must do better. Even so, for us to do better, we can look to the logic, and not just the rhetoric, of Justin's claim. He insists that Trypho and his fellow Jews follow the law according to the flesh, while Christians follow the law according to the spirit. In other words, the basic hermeneutic for Christians is that of a two-fold reading of scripture which sees beyond the fleshly/literal meaning in order to see a spiritual/theological meaning.

A century after Justin, this two-fold reading is famously expanded by Origen of Alexandria into a three-fold reading. In this way of thinking, between the fleshly and the spiritual is the "psychic" or soulful reading, so that scripture corresponds to humans' body, soul, and spirit (cf., 1 Thess. 5:23), and thus the soul layer has to do with the moral or ethical meaning of the text.¹³ It is curious, however, that Origen says precious little about the soul meaning. In fact, Origen scholars have long known that this threefold reading is somewhat of a misnomer.¹⁴ In his *On First Principles*, he mentions this correlation to the body, soul and spirit of humanity, but he nowhere defines the meaning related to the soul. In contrast, when one looks at Origen's sermons and commentaries, he is actually employing a twofold reading. This is to say that in

practice, as part of his spiritual interpretation, Origen also finds the ethical implication. When doing so, at least in his best moments, Origen derives the ethical implication from the spiritual meaning of scripture, not the fleshly. This, I think is an important distinction for interpreters today who would recover a Christian reading. If one reads an Old Testament passage in a strictly historical framework, and then attempts to find the moral meaning, one likely bases the “moral of the story” on the human characters, which is potentially disastrous with many biblical passages. Origen looks to the divine persona in the text: we learn about morality from God’s character, not the human characters. I will return to this ethical reading below.

At this point, we should continue down the history of hermeneutics to note the shift from Origen’s threefold (or in practice, twofold) to the fourfold reading of the Middle Ages. John Cassian (d. 435) added the eschatological reading to the text, so that the four readings come to be known as the literal (historical), tropological (ethical), allegorical (theological), and anagogical (eschatological). While said fourfold reading does become popular and normative in the Middle Ages, it should be noted that these readings are more like available options for most interpreters, and not a checklist that every sermon or commentary must address. What is more, this alleged fourfold reading is, like Origen’s alleged threefold reading, somewhat of a misnomer. When pressed, it is clear that the medieval thinkers understood a basic twofold distinction for scripture: the letter and the spirit, and the latter could then be subdivided or understood in different ways. The major teachers of this approach, from Cassian to Thomas Aquinas and beyond, agree that the allegorical, tropological and anagogical are part of the “spiritual” meaning.¹⁵ This is because, when seeing beyond the historical meaning (the so-called “literal”), one can also see Christ in the text (especially via YHWH Christology) and, since Christ is divine, one sees the character of God in the text (the theological or “allegorical”), and from God’s character one derives both what our character should be (the moral or “tropological”) and our ultimate hope (the eschatological or “anagogical”).

At this point, however, we have to admit that the patristic and medieval writers displayed their fair share of problematic applications of this methodology. This is especially true for late medieval allegories, which eventually prompted the Protestant reaction to them (or, arguably, an overreaction to them). One notorious example is when Pope Innocent III (1161-1216) writes to some of the nobility in Europe and sets up an allegorical reading of Genesis so that the sun rep-

resents the higher papal authority while the moon represents royal, but lesser, power.¹⁶ Of course, not only did kings not always agree with the pope’s allegorical interpretation, later Protestant kings in particular rejected this. In the 16th century, Martin Luther uses this claim from Pope Innocent as an example of the kind of problems inherent in allegorical readings. Namely, Catholics are able to read the Old Testament and see the papacy, the seven sacraments and everything needed to support Roman Catholic claims over Protestants. Protestants, unsurprisingly, are unconvinced by such biblical claims.¹⁷

When facing such Catholic allegories, Protestants responded by throwing the baby out with the bathwater – not literally, of course (see what I did there?!). The fourfold reading, or really any reading that sees beyond the historical sense, was known as the *sensus plenior*, the fuller sense. Protestants rejected this understanding and instead insisted on the *sensus literalis*, the literal sense. Now here it needs to be stipulated that none of the magisterial Reformers rejected Christological reading of scripture. Instead, they claimed to reject allegorical reading, in favor of what is claimed to be the plain sense of scripture which retained the ability to “see” Christ in the Old Testament.¹⁸ The central dispute is the need to prevent any Roman Catholic ecclesiology or soteriology from being “read into” the scriptures.¹⁹ Nevertheless, despite this rejection of “allegory” in theory, in practice the Reformers largely continued offering at least a twofold reading of scripture. From this point forward, without a clear rationale for what seems to be an inconsistent application of allegorical readings, later Protestants come to insist that the literal sense is always the historical sense.²⁰

By limiting scripture to only the historical meaning, Protestants eventually lost the tropological or ethical sense of scripture altogether. This was especially true when many Protestants began to accept Rationalism. The Anglican bishop, Joseph Butler (1692–1752), for example, understood the scriptures to be bound up with primitive thinking, and thus it was the task of theologians to interpret the “Natural Religion” revealed therein as something applicable to all times and places. In a similar vein, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) believed that the moral truths found in scripture could and should be exhumed from scripture itself and taught in a philosophically universal sense, so that one has “Transcendental Idealism.” The most famous example of this kind of maneuver is probably the so-called “Jefferson Bible,” which Thomas Jefferson (1743-1846) made by literally (yes, literally) cutting and pasting what he thought were the teachings that

still applied to the modern world, an act he described as mining “diamonds from the dunghill”! More impactful was the work of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), who believed the scriptures could be shown to teach a Universal Moral Kingdom, but only once they were properly historically contextualized so that said context could be swept away. Likewise, Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) famously championed the idea that the Gospel is the “kernel” that should be kept after the “husk” of ancient Judaism was peeled away.

Once Christian thinkers in general and modern Rationalists in particular decided on what is and what is not godly, then when these biblical scholars look back at scripture, especially Old Testament scripture, they saw a God who is not ethical. For example, God says over and over again, “I am a jealous God” (e.g., Exod 20:5). Jealousy is a vice, not a virtue. And so scholars must look to the text’s original context, where one sees Bronze Age people thinking like Bronze Age people, and assuming the same mentality in their god. The text and its content are dubbed primitive, provincialist, tribalist and unevolved, and thereby one has lost the ability to read the Bible for ethical guidance. Instead, these problematic texts were deemed to be products of history, and the problematic historical content, via the historical critical method, could be swept into the dustbin of history (figuratively speaking), while transcendental ideals were all that would remain. The irony here is that this sounds much like the genealogy of allegory so many of these same scholars would give to discredit pre-modern approaches: Plato’s abstract concepts were used to determine which texts about God need re-interpreted. Be that as it may, in modern critical approaches, ethics preceded interpretation, not the other way around.

Of course, not all Protestants agreed with the Rationalists and their conclusions, but in large part even the Fundamentalists who refuted them remained trapped (figuratively) in a historical framework. Thus, Fundamentalist scholars had to debate whether or not the world was created in six literal days, or whether Jonah was a literal person who was swallowed by a literal fish before being spat up on “the land” (cf., Jonah 2:10; Gen. 1:10) on “the third day” (cf., Jonah 1:17; Gen. 1:13). In the meantime, the ethical implication of the Old Testament is eclipsed by the concern for the historical truthfulness of the texts. All energy is devoted to understanding the text in terms of historicity, and so—at best—a shallow moralistic reading can be derived from the historical figures in the text. In short, biblical ethics, like Paradise, was lost. How then, can biblical ethics be regained?

Biblical Ethics...Regained

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a series of renewal movements arose in Christianity, largely as a reaction to the overly modernistic forms of Christian thinking reviewed above.²¹ These renewal movements all entailed a call to reclaim sources and thought from early Christianity in general, and with that call came a desire to retrieve pre-modern exegesis in particular. Many thinkers from these movements have provided helpful ways forward in this area, and so they deserve to be mentioned here in order to give credit where credit is due. What is more, and what is rarely acknowledged, is how each of these movements also resulted in a renewed interest in biblical ethics.

The first is the Oxford Movement, which began in the 19th century Church of England. Its proponents, like John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey, began publishing a series of essays entitled *Tracts for the Times* (1833-1841), which earned them the label “Tractarians.” In these essays, the authors called for Christians to reclaim the thought and practice of the ancient church. One of their major contributions was the Library of the Fathers series, which eventually was adopted and republished in the series known today as the Ante-Nicene Fathers. The movement dissipated when many of its key proponents, like Newman, left the Anglican Church and became Roman Catholic. Even so, their efforts had a significant impact on the Church of England and the wider Protestant movement. It is also interesting to note one outcome of this movement in terms of ethical social action. Many Tractarians who remained in the Church of England were seen as suspect (“Popish”) and so denied the more prestigious appointments. Instead, many served in economically depressed areas, which caused them to help form the Christian Social Union in 1889.²² The correlation between reclaiming ancient Christian readings and adapting to new moral demands recurs in other examples of retrieval movements that follow.

Another retrieval movement emerged in the early 20th century in Catholic France. It became known as “Nouvelle théologie,” despite its proponents calling for a return to the older sources. This retrieval is summed up by the French term, “ressourcement.” While many Protestants tend to assume that all Catholic thinkers rely on patristic sources, the reality has often been different for Roman Catholic scholars. The so-called “new” theologians found that Thomistic and Neoscholastic thought had overshadowed the more ancient Christian views and practices. Therefore, their theological works sought to retrieve an ancient Christian hermeneutic for the modern church. Like the English Tractarians, they also produced a series

of patristic writings translated into French (along with critical editions) in the series named *Sources Chrétiennes* (1942-). Although this movement primarily affected Roman Catholic thought, it has also had a wider impact on many Protestants.²³ Another comparison with the Oxford movement is the fact that many in the Nouvelle théologie movement also spoke out against social injustices and issued calls for political action.²⁴ It is widely recognized that liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Oscar Romero studied in Europe at the height of this movement and were influenced by it. Once again, we have a tie between the retrieval of the ancient and the promotion of the ethical. Another key example of a retrieval movement is the “New Yale School of Theology” or “postliberal” theology. The movement is influenced by Karl Barth, who himself had delved deeply into patristic sources,²⁵ but its leading proponents were Americans George Lindbeck²⁶ and Hans Frei.²⁷ The notion of *post*-liberalism reflects a specific concern with the German Liberal approach to higher criticism: the Yale school did not reject historical critical studies as incorrect, but they did deem that approach to be insufficient. As part of their efforts to supplement the historicizing approach of modernity, they turned to pre-modern sources for support.²⁸ Once again there is a connection here to social concerns in general and virtue ethics in particular. For example, one of the most famous students of the Yale school was Stanley Hauerwas, who incorporated the narrational approach into his system of virtue ethics.²⁹

Finally, we come to a loosely connected group of thinkers that can be labelled Evangelical Catholics. That title was championed by Lutheran theologians Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson who impacted many others through their promotion of ecumenical dialogue. Because Evangelicals and conservative Roman Catholics found they share most core doctrines (while still disagreeing largely in terms of ecclesiology and soteriology), the patristic sources and practices offered common ground for dialogue. Other Evangelicals who shared a desire for ecumenical dialogue and the value of ancient tradition should be mentioned here as well. Thomas Oden (also a student of the Yale school) preferred the term “Paleo-Orthodoxy,”³⁰ and many like Robert E. Webber championed the category of the “Ancient-Future Church.” At this point, we are dealing with too diffuse of a movement to make any generalizations about ties between Evangelical-Catholic and Paleo-Orthodox concerns and social implications; suffice it to say that there are numerous examples where their retrieval of ancient Christian sources also coincided with ethical concerns.³¹

These various retrieval movements, therefore, have provided a road-map (not literally) for ways to reclaim a Christian reading of the scriptures and, in particular, a recovery of an ethical reading of the Old Testament. In what follows, I will first address two false premises that need to be understood before reclaiming a theological reading of scripture, followed by a brief look at the Psalms as a case study to an alternative approach that allows for a multi-layered reading.

When reclaiming a Christian reading of the Old Testament for ethical purposes, we need to acknowledge two false premises. First, when Protestants claim the literal interpretation, they tend to refer to a historical meaning. This premise, however, is born out of modernistic thinking. In this way of defining the literal meaning, how can the interpreter navigate different genres of literature like apocalypticism, parables and prophetic poetry? When trapped in a definition of truth that thinks only in terms of historicity, both fundamentalists and liberals are doomed to fighting the wars mentioned above about literal six-day creation and literal interpretations of Jonah, not to mention the literal interpretation of apocalyptic texts like Revelation. The early church (along with the Jewish Rabbinic tradition) never denied the historicity of these events out of skepticism about miracles; instead, they openly read these texts as parabolic and figurative. What is the “literal” meaning of a “literary” text? It is often not the kind discovered only with the tools of a historian. In short, we are dealing with something more aligned with the humanities than with the sciences.

A second false premise for Protestants in modernity is that texts only have one meaning. This is a modernistic idea. Reading a poem, one finds multiple layers of meaning: different meanings to different readers; different meanings to the same reader under different life circumstances, etc. To ask what is *the* meaning of a certain poem, the answer in part depends on what one is looking for in that meaning and it depends on a variety of factors. While this is intuitive to most people when it comes to poems, it is not obvious to modern Protestants when reading the Old Testament – despite the fact that the majority of our Old Testament is in poetic form!³² Once we acknowledge that it is a false premise to claim that a text only has one meaning, we can turn to Old Testament texts and allow for various layers of meanings. Let us take the book of Psalms as a case study.

When it comes to the Psalms, we should acknowledge that our inability to read the Psalms as Christians is one of the biggest losses in modernity, and this likely started when we lost our ability to sing the Psalms

since we lost the inherent poetic nature of the genre. If the Psalms are not within arm's reach in the library of one's mind, then the Psalms will not shape daily activity and imagination, including our imagination when reading the rest of the scriptures. Ancient Christians continued Israel's practice of using the Psalter as their primary hymnbook. Therefore, they repeatedly voiced their prayers in words shaped by the Psalms.

How did the ancients interpret the Psalms since they were so familiar with them? Well, if we were to ask them who is the *Ego* or speaker of the Psalms, early Christians would acknowledge that it is—generally—David. These are, after all, the “Psalms of David.” This is not to ignore all the exceptions, where the psalms themselves identify additional authors, which the early church knew and accepted. It is to say they are—in some way—*of* David. So as to who is the speaker of the psalm, in general the early Christians know it to be the human author, David. And yet, that is not whole of it. Who else is singing these Psalms? As just mentioned, it is Israel's hymnbook. So, David (et al.) originally penned the Psalms, and Israel continued to pray them, making Israel corporately the *Ego* of the text.

Then again, at another level, most early Christians likely would not start with David or Israel, but instead would begin by seeing Jesus is the speaker in the Psalms (e.g., *1 Clem.* 16.15). In cases like Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” this is easy for us moderns to accept because we know that historically Jesus did pray this from the cross (Matt. 27:46). Notice in this particular case, we might say, Jesus *literally* voiced the psalm. However, for the early church, this is only the start: Jesus can be understood to be the speaker of virtually every psalm. This works on several levels: Jesus is the Son of David, the fulfillment of the messianic hopes of David's royal line, and Jesus is the embodiment of Israel. Some early Christians like Augustine even have a way to attributing the psalms of repentance to Jesus, while remaining committed to the Christ's personal sinlessness: Christ as the head the church confesses and repents on behalf of his sinful body.³³

This brings us to another layer found in the Psalms: the church is also the speaker. As Christ's body, the church prays through these texts, and as the ongoing spiritual Israel (cf., Gal. 6:16), the Psalter continues to be the people of God's hymnbook. Even that, however, does not exhaust the layers of the meaning in the psalms: the speaker of the Psalm can be the church corporately and also a soul individually. Since individuals within the church also memorize these psalms and pray them privately, the speaker can be any indi-

vidual believer. Psalm 42:1, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God,” applies to anyone who prays it in faith.

Now, if one holds the false premise that texts have only one meaning, then one would have to look at this list as if it were a multiple-choice test: Who is the speaker of the psalms? a. David, b. Israel, c. Jesus, d. the church, e. the soul. However, for ancient and medieval Christians, the answer is “f. all of the above”! In short, the notion that a text's meaning is found at the historical-literal level, and that texts only have one meaning are false assumptions.

With these false and modernistic premises removed, we can point to the shape of a Christian ethic that will be based on a theological reading of the scriptures, both Old and New. I stated above that Origen in practice thinks more in terms of a twofold reading of scripture, with the understanding that the spiritual/theological meaning can then provide the content for our moral formation – what in his *On First Principles* is called the “soul” meaning. What kind of moral system or ethical framework should we expect from a Christian reading?

In general, ethicists speak of three kinds of moral systems: deontological, consequentialist and virtue ethics. Let me briefly assess the prospects of each in relation to a Christian reading of the Old Testament. While we might expect a Christian reading of scripture to produce a deontological approach, especially if we are to give equal voice to the Old Testament and its many commandments, I suggest that this is in fact not the kind of ethics that will result from our project.³⁴ What is the basis for such moral laws? Are they arbitrarily chosen by God? If not, are these moral absolutes that constrain even God? Such a view would make God beholden to concepts like justice. Instead, for Christianity, God is absolutely free, and the human understanding of justice is in fact dependent on God's character. Furthermore, deontological ethics would be incredibly problematic if we imagined that there are simply abstract philosophical principles that govern morality independent of the developments of history. We certainly could not expect to discover the kind of deontological ethics that Kant taught (mentioned above), wherein once the moral imperatives of the scriptures are mined they can be taught and practiced apart from their original casing in Israel's scriptures – what Jefferson called the “dunghill” and Harnack called the discardable “husk.”

Next, the second moral system, consequentialist, can be promptly set aside. Christians cannot understand morality as a utilitarian or pragmatic approach to weighing what means are justified by certain ends.

This is not to say that Christians should ignore consequentialist considerations altogether,³⁵ but that these cannot be the basis for a wider approach to ethics. We are left, then, to consider virtue ethics.

To put it succinctly, in virtue ethics if one wishes to do what is right, then one should attempt to do what a virtuous person would do. Making the right choice should become a habit, and one's habits form one's character. Aristotle lists the four cardinal virtues as prudence, justice, temperance and courage. The only question is how does one define these concepts. Early Christian writers like Augustine supplement Aristotle here. First, they add three more virtues, faith, hope and love – making the seven heavenly virtues a counter to the seven deadly sins. What is more important than the exact number or the addition of the theological virtues, is the way all seven should be defined for Christians: Christians know what justice is by looking to the character of God revealed in Christ. God is a just God, so we look to God's character in order to know how to be just people. God is love, so we look to God's character in order to know how to be loving people.

This idea is probably one of the most common statements in the Bible, especially in the Hebrew scriptures. Repeatedly, God calls the people to imitate divine virtue: "Speak to all the congregation of the Israelites and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."³⁶ Of course, God also gives commandments. Yes, God gives all kinds of laws and rituals and things that are in place. God even inspires books of wisdom that provide us with something like consequentialist reasoning.³⁷ Even so, these deontological and consequentialist elements all fall under the larger virtue ethic of scripture: namely, the role that the narrative of Israel's Lord remaining faithful to the covenant in keeping with God's own divine virtue. Therefore, a truly biblical ethic will take the shape of virtue ethics, ethics determined by God's character. Thus, it would be folly to try to mine a deontological ethic out of the biblical narrative, as the modern Rationalists did.

At this point, we should take stock of the alternatives. In a modern Protestant rationalist way of thinking, the task of finding divine virtue in the Old Testament is difficult at best. The Old Testament God, to the modern reader, often looks unvirtuous. How are we to address the scriptures and honestly draw from it something like a virtue ethic? This is precisely where YHWH Christology can help. If Jesus is not YHWH, then we could easily slip into some kind of neo-Marcionism or neo-Modalism: The Old Testament God is the Father, but we follow the character of the New

Testament God, the Son. If, however, we embrace YHWH Christology, we have to reject any kind of Marcionite or Modalist contrast between the character of God in the Old Testament and the character of God in the New Testament.

Even so, what are we to do with difficult passages in the Old Testament where God seems less than virtuous? This begs the question: how do we know that certain actions should be deemed unvirtuous? For Christians, certain behaviors are known to be less than virtuous, not because we have some sort of abstract philosophical principle that we impose on the text. Certain passages' depiction of God are known to be less than virtuous because of God's own standard of virtue revealed in those same scriptures. Obviously, working out all the details of this kind of virtue ethic is beyond what I can accomplish here, but I can point to promising possibilities. When we see something that looks like an unvirtuous representation of God, we first examine what this text is saying at its most basic, historical, fleshly level. But then we remember that this is only one layer of the text's meaning! God told Abraham to perform a child sacrifice, which likely—in its original, pre-canonical context—reflects a socio-religious milieu wherein child sacrifice to appease a deity was normal. Even so, Abraham seems to trust that there must be more to see here, for he tells his servant that he and Isaac will return (Gen 22:5; cf., Heb 11:19). Therefore, when we read seemingly unloving statements about God's actions toward Israel, which can be found throughout the all the books of history and especially in the prophets, then we read these in light of the deeper meanings we find revealed in God's unfailing, never-changing, covenantal love for Israel, which is also found throughout the books of history and the prophets, not to mention the writings.³⁸ The point is that we do not need to apologize for a depiction of God as it is apparently unvirtuous in any given passage, nor do we need to dismiss it as historically bound and irrelevant (if not un-inspired). Nor do we need to allegorize it in the way allegory allegedly does (i.e., the bad kind of allegory so often maligned in modernity). Instead, we acknowledge the historically situated nature of the text while also seeing beyond this situatedness to the other layers of meaning in the same text.

Let us take the example of Job. Throughout the body of this text, Job repeatedly calls for God to appear and answer Job's petition. God is put on trial. This is a stunning event: is there any corollary where a Bronze Age king tolerates this tone from one of his subjects? Much less, does any Bronze Age god allow himself to be summoned down from a heavenly throne to answer

the demands of a mere mortal? And yet that is exactly what Job's God does allow: "God comes in awesome majesty" (37:22), and in the storm out of the desert (38:1) the LORD appears to Job and gives an answer. In the same way, it should not surprise us when we find Israel assuming that God acts in ways that seem like justice to Bronze Age people, at least at the fleshly, historical level. And yet we should equally not be surprised to find that the Lord God of Israel leads the covenant people to a much higher understanding of justice (e.g., Jer 31:29-30). God is not just a king or a shepherd to Israel. God is the bridegroom from the Song of Solomon who, as was revealed to Hosea, must find a way to be faithful to his bride even when she has been unfaithful. God loves with immutable love. God acts with immeasurable justice. God saves with unimaginable grace. So yes, we can look to the scriptures and derive our ethics from the character of God. Because we believe that Jesus is the Lord of Israel's scriptures. And we believe, therefore, that we can look to these scriptures and find virtue.

Admittedly, I can only gesture in the direction that this kind of retrieval can go. I have used the motif of what comes "after" in the sense of Alasdair MacIntyre: if we are not just chronologically-after virtue but pursuing-after virtue, what have we regained?³⁹ I have also used the motif of what has been "lost," like Milton, who wrote both *Paradise Lost* and (the

less commonly read) *Paradise Regained*: paradise regained of course comes with all the joys and benefits of a relationship with God. In addition to retrieving virtue, our task is to retrieve the mystical presence of our Lord encountered in the scriptures. In this way, when we read the Song of Solomon or the Psalms, we re-enter in a mystical sense into Paradise, the enclosed garden (Song of Solomon 4:12), where Jesus is the lover of his Church.

YHWH Christology, one of the primary hermeneutic keys for ancient Christians, helps us retrieve this encounter. Jesus is the Lord for whom the voice in the wilderness prepared the way (cf., Isa 40:3; Mal 3:1; and Mark 1:2-3).⁴⁰ Jesus is the "I AM" who preceded Abraham (John 8:58)⁴¹ and even existed since the beginning (John 1:1). What is more, Jesus is the one whom Isaiah saw enthroned in glory (cf., Isa. 6:1) according to John 12:41. In this way, we can see Jesus in our Old Testament as the LORD who said "be holy as I am holy" (Lev 19:2), and thereby begin a retrieval of a virtue ethic that incorporates the whole of our canon. ■

Note: footnotes are to be found on the digital version of this article at www.christianethicstoday.com

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Book Reviews

Mississippi Heroes: White Champions of Racial Justice, 1954-1974

by Charles Dollar (Charles Dollar, 2025). 387 pages.
Reviewed by Walter B. Shurden

No kidding! I have waited one half-century for this book! My fear was that it would never find an author. After meeting Charles Dollar in 2014 at a Baptist Heritage conference, I read much of the manuscript. I knew that fortune had smiled on the subject and found its writer. Charles Dollar's patient, passionate unpacking of an unknown and untold story begged for his talents. I cheered often and enthusiastically for the finish of the book.

The title describes exactly Dollar's purpose. It is the history of White Mississippians, 59 of them, who championed racial justice during explosive and revolutionary years. Read that sentence again. White! Mississippians! Champions of racial justice! 1954-1974!

Dollar's opening sentences set the stage for his book: "Between 1954-1974 hundreds of courageous Black individuals in Mississippi defied intimidation, police arrests, violence, and death to gain justice and equality in the courts, in education, job opportunities, and the right to vote. A very small minority of White Mississippians supported their efforts by championing racial justice and equality in the courts, in educational opportunity, in job opportunities, and the right to vote."

Why 1954 to 1974? The date of *Brown v. Board of Education* decision issued by the Supreme Court of the United States that ruled that segregation in public schools violated the national Constitution *was in 1954*; the historic. 1974 is the date when Governor William Waller vetoed a bill funding the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, an organization created by the state legislature in 1956 that worked to block desegregation of public schools. These dates by no means marked the beginning or the ending of the struggle for racial justice in Mississippi. However, these were 20 years of extreme racial turbulence in the state, in the middle of which was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Historical work has at least two sides to it: science and art or research and literature. Historians have less

trouble researching names and dates. Sometimes the good ones even get lucky, connect all the dots, and describe helpfully the meaning of history. But the very best have enormous difficulty describing for their readers the raw, piercing emotions, the thick tension, the boiling anger, and the sharp pangs of fear of days gone by. Making emotions of the past come alive is as much art as science. Dollar does both well.

Jerry Ashby and I were standing on the steps of the cafeteria at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary one Monday afternoon in the early 1960s. Each had just returned from our weekend churches, his in Mississippi and mine in Louisiana. We were discussing the incendiary nature of the race issue in the country, especially in the South. I think I remember his exact words because they were so true of the times.

Making emotions of the past come alive is as much art as science. Dollar does both well.

Jerry Ashby said: "It has gotten so bad at my church, Shurden, that if you preach on John 3:16, their paranoia suspects you are a liberal on the race issue." This is something of the inflammatory context in which the 59 White Mississippians lived and worked.

How did Charles Dollar get to 59? He culled the list to 100 people by reading "contemporary newspaper articles, and magazine reports, relevant journal articles and books." Out of the 100 he found 59 that shared five characteristics. They were (1) permanent residents of Mississippi, (2) public and visible in their support of racial justice, (3) their visibility is documented by word or deed, (4) their visibility was sustained over time, and (5) they have a life story with adequate documentation.

Dollar arranged his heroes into seven categories: attorneys, business people, clergy, educators, media personalities, politicians and female activists. The clergy claimed 17 names, the most of any of the clusters.

Maybe the most helpful feature of *Mississippi Heroes* is Dollar's use of brief vignettes to describe his subjects. The longest biographies never extended beyond six pages. Brevity encouraged readability,

providing inspiration to read of yet another champion. One can scan the Table of Contents, spot a person or category of interest, and go immediately to the relevant pages. Or one can thumb through the volume randomly, reading according to interests and always finding unmistakable courage.

While brief, these mini essays are well researched and thoroughly documented. Citations, consisting of oral interviews as well as diverse written materials, offer broad direction for further historical investigation. Dollar has opened the door for eager graduate students and their hopeful dissertations of various kinds.

Dollar worked on his book for 11 years, from 2014 to 2025. He plowed lots of new ground. Many of his champions are completely unknown to Mississippians and, I am confident, even to their historians. A native Mississippian, I was a student at Mississippi College and a seminary student at New Orleans from 1954 to 1967, years of Dollar's concern.

I knew only one of Dollar's heroes well, Richard Butler Smith, a dear seminary friend, my senior by several years. Four of the heroes hailed from my hometown of Greenville. Two of them, William Leon Higgs and Hodding Carter III, were my high school classmates. One could have guessed that Hodding would have landed in such a book. His father, Hodding Carter II, also in the book, earned the disdain of many Greenvillians with his edgy editorials on racial justice. Billy Higgs, an intellectual at Greenville High, operated a snow cone stand on Main Street during the hot Delta summers. As far as I know, no one ever expected he would one day be called a champion of racial justice. A graduate of Ole Miss and Harvard Law, Higgs was Charles Dollar's first biographical entry and one of the most irrepressible White activists in Mississippi.

Baptist readers of age will recognize the name of Owen Cooper, a layman who was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1972. Cooper's bio is reflective of most of these champions. Like Amos of Hebrew scripture, they were not born prophets or the children of prophets. They evolved. Some moved across the ethical spectrum more quickly and more energetically than others. But they all progressed. From initially accepting Mississippi's cultural norms of racial prejudice to eventually questioning those norms, these 59 ultimately modified or rejected those norms in very public ways.

And what launched the moral transformations in their lives? Reading these 59 biographies, four creative forces stand out: education, good friends and mentors, religion and a basic instinct for fair play. Winifred Anne Green grew up in Jackson. A privileged

white Mississippian, she reflected these forces in her life. And when her bewildered mother asked, "What did I do wrong? I tried so hard with you. We've educated you at the best school. What did I do wrong?" Winifred said, "You taught me the song that 'red and yellow, Black and White are precious in his sight.'"

I was glad to note four Baptist clergy who also taught that song earned a place in Dollar's book. They were William Penn Davis, an executive in the Mississippi Baptist Convention, Chester Molphus, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Belzoni, J. Ralph Noonkester, president of William Carey College, and R. B. Smith, mentioned above.

Dollar's challenging accounts of integrity and bravery kindle curiosity, stimulate questions, whet the mind regarding the origins of moral courage, and help to preserve a slice of untold Mississippi history. He reminds us that the more public prophets never monopolized the hunger for racial justice in the Magnolia State. And while always in a supporting role to Black activists and never sacrificing nearly as much, these 59 worked for racial harmony.

Standing up and speaking out obviously came with a price, a recurring theme in this excellent and important book. Careers crumbled, friends and families fractured, and parents and children were alienated.

Standing up and speaking out obviously came with a price, a recurring theme in this excellent and important book. Careers crumbled, friends and families fractured, and parents and children were alienated. Some, like the Reverend William Penn Davis, experienced heinous humiliation. One night a band of mask-wearing White men forced his car off the road, jerked him out, beat him and urinated in his face. They wanted "to teach a damn n-lover some sense." And why? Because Davis was trying to train Christian leaders in Black churches.

Every state in the South, maybe in the nation, needs to find a Charles Dollar for a state history of this type. A minority of White "heroes" existed in all the Southern states. They were by no means "saviors," but they knew right from wrong. Their stories, though minority ones in the struggle for human dignity, deserve the light of history.

Above, I said that I cheered often and enthusiastically

cally for the finish of the book. I had good reasons. Charles Dollar was 80-years-old when he began his research. He published at age 91. We ought all to stand and cheer!

This book is not only significant because of its concern for racial justice. It is a stunning rebuke of ageism. A “senile old man” did not write this book. A professionally educated historian with a B.A from Union University, a B.D from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a M.A. and Ph.D. from the

University of Kentucky performed the hard labor here.

If you want to know more about why Charles Dollar wrote this book, go to charlesdollarbooks.com. There you will also see his stellar qualifications as a historian and the many kudos that have accompanied his valuable work. Amazon has the book. ■

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Shame-Sex Attraction: Survivors' Stories of Conversion Therapy

by Lucas F. W. Wilson (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2025)

Reviewed by Cody J. Sanders

In March, the Supreme Court struck down a Colorado law that banned conversion therapy for minors in the state, ruling the Colorado law a violation of therapists' free speech. That ruling now has implications for the 20 other states that ban the practice because of its harm to the mental health of LGBTQ+ minors. Mental health professional organizations like the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association have, for decades, publicly condemned sexual orientation change efforts as harmful and ineffective practices.

Yet, many people likely have little sense of what exactly is entailed in the pseudo-therapeutic practice of conversion therapy, also known as "reparative therapy" or, more comprehensively, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts (SOGIECEs). Lucas Wilson offers readers of *Shame-Sex Attraction* a first-person glimpse into the lived experiences of 17 LGBTQ+ people who share their stories in this edited anthology. Each writer narrates a personal experience of conversion therapy that entailed some combination of "talk-therapy counseling, 'support' groups and camps, transphobic healthcare practices, 'corrective' prayer, forced celibacy, coerced sexual relations or relationship, behavioral suppression and 'correction,' aversion therapy, electroshock therapy, online programs, and exorcisms" (12). Most, though not all, sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts are undergirded by Christian theological teachings (though one author in this book comes from an Orthodox Jewish background).

These 17 survivors of conversion therapy and other "ex-gay ministries" share their stories in brief, accessible and highly engaging essays. After years of healing from these shame-inducing spiritually violent experiences, some even share their stories with a bit of humor while also not shying away from the hard and heavy parts of their stories, including suicidality.

"Shame" is the orienting theme of Wilson's edited collection because, as he notes, "without shame, the authors in this collection would never have felt compelled to submit themselves to conversion practices" (28). One author—Jordan Sullivan—a trans man who grew up in a Seventh-day Adventist family, narrates his young adulthood sense of hopelessness as he grappled with the "pain, suffering, agony, sickness, and

guilt" he longed to be over. On the brink of suicide, Sullivan recalls praying these heart-rending words:

I am incapable of comprehending, blind to the truth, scarred by sin. My nervous system feels shot. I can't hear you anymore. I can't see you anymore. I've caved in from within, and there's no one or nothing to reach inside and put the shattered pieces back together. Your avenues to my soul are shattered. I'm a shell, with nothing — no one... (67, italics original).

In his 30s, with the support of his parents, a therapist and resources he discovered in places like an Oprah Winfrey episode, Sullivan began a long process of recovery from the harm experienced through the decades of religiously induced shame. At the time of his writing, he has lived as a trans man for over 12 years. He reports, "I am still learning that when you suppress a part of your core identity—you dissociate from yourself—and it can take years to re-integrate and become whole" (73).

"Shame" is the orienting theme of Wilson's edited collection because, as he notes, "without shame, the authors in this collection would never have felt compelled to submit themselves to conversion practices"

In addition to the 16 other voices, Wilson also narrates part of his own story with SOGIECEs as an undergraduate student at Liberty University where he confided in a campus pastor about his same-sex attraction and attended a group of gay students convened by the pastor in an effort to help them suppress their same-sex attraction and eventually marry a woman so that they had an outlet for their hormones. Wilson's writing is beautiful, raw and real, transporting readers into the dorm rooms, gyms and cafeterias of the U.S.'s largest evangelical university. (Notably, Wilson has another book under contract with University of Georgia Press titled, *Don't Ask, Tell All: Stories of Christian Colleges' Anti-Queer Regimes*, set to release in early 2027, which will be a similar collection of first-person narratives of LGBTQ+ people who endured harm at the hands of high-control Christian institutions.)

Wilson notes that the spiritual harm experienced

from conversion therapy includes “damage to victims’ spiritual self-identity, their ability to construct existential meaning, their relationship to God or the divine, and their relationship to their religious community” (16). It’s helpful to note that an LGBTQ+ person doesn’t need to experience any formal conversion therapy efforts to experience the spiritual harm that Wilson names here. These effects of spiritually violent theologies and practices often visit the lives of LGBTQ+ people who have simply lived part of their lives within religious communities and families that actively condemn LGBTQ+ people, believing themselves to be on the receiving end of God’s condemnation. For other books that treat this spiritual violence more broadly, see, Cody J. Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide, and the Souls of Queer Folk* (Lexington, 2020), Brook Petersen, *Religious Trauma: Queer Stories in Estrangement and Return* (Lexington, 2022), and Joel Hollier, *Religious Trauma, Queer Identities: Mapping the Complexities of Being LGBTQA+ in Evangelical Churches* (Palgrave, 2024).

In addition to the Supreme Court’s decision, the ACLU is tracking 517 anti-LGBTQ bills in state legislatures across the U.S. (as of April 11, 2026). A disproportionate number of these target trans people. I am increasingly convinced that in an era when LGBTQ+ people are under attack at every level of government and in the vast majority of ecclesial spaces in the country, LGBTQ-affirming faith communities, friends, family and professionals (therapists, physicians, educators, etc.) will become the lifelines that so many queer and trans people need in order to bear the weight of the onslaught of attempted erasure of our lives and all of the beauty and joy they bring into the world.

Wilson notes that one of the top-cited ways that survivors of conversion therapy come to terms with the effects of SOGIECEs in their lives is through supportive friendships with affirming friends (straight, cisgender and LGBTQ+ alike). The Trevor Project, in a similarly stunning finding, discovered that when an LGBTQ youth has at least one accepting adult in their lives, they were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt. Wilson’s book is an exceptionally readable introduction to conversion therapy and related practices for the lay reader who needs to know exactly why the Supreme Court’s ruling is so dangerous to queer and trans lives in the U.S. Let the voices of LGBTQ+ survivors educate you. Learn from their stories how to further your own commitment to love and affirm the queer and trans people in your own life. ■

Cody J. Sanders is associate professor of congregational and community care leadership at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, an ordained Baptist minister, and author of several books on LGBTQIA spiritual care.

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Conscience, Spirituality, and Religion: Evade Extremisms and Enjoy an Enriched Life with an Axial Age Perspective

By N. S. Xavier (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2025)

Reviewed by Fisher Humphreys

You would think that in the church today we would hear and read a lot more about conscience than we do. At a personal level the culture wars are mostly about issues of conscience such as homosexuality and abortion. At a political level some of the most intense questions are about issues of conscience such as whether it's right for America to shut out refugees or to bomb Iran, or whether it's right for President Trump to desert America's allies, pander to its adversaries, and use the power of his office to get revenge on his personal enemies and to enrich himself and his family. Given that our world is awash with issues of conscience, why are there not more articles and sermons about conscience?

We might assume that the answer is that secularization has eroded our confidence in the reality or importance of conscience. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. Most people seem to think that we all have consciences and that, unless we have intentionally suppressed them, they are trustworthy guides for us as we navigate the moral world that surrounds us. We don't talk much about conscience for the same reason we don't talk much about the sun—both of them are obviously there and obviously important.

What N. S. Xavier is doing in his new book about conscience is to build on widely shared assumptions about conscience. He is a retired psychiatrist, the kind who not only wrote prescriptions but spent hours and hours listening to his patients in order to help them cope with their personal problems. What they told him about themselves left him with no doubt that they have consciences.

But if it is already widely agreed that conscience is real and is an important guide in life, what else needs to be said? Dr. Xavier thinks we all need to be more attentive to our consciences and to reflect more carefully about what our consciences are telling us.

He also is challenging his readers to act according to what their consciences are telling them. As a psychiatrist he is fully aware that conscience is not our only inner impulse. We also have what he memorably calls PIG, the problem of instant gratification. It comprises natural human desires that direct us to various

behaviors, some of which differ from those to which conscience calls us. We do not need to be ashamed that we have these desires, but neither do we have to act on them. We should let conscience guide us.

Another inner impulse is the superego to which Sigmund Freud alerted us. It is natural to assume that "superego" is a modern, scientific name for what traditionally was known as conscience. In a surprising move, Xavier rejects this assumption. He sees the superego and conscience as separate impulses with incompatible messages. Because the superego is an internalization of external authorities such as our parents and our society, and because those authorities are not infallible, superego may cause us to experience unhealthy guilt and shame. He calls his readers reject the message of the superego and to live by conscience.

Dr. Xavier is convinced that the message of conscience can guide us into a life of happiness. He understands happiness in the way Aristotle did, as a flourishing and fulfilling life. He tells dozens of stories about his patients and others who found their way to a

As a psychiatrist he is fully aware that conscience is not our only inner impulse. We also have what he memorably calls PIG, the problem of instant gratification.

more meaningful life by paying attention to conscience and following its guidance.

Several things are involved in using conscience as a guide. One is moderation; the author calls his readers to avoid extremes. Another is reason and truth; he calls his readers to avoid falsehoods and to be realistic about life. Another is the Golden Rule: treat others as you want others to treat you.

Dr. Xavier is persuaded by his fellow psychiatrist Karl Jaspers's theory of an axial age in human history. The theory is that over several centuries—approximately 800 BC to 200 BC—human societies in various places in the world, independently of each other, made conscience a centerpiece of their ancient religions and thereby moved from superstition to authentic spirituality. In Israel, for example, prophets such as Amos and Hosea said that God does not accept the worship of people who oppress the poor. Dr. Xavier's call to his readers to use conscience is a call for them to do on a personal level what the human race did during the axial age.

What I have written so far appears in the first half of the book. The second half comprises nine chapters, one about each of the kinds of fruit of the Spirit listed by St. Paul in Galatians 5:22: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These virtues are goals towards which conscience directs us.

These nine chapters are beautiful, wise and practical, and reading them is an inspiring experience as well as a learning experience. For example, for years I have felt that Henry Drummond's book on 1 Corinthians 13, which is entitled *The Greatest Thing in the World*, is the richest essay on Christian love I have

ever read. Dr. Xavier's chapter on love is equally rich, and it includes psychiatric insights that were not available when Drummond wrote his book.

Dr. Xavier's vision of the importance of conscience and of the relationships among conscience, religion and spirituality, seems true and important to me. His chapters on the fruit of the Spirit overflow with spiritual and practical wisdom that can enrich the lives of readers. They can also serve as resources for anyone who is preparing to preach or teach about Christian virtues. I am happy to recommend his new book to readers of this journal. ■

A Call for a New Birth of Freedom: 1863-2026

Many of us can quote by heart the famous 280-word "Lincoln's Gettysburg Address." Today, I think in the year 2026 Abraham Lincoln's call for "a new birth of freedom" apply to America just as much as in 1863. Perhaps, with a more modern opening line, like "Twelve score and ten years ago..."

Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg, PA November 19, 1863

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

*But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. **It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.***

Practicing Multispecies Relationality

Cody J. Sanders

Many faith communities are now quite attentive to the ecological emergency embroiling the planet. “Creation care” is now a regular topic of conversation in many churches and denominations. But *mitigating disaster* and practicing *care for creation* fall short of cultivating *relationality* with the wider web of life that is necessary if we have any hope of extricating ourselves from a human supremacist theologies and philosophies that have led us down this path of climate collapse and ecological devastation.

As I wrote about in last month’s CET half-issue dedicated to ecological theology and ethics, I recently theorized a concept I termed, “ecopneumastalgia,” to describe our longing for these lost relationships with spiritually alive earth others. (*Eco* designates the ecological setting. *Pneuma* is the Greek word for “breath” or “spirit” used throughout the New Testament pointing us toward that inspiritedness of an ecological web of life. *Algia* is a Greek word for “pain,” and can also denote something more like “longing” or “yearning” in the way it is used in the term “nostalgia”). We are missing critical relationships to beings in an inspirited ecological world that leaves us bereft of the solidarity with the wider web of life, with whom our fates are abound up in the current crises of care and collapse.

In this second half-issue dedicated to the subject, I wanted to suggest a few of practices that may help us cultivate experiences of deeper *relationality* with the wider web of life that may be helpful to you or your communities.

Landscapes of Belonging

A few years ago, I got tired of all of the opening questions we ask of people when they are introducing themselves to one another in a group. So, I began asking this question: *Describe a specific landscape that you feel a sense of belonging to.* Or, put another way, *describe a landscape that feels like “home” to you, whether or not you live there anymore.*

The first time I asked this question to a group of international students in a university chaplaincy setting, the result was magical. We heard about mountains and forests and bodies of water all over the world that students felt a sense of belonging to. Many of

them were separated by thousands of miles from these “landscapes of belonging,” as I’ve come to call them. Not that the landscape belonged to *them* but that they belonged to *that specific land*.

I still remember the vivid detail one student provided of the Acacia trees in his home in sub-Saharan Africa. Another time, with a seminary class, a student narrated his entire call story with specific events and relationships that occurred at different points along one river that ran through his home state. I’ve heard stories of landscapes that held people in care amid crises in their lives, and landscapes of deep spiritual connection.

We are not often invited to think of ourselves as belonging to a place and all the geological, vegetal, creaturely beings that inhabit that landscape alongside us.

It is still sometimes a challenge to invite people beyond a simple statement of “appreciation” for the beauty of a particular place. We are not often invited to think of ourselves as *belonging to* a place and all the geological, vegetal, creaturely beings that inhabit that landscape alongside us. But if you think about it, I imagine you can conjure an image in your mind of – if not simply look out the window to see – a landscape of belonging that brings to your body a sense of being at rest within an ecological web enfolding you.

Worship and Pray with Earth Others

Too much of our praying and worshipping life involves only other human beings. Most often, it is when we are sitting in church praying alongside one another in the pews, singing hymns and listening to instrumental music of praise to God. All of this is perfectly fine, but scripture is replete with images of the ecological web of life – mountains and bodies of water and even the celestial bodies – praising God alongside

humanity. (Psalms 19 and 148 are two of my favorite examples from the psalter.)

We too often understand these passages as poetic metaphor, rather than seeing the inspired eco-imagination of the psalmists and other writers of scripture coming through in these texts. We don't imagine the writers are speaking in metaphor when they portray *humans* as worshipping God. Why should we not take seriously the image of ecological earth others as also imbued with a connection to the Divine, ways of praising the Holy that humans can join alongside, and knowledge of God that humans can learn from?

Try reading the psalms outdoors alongside the ecological kin, pausing to listen for their contributions to the praise of God. Take prayer walks around the neighborhood of your church but, instead of praying for only the human neighbors, pray for (and with) the trees and the creeks and the fields and the animals that are active all around you. Celebrate communion on the banquet table of the earth as portrayed in Matthew 14's feeding of the more-than-5,000, where the words "took, blessed, broke, gave, ate, all" indicates that this wild feast of grace is just as much a eucharistic text as the later scene of the Last Supper.

Cultivating Multispecies Relationships

Finally, make some intentional time each week to work on your relationships with beings in your ecological web. Any relationship takes time and intention to cultivate, and our relationships with the wider web of life are no exception.

Take a moment, wherever you are, to look around you, to notice what you see.

Try to ignore the humans around you in order to look *up* and *around* and *down* at what you *don't* normally notice about the other-than-human around you. Trees, grass, birds flying overhead, squirrels running by you.

Feel the wind blowing. Notice the sun or the moon or the stars above. See and feel the rocks and soil underfoot.

If you pass by this way often, you may want to choose one being in the more-than-human world that surrounds in this place with whom to build an inten-

tional relationship in the coming weeks and months.

When you've chosen the partner in this human and more-than-human relational bond – whether a tree, a group of animals, a body of water, a large stone, etc. – spend time with this more-than-human being. It may be no more than five minutes that you build into your day once or twice a week on the way to class, or work, or running errands, but become *intentional* about this time.

As odd as it may feel at first, talk to this more-than-human part of your life. Communicate with it by touch if you can.

And the hardest part of this, or any, relationship: *listen*. You may not know how to really listen to a tree or a rock or a bird yet. But try it and see what you learn – about your ecological companion, about the world, about relationship, about care, about yourself, even about God. ■

Celebrate communion on the banquet table of the earth as portrayed in Matthew 14's feeding of the more-than-5,000, where the words "took, blessed, broke, gave, ate, all" indicates that this wild feast of grace is just as much a eucharistic text as the later scene of the Last Supper.

*Cody J. Sanders is associate professor of congregational and community care leadership at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, an ordained Baptist minister, and a member of the CET board. He has written a number of books, including, *Spiritual Care First Aid: An All-Hands Approach for Church and Community* (Fortress, 2025).*

Grieving That Which Is Breaking Our Hearts

Timothy Robinson

Ten people gather in a circle. The facilitator gently queries, “Anything that’s coming up for you right now with your response to this step?” The “step” in question has just been read by another participant in a gathering sponsored by the Good Grief Network: “Accept the severity of the predicament.” One participant replies, “I love this world so much, but I feel ... kind of heartbroken, just all of the time.” Another offers, “I feel this mundane behind-the-scenes, always-constant grief and despair.” Yet another, a university professor of climate science, confesses she has considered giving up teaching because of her own strong emotional response to the material she shares with her young students (See the documentary “Good Grief: The Ten Steps”¹).

The Good Grief Network is among a growing number of eco-grief support groups and workshops emerging in response ecological change and growing acknowledgement of the severity of the climate crisis. Others include the Green Chalice ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who regularly hosts “eco-grief story circles” online, New Jersey-based Waterspirit that sponsors eco-anxiety support groups, and the BTS (formerly Bangor Theological Seminary) Center that offers a “Lament With the Earth” program, accompanying participants through the liturgical year “honoring the pain of our loss.”

Increasing numbers of persons are seeking groups like these with whom they can share feelings of distress related to climate change and ecological loss. Educators, social workers and clergy among others, are also noticing and engaging persons and communities exhibiting ecologically-related expressions of grief and distress.² A new field of inquiry has arisen that explores eco-related emotions like grief, anxiety, fear and despair, attempting to formulate compassionate responses.³ Ecological grief can arise in response to a favorite tree being cut to make way for a construction project, seeing a clear-cut forest from the freeway, learning about a species of dolphin being declared extinct, or experiencing displacement from one’s home because of rising seas. It can also be spurred by simply hearing about or anticipating occurrences of ecological or climate-related destruction or loss.

How might people of faith respond to such deep feelings of ecological grief? There is a deeply embedded notion in much of Western science and Christian theol-

ogy that humans have been established as supreme in a hierarchy of creation, set apart above all others; this notion regards everything in that creation as meant to serve human needs and desires and has rendered everything apart from the human as disposable. Thus, the prospect of grieving for trees, plants, animals or landscapes has been regarded as irrational and pointless. Ecological losses are not seen as connected to psychic, emotional or spiritual distress.

One grief expert has introduced the concept of “disenfranchised grief” to identify “grief that is experienced but cannot be acknowledged or publicly mourned.”⁴ Yet, human life is utterly dependent upon and connected to the larger whole, to the biological and ecological systems that sustain human life,

Ecological grief can arise in response to a favorite tree being cut to make way for a construction project, seeing a clear-cut forest from the freeway, learning about a species of dolphin being declared extinct, or experiencing displacement from one’s home because of rising seas.

both physical and spiritual. Humans naturally form deep attachments to other creatures, to places, and to landscapes. Grief—and anxiety, guilt, rage and other emotions—over the state of our current climatological and ecological crises should be regarded as a natural response to the profound rupture that we are now experiencing. More than regarding eco-grief as natural, we must make space for expressing it: in prayer, in liturgy, in pastoral conversation and in the public square. Spirituality scholar Douglas Christie writes, “If we hope to arrive at a deep and authentic response to this crisis, we will have to find a way to speak honestly about all we are losing and what this loss means to us.”⁵

Finding ways to express the grief we experience in these times of profound loss, anxiety and fear and for

helping others to express it is essential for persons of faith and for those tasked with caring for souls today. There are least four functions of ecological grief in spiritual contexts today. The first is rooted in the ancient Christian notion of compunction—the anxiety that arises over awareness of guilt. Christie describes “the gift of tears,” or *penthos*, that accompanied feelings of compunction among the desert ascetics of the Christian East.

Tears evoked by a sense of grief and the recognition of one’s complicity in wrongdoing, writes Christie, have served in spiritual traditions as “crucial means by which persons and communities are able to seek healing for what has been broken asunder.” Christie suggests mourning as a spiritual practice that may heighten our attention and connection to what is being broken and lost in the natural world. Grieving one’s contributions to systems of oppression that are destroying communities of life—social and ecological—can be cathartic, pointing toward avenues of repair: “Grief and mourning can be seen not simply as an expression of private and personal loss, but as part of a restorative spiritual practice that can rekindle an awareness of the bonds that connect all life-forms to one another and to the larger ecological whole.”⁶ Allowing ourselves to feel deep sorrow for the losses now occurring helps illuminate how and where things have gone wrong and invites us to imagine pathways of repair.

This leads to a second function for ecological grief: heightening our awareness of the vulnerability that humans share with other creatures and honing our sense of responsibility for one another. The environmental researcher Ashlee Cunsolo Willox argues that mourning functions ethically as “a source of insight into the responsibilities that we share for and to one another” because grief emerges from a recognition of the fragility and vulnerability that we share with other humans and with other creatures.⁷ The anxiety, fear, and grief evoked by our current climatic realities are not only expressions of existential dread at the prospect of personal loss, but they also indicate our attachment and feeling of connection with suffering others, calling forth a sense of responsibility for fellow sufferers.

A third function of making room for ecological grief is to affirm the vital importance of creation and its suffering for people of faith. Performing public ritual expressions of eco-related compunction is critical. Liturgical acts of confession and lamentation, which share long histories of practice in both Jewish and Christian traditions, serve an important purpose for people of faith. They indicate that ecological injustices

are central concerns of the Church’s mission. Further, they affirm the validity of worshipers’ feelings of eco-grief and anxiety. Ritual acts of eco-mourning and lamentation, whether in ecclesial spaces or the public square, provide opportunities to protest acts of ecological and environmental injustice and to form communities of solidarity and resistance.⁸

Finally, expressions of ecological grief and mourning can function politically to extend our notions of what is considered “grieveable,” challenging exclusive human dominion over the rest of creation and resisting the tendency to dismiss ecologically related emotions. Expressing ecological grief publicly raises awareness of the issues and can serve to catalyze action on behalf of threatened ecosystems. As Willox writes, “From this perspective, grief and mourning have the ability to mobilize, to galvanize, and to cause conscious action through the recognition of others as fellow vulnerable beings, and through an understanding of shared suffering, *not* to privatize, silence, and subdue.”⁹

Expressing ecological grief publicly raises awareness of the issues and can serve to catalyze action on behalf of threatened ecosystems.

The Utah writer and activist Terry Tempest Williams asks in her recent work, “How do we find the strength to not look away from all that is breaking our hearts?”¹⁰ The weight of her question hangs heavily upon many of us who know the difficulty, the vulnerability and the pain of looking upon and grieving the land, the creatures and our fellow humans who are suffering. But we must not look away. People of faith have the resources to open ourselves to the grief and to be moved toward repair. ■

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Note: Footnotes can be found on the digital version of the article at www.christianethicstoday.com

Who is the Creation that Groans? Ecology, Race, and the Struggle for the Sacred

Matthew Elia

“We know,” Paul writes in Romans 8, “that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together.” We know this: the creation groans from its wounds. But who—who in particular—groans when the whole creation groans? And what is the shape of the wound?

Beneath the forest canopy just southeast of Atlanta, on an unseasonably warm January day in 2023, a young environmental activist named Manuel Terán was sitting among the loblolly pines when six Georgia policemen approached, then opened fire: the autopsy found the tracks of 57 gunshots. *Wound paths*, it called them.¹ Real people, none of whom faced charges, pulled the triggers of course. But the path their bullets followed did not begin with them. I want to trace, in this essay, the longer path of violence—the path on which they were only the most recent travelers. A lot hangs on how we name the longer history of the wound. What is the path that precedes, includes, then extends beyond the wound paths that perforated Manuel’s right lung, collapsed their right eye globe; and where is it leading now? To name the wound, to hear the groan, I begin to walk the path backward in time.

An Indigenous Venezuelan of Tomoto-Cuica descent, Manuel (who was nonbinary and used they/them pronouns) had adopted the name Tortuguita—meaning: *little turtle*—while living with others in the Forest, part of an expansive cross-racial movement to resist the Forest’s being torn down to build a proposed \$120 million police facility, where militarized officers would be trained to suppress civil unrest by running drills in a mock city layout. Hence the name given by activists: “Cop City.”² A broad coalition united quickly to oppose it. The Sierra Club Georgia Chapter, along with 15 other environmental organizations, penned an open letter urging city council to consider that destroying even “a fraction of the total acreage” would compromise the Forest’s natural ability to mitigate flood risks, reduce the urban heat island effect, and lower air pollution by converting carbon dioxide into oxygen.³

Organizers aligned with the Movement for Black Lives came out against Cop City with powerful immediacy, having just flooded the streets in the spring of 2020 not only to denounce the police killing of

George Floyd in Minneapolis, but two weeks later, Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta.⁴ Experts pointed out that the reforms being proposed to the policing system—including massive budgets for increased training through facilities like the Cop City—not only siphon public money away from the sort of investments in community life proven to reduce crime (education, employment programs and public health), but were themselves already *part of* the very problem to which they are now being proposed as solution: Garrett Wolfe, the officer who shot Rayshard Brooks twice in the back, had “undergone 2,000 hours of training, including sessions on de-escalation tactics, cultural-awareness training, and instruction on use of deadly force. None of this preparation stopped him from kill-

With this double-name, the movement joins two crises Christian ethics has often kept separate, two wounds from which a single, whole creation groans: ecological destruction and racial violence.

ing Rayshard Brooks.”⁵

Two key names thus began to emerge for this single coalitional movement: “Defend the Atlanta Forest” and “Stop Cop City.” With this double-name, the movement joins two crises Christian ethics has often kept separate, two wounds from which a single, whole creation groans: ecological destruction and racial violence. The movement thus joins constructive ethical responses to them too: what Christians sometimes call “creation care” on one hand and the struggle to abolish structures of racial injustice rooted in slavery on the other: prisons, policing, the carceral state. And by joining them, the movement underscores that the struggle was not merely against the building of this particular facility, but rather, as one participant put it, “a struggle at the intersection of climate change, police militarization, racialized police violence, and environmental racism.”⁶ Tortuguita and the Atlanta Forest defenders help make vivid and concrete an emerging global reality that few see right now, but which will become

unavoidable in the decades ahead: in the climate era, struggles to defend the earth from destruction will everywhere begin to converge with struggles to defend Black, Indigenous, Latine and ordinary people of all races, especially poor people, from militarized police forces.⁷ Creation care begins to emerge as an abolitionist project. These will look more and more like one struggle.

But to understand this claim requires that we trace the longer path of the wound, that we hear the groans arising from the wounded earth and, for this, we might trace the path more deeply into the Forest and let the land itself tell the story.

Before Manuel became Tortuguita, before Cop City was proposed, indeed, long before Atlanta became Atlanta in 1845, the name of the place was *Weelaunee*. Meaning “brown water,” this is the name the Indigenous Mvskoke people gave to the river still running through the Forest, one of their original homelands.⁸ The Indian Removal Act of 1830 separated them from it at gunpoint. Roughly half died in the forced transfer. “I was the witness,” wrote famous French observer Alexis de Tocqueville, “of sufferings which I have not the power to portray.”⁹

Amid the violent dispossession, the land was being reimagined. It became, in the minds of white settlers, something called *property*—fungible, sellable, divisible into square plots, without the intimacy of relation. Changing hands among various settlers, two such plots eventually fell to George P. Key in 1855, who “operated the property as a farm, and at one point had as many as 19 enslaved people working and living on the land—making his one of the farms with the most enslaved people in DeKalb county.”¹⁰ An adjacent plot was sold to another slaveowner, Elijah Henry Clark, an ordained Methodist minister.¹¹ Here the precise shape of the wound starts to emerge with brutal clarity: stolen Black life, working stolen Native land, for the profit of white Christian masters. The longer path of violence coming into view is, in key part, simply the story of western Christian life in modernity: an emerging plantation system of enslaved production, secured through the separation of indigenous people from land, catalyzing what would become the world system of global racial capitalism.¹²

After the Civil War, in the wake of the legal abolition of slavery, the patterns of relation which slavery had put in place did not magically disappear. Slavery’s racial hierarchies—of unequal vulnerability to violence, persistent wealth inequality and exposure to poverty, skewed life chances—are what Saidiya Hartman has called “the afterlife of slavery.”¹³ Among the best-studied sites of this afterlife is the postwar

practice of “leasing” people convicted of crimes (often on charges spurious, frivolous, or both) as an incarcerated labor force for agricultural profit, so perhaps it is unsurprising that this is precisely what happened to the land: George Key’s slave plantation was sold to the city in 1911 and became the Atlanta Prison Farm.¹⁴ There the state extracted value from incarcerated laborers tending livestock and crops and, as late as the 1980s, newspaper accounts compared the conditions to “slave labor,” leading the ACLU to sue the city for unsanitary conditions and brutally unconstitutional practices of punishment, including leg irons and solitary confinement.¹⁵

Yet this system—dominant though it was, persistent though it remains, even in the wake of the legal abolition of slavery—never triumphed unopposed. It never reigned without facing manifold resistance from below: from everyday acts of interpersonal defiance to massive organized rebellions; from fugitive flights of individuals to enormous marronage communities in the swamps and forests. There Black and Indigenous communities pursued fraught and imperfect experi-

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ments in social life, as well as alternative ecologies in the shadows of the colonial monocrop plantation complex—what recent scholars have explored as “a totally different form of living.”¹⁶

It was this tradition of coalitional anticolonial resistance that Manuel invoked when they started going by Tortuguita: a name borrowed from the Indigenous military commander Mihšihkinaahkwa, “Little Turtle,” who claimed several key victories over the U.S. settler state in the late 19th century, in key part by uniting disparate tribes into a confederacy. It was this tradition that writers like Barbara Ransby invoke when,

in *Making All Black Lives Matter*, she describes contemporary Black movements of resistance as “modern maroon spaces.”¹⁷ And it was this tradition that was on display when, in March 2023, a contingent of Mvskoke organizers returned to their ancestral land to deliver an eviction notice to Mayor Andre Dickens, demanding the return of the land, the cessation of “violence and policing of Indigenous and Black people in Mvskoke lands,” and the declaration of “solidarity with the Black residents of Atlanta in opposition to continued genocide via Cop City.”¹⁸

The struggle over Cop City made international news. Yet it has not been a significant site of attention for Christian theological reflection or for the study of American religion. I’ve tried in vain to find any reference to it in academic journals like *American Religion*, *The Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, or *Political Theology*, or in public facing magazines like *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *Commonweal*, or *America*. The present essay is a small contribution amid this general neglect. Meanwhile, mainstream and secular press have exhaustively explored the dynamics of the Stop Cop City movement, yet struggled to recognize it as, in key part, a contestation over the sacred. Yet this dimension, what Justin Farrell calls “the sacred roots of environmental conflict,” is precisely what calls out for analysis, not only in the key role of prominent Atlanta clergy in providing a kind of theological cover for Cop City, but also in the central role of the sacred imagination in those opposing it.¹⁹ As Mvskoke member and interfaith leader Mekko Chebon Kernell writes, the journey they undertook to deliver the eviction notice was “much more than just a physical return to a specific location; it is a spiritual and cosmic decolonizing initiative,” one that thus involved the stomp dance, ceremonial offerings and singing, the visitation of sacred sites throughout the region, and education in the history of “centuries of colonial violence against creation.”²⁰

And it is this—the prospect of shared theological vision of creation—which brings us back to our opening scene. After police initially claimed Tortugueta shot at them first, the family commissioned an independent autopsy. It found that, far from attacking officers, Tortugueta was likely seated cross-legged, in a prayer position.²¹ “Manuel loved the forest,” their mother said. “They meditated there, the forest connected them with God...I never thought that Manuel could die in a meditation position.”²² One of their friends, who’s since become a friend of mine, the Reverend Matthew Johnson, wrote: “I pray that the mother of the slain, Belkis Terán, a devout Catholic, knew who her child

truly was, despite the misinformation swirling around their death...May the bullet holes through their palms, holy stigmata, be a reminder that their child was a servant of God.”²³ And at the memorial service, Manuel’s father found in Saint Paul’s words the crucial frame for understanding what their child was up to in the forest: “The Bible says in Romans that the creation is suffering of childbirth pain, the creation is anxious for the redemption of the Lord. *Manuel was suffering the same distress as the creation*. They cried when a tree was torn down. Manuel was happy looking at how a recent planted tree was little by little growing, like a parent happy to see how their children are growing.”²⁴

Who groans when creation groans? In the climate futures now emerging, some of the most vital and insurgent forms of American religious life will be where Tortugueta was—praying from inside the path of the wound. It is an open question whether Christian pastors and lay people and everyday citizens, especially those whose contemporary social position aligns them not with the history of Black and Indigenous resistance, but with those whom they were resisting,

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can defect from their ongoing place in the tradition of Christian mastery represented by George Key’s plantation. If so, it will look like defecting from the plantation, discerning the wounds of creation in the lands where they live, and seeking out spaces of solidarity with the work of the Spirit who groans prayers with and for a wounded world. ■

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Note: References can be found in the digital version at www.christianethicstoday.com

Young and Learned: What My Undergrads Are Teaching Me about Troubled Hope

Kiara Jorgenson

A year-and-a-half into our research together, something shifted. Addie Flesch and Paavo Rundman, both St. Olaf College students and lifelong Lutherans, bring a depth of theological commitment to climate justice that surpasses that of many adults I know. For two-and-a-half years, they joined me in assessing the staying power of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America (ELCA)'s 1993 Social Statement on Creation Care from a young-adult perspective, digging through archives and climate reports, visiting congregations and leading their peers in discussion. Our work will soon result in a book with Fortress Press, and we're hopeful it will foster intergenerational conversation and action on environmental problems and possibilities.

But a year-and-a-half into our research together, something shifted. I remember that Monday afternoon meeting well. The day before Addie and Paavo had presented their research at a nearby Lutheran church, where they also offered a pragmatic take on Christian hope in light of climate change.¹ To their disappointment, the insights they shared were met with suspicion. They weren't taken seriously, nor was the claim they were making—that hope must be troubled in ways. To my surprise, what they brought to our debrief meeting wasn't anger, but instead a deep weariness. They felt that no matter where they turned—classrooms, social media, youth gatherings, or, in this case, conversations with well-intentioned elders—the refrain was always the same. Things are dire. Catastrophic even. Statistics get recited, and urgency underscored. And then predictably the dialogue quickly dries up or loops back to the same grim claims.

What my students were longing for was not more ominous facts, but real companionship in learning how to shoulder the long, hard work ahead. Addie and Paavo had been welcomed into spaces like that congregational forum, placed on panels, and consulted for task forces. But neither of them experienced these forms of inclusion as actual partnership. And even partnership, they were learning, rarely leads to accompaniment.

I began this collaboration with Addie and Paavo with the explicit aim of mentoring them toward a thicker, more robust sense of hope. But that Monday conver-

sation and my months working alongside them since have given me a more vivid understanding of hope's demands and a keener awareness of how the church might better meet the needs of young adults. What I share here is an effort to pass along what I take to be their holy insights.

When visiting congregations, Addie and Paavo regularly reminded their 50 yrs.+ audiences how “once-in-a-century” weather events became routine during their childhoods. The crises that the ELCA's 1993 Social Statement on Creation Care named as concerns for “children and children's children” are not abstract futures for these two.² Calamity is just the everyday

Left unaddressed, eco-anxiety can petrify into paralysis. This may look like apathy from the outside, but is in fact the product of helplessness when something feels both total and unresolvable.

weather of their everyday lives. What makes their vantage significant, therefore, isn't simply that they are young or worried. It's the both/and they carry.

Addie and Paavo describe their generation as experiencing a unique emotional dissonance: overwhelming helplessness and a deep sense of responsibility simultaneously. This isn't apathy, although plenty of adults they've interacted with have been quick to point out their generation's absence at recent No-Kings rallies (with a tenor of accusation rather than curiosity, I might note). As Addie shared with me this past fall, it's like being handed a task whose scale exceeds any available tool, and then being told to get to work. The result can be what we in environmental studies call “eco-anxiety,” a chronic, diffuse dread about ecological collapse that compounds every other uncertainty in a young person's life.³ Left unaddressed, eco-anxiety can petrify into paralysis. This may look like apathy from the outside, but is in fact the product of helplessness.

ness when something feels both total and unresolvable. The effects of eco-anxiety are now widely known, and they're impacting young adults the most.

Pastors and congregational leaders would do well to understand the difference between these. A young adult who has gone quiet on creation care is not necessarily indifferent. They may simply be exhausted. They may have burned through one cycle of frenetic activism and found themselves empty at the other end. They may have been included in enough conversations about the problem to last a lifetime, without ever being invited into relationships that would help sustain them.

When Addie and Paavo described their exhaustion at that November adult forum on climate change, they weren't denying the seriousness of our ecological problems. They knew their facts. They had felt the heat—literally, in Paavo's case, during the 2024 ELCA Youth and Young Adult Gathering in New Orleans, where he suffered heat exhaustion on the second-warmest day ever recorded there. What they were rejecting was something subtler; namely, the assumption that citing the problem, repeatedly and with increasing urgency, constitutes faithful engagement with it. It does not. And the church, of all institutions, should know better.

I can't think of any expression of Christian theology, past or present, that suggests naming suffering makes it bearable. Don't get me wrong, *calling a thing what it is* is crucial. For example, our liturgies of confession and forgiveness do this good work by inviting us to tell the truth about the impact of our sin. But as confession is followed by the proclamation of forgiveness in our faith tradition, so recognition of suffering must be followed by a reminder of God's immanent presence amid it. What Addie and Paavo were bumping up against, in congregation after congregation, was a church so fixated on diagnosis, and perhaps therefore anxious in its despair, that it could not still long enough for grief to do its work.

The consequences of rushing this process are not trivial. When the only available response to eco-anxiety is more information about how bad things are, followed by an urgent call to individual action, the cycle is textbook. Motivation. Effort. Burnout. Cynicism. Addie and Paavo are familiar with this cycle, and the data suggest most young adults in their communities are too. Social media activism, lifestyle change campaigns, petition signing—none of these are wrong.

However, on their own, they don't provide what any of us need to sustain a lifetime of hoping against hope. What this "climate generation" needs and the church is uniquely equipped to offer is something different. It's a community that can hold grief without being

destroyed by it, and that can speak of hope without pretending the grief away. For a generation navigating eco-anxiety, these theological resources are ingredients for a thriving life amid chaos. The question is whether our church will offer them as such, and whether our communities of faith will step into the special role we must play in this new planetary era.

So, what does hope require in practice? What are hope's companions? Here's what I've learned from Addie and Paavo.

Make space for grief before reaching for action.

Many young adults lack spaces where grief can be recognized without attempts to solve or manage it. In their writing and speaking, Addie and Paavo have asked our church to return to its rich traditions of pathos and invite young adults to dwell in their grief and reckon with their pain. In practice, this could look like a sermon series that weaves lament into proclamation. It could mean starting a congregational conversation with hard questions instead of an action-points

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checklist. It most certainly requires that those in pastoral leadership avoid gift-wrapping the hard stuff with an unfounded optimism. The grief can be catalytic and generative.

Offer binocular vision

Addie and Paavo draw on the work of ecotheologian Panu Pihkala to describe what they call "binocular vision," or the ability to see loss and possibility simultaneously, without letting one obscure the other. This is harder than it sounds. The temptation, in the face of bad news, is to resolve the tension in one direction or the other. But neither serves young adults well, nor does either reflect the full witness of Christian faith. Our scriptures are replete with stories of people who mourned what was lost while earnestly looking for God in what comes next. Preachers and teachers who hold this binocular tension and exhort communities

to faithfully inhabit ambiguity and uncertainty offer young adults a way forward. This is especially so when pursued through intimate relationships of accompaniment.

Situate the present crisis in a longer, larger story.

In their writing, one of the most astute moves Addie and Paavo make is resisting treating our current ecological problems as unprecedented. They point out communities who have endured the ends of worlds before. Theirs are the stories of displaced peoples, destroyed habitats and extinguished ways of life. And in all of these examples, the witness of Christian faith is a God who accompanies the oppressed and is present in beginnings and ends. This perspective doesn't downplay our very real environmental challenges, but it does make hope more imaginable. We can see ourselves in the stories of others. So, when congregations help young adults connect their own grief to that of the biblical Israelites in exile, for example, or to neighboring Indigenous communities who lost their lands and remain dispossessed, resurrection takes on new meaning.⁴ In my experience, young adults are utterly captive to these narratives. When biblical study is grounded in truth-telling, particularly regarding Christianity's problematic tango with settler-colonialism, it can be a wellspring for action and spiritual endurance.

Build intergenerational relationships of accompaniment.

This is perhaps the most pointed challenge Addie and Paavo offer me. Young adults, they've said, are often tokenized in church discussions and committees. They may be present but rarely have genuine agency, and are almost never mentored into their roles. Paavo in particular has helped me see how older generations' guilt and related sense of urgency frequently drive them to focus on short-term solutions. In his home denomination, this typically looks like passing resolutions and launching initiatives, whereas what he and his peers most value is the long-lasting, less visible work of accompaniment. Mentorship through presence.

Addie and Paavo haven't asked for a seat at the table. As a part of the climate generation, they've simply inherited these seats. Rather than a bigger platform, what they desire is elders who, by example, demonstrate how to sustain a lifetime of faithful work without burning out or giving up. This kind of mentorship is not a program or a quarterly agenda item, although it can certainly grow out of intentional programming and warrants regular inclusion in the meeting minutes of church councils. There is great value in having a men-

tor who can say, "I may not have all the answers, but I will not leave you to face this alone." Congregations that take this form of accompaniment seriously will find, as I did, that the learning runs in both directions.

Build belonging by attending to the local.

Eco-anxiety feeds on a sense of boundlessness. When our ecological challenges are framed as entirely dispersive and responsibility global in scope, it's easy for any of us to hamster-wheel in the realm of theory. It's very possible to care deeply and do little to nothing. One of the most practical gifts a congregation can give young adults, therefore, is vision for what is within grasp. This isn't to say that local action is enough to solve our wicked problems, but it helps young people understand the tremendous benefits of showing up. And for a generation that reports feeling increasingly socially isolated, this is a win-win.

For the church, this requires helping people identify what they can do as individuals, as a congregation, and as part of a wider community. It looks like connecting them with local organizations already at work. It

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means finding a middle ground between the false comfort of "all will work out" and the overwhelming "the whole system must change." Both leave people adrift. And GenZ and GenAlpha won't buy either anyway. When a congregation works to discern what it can and cannot do and discovers pathways together, young adults are given what they say they need most—a place to start and a community to call upon.⁵

A Word to Pastors and Congregational Leaders

In its own way, the collaboration Addie, Paavo, and I shared was a living example of this. They were never just students passing through my classroom. They became partners who reshaped my understanding of hope, church and what it means to work faithfully across generations. This experience has left me with some thoughts for pastors and congregational leaders, and I'll conclude by sharing those.

First, know that your congregation is already filled

with young adults carrying this burden. They may not call it eco-anxiety. They may never mention it to you. But the grief is present, in their quiet retreat from creation-care conversations, in the fatigue that follows each wave of activism, or in the sense that most adults focus on problems over people. You don't need a new program to meet young adults where they are, but you may need a different kind of pastoral attentiveness. Scratch, and just below the surface you'll encounter pain. How will you move beyond inclusion toward accompaniment and really listen?

The second is harder. It requires honesty about what the church has often failed to provide. Many of our churches have responded to our environmental decline the way anxious institutions tend to respond to hard things: by forming committees, deliberating, issuing statements and passing resolutions. These moves matter; but what I'm hearing from young people like Addie and Paavo is also a need for an ecclesial commitment to connect this present struggle to a larger story and to provide models for the road ahead.

At its best, the church offers a compelling way to make meaning in these tumultuous times. Not by outcomes, but by faithfulness. Not by what is achieved in one lifetime or generation, but by what is planted for the next. What I'm taking from my years of collaboration with Addie and Paavo is a growing trust that hope can come to us and sustain us through the grief of loss and the anxiety of overwhelm when we forge meaningful relationships of accompaniment that allow us to see things as they are while yet imagining what can be. ■

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Note: Footnotes can be found in the digital version at www.christianethicstoday.com

In her 1836 autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel*, the AME Black preacher Jarena Lee declared:

O how careful ought we to be, lest through our bylaws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox or improper for a woman to preach? Seeing the Saviour died for the woman as well as the man.

What a hermeneutic!

Source: *Is the SBC Still Haunted by the Slavery Hermeneutic?* By Bill Leonard, Senior Columnist at Baptist News Global, May 18, 2026

A Chaplain on the Green Team

Talitha Amadea Aho

It took a lot of training to become a pediatric hospital chaplain. Seminary prepared me to talk kindly and flexibly about a wide range of theological beliefs. Clinical Pastoral Education prepared me to be a “non-anxious presence” as I listened to stories of trauma and suffering. Pastoral internships gave me Godly Play stories to tell young children and tested me on earning the trust of wary teenagers. Nowhere in my near decade of training did I learn about capping anesthetic gases. But here we are, on today’s zoom meeting, working on a report that asks us how our hospital’s nitrous oxide is supplied to the operating room.

How did a chaplain get on the Green Team? The other people in the zoom room have big titles: Director of Safety, Supply Chain Manager, Director of Environmental Services. They are on a first-name basis with the Chief Operating Officer, to whom they are assigning questions as we go through the outline of the report. I do my best not to be daunted; I have done my research. As I understand it, nitrous oxide is a potent and long-lasting greenhouse gas and ozone-depleting substance, nearly 300 times more damaging than carbon dioxide.¹ And it is a versatile, safe and popular choice for pediatric anesthesia. You can see the shape of the dilemma: How do we care for our patients while reducing the climate impact of their care?

The U.S. healthcare system owns a staggering percentage of our national carbon footprint, and anesthetic gases stand out as a contributor.² Luckily, the purpose of today’s zoom meeting is not to debate how to solve this problem. The health-sustainability field has settled on an achievable goal: to allow the anesthetic use of nitrous oxide while changing its delivery method. Small canisters of nitrous oxide loaded directly into anesthesia machines waste far less gas than the old gas pipes that run through the walls of the hospital, leaking as they go.³ Our hospital still has the piped system and we are in agreement that we should switch to canisters, which is of course easier said than done. Perhaps some year soon we will be able to celebrate the transition and track the savings. Today, we are simply logging our baseline data and marking the work that can be done in the future.

How did a chaplain get on the Green Team? I was willing where others were not. Perhaps it was my sense of urgency. I had a fire lit under me not too long

ago by the teenagers of the church I served previously, who raised deep questions during one of California’s worst smoke seasons. They asked, “What is God *thinking*, letting us destroy the world?” And I earnestly tried to theologize around the heart of the matter, but they put their ultimatum down. We could believe any of those theologies, they said, except the ones where the climate crisis is going away. This is the fight of our lives, they said, and if you want us to trust you, you must take it seriously. These teenagers were all prepared to jump in completely; to major in climate studies, to become lawyers and sue corporations on behalf of the earth, and to go vegan. They radicalized me and I brought that urgency with me to the hospital.

But it was trickier than that. When I arrived, there

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was no active Green Team. There were a few hospital employees still wearing Green Team buttons, and you might meet them as you parked your bike and went about your day; but all of them were burned out to the point of despair. You might recognize them, carrying a bag of recyclables home at the end of the workday, and, if you gave them a sympathetic ear, they would complain about the hospital’s dysfunctional recycling system, but they were not willing to attend another meeting. They had made progress in reducing waste at the bedside and then watched their progress washed away in a sea of new disposable materials brought in during the pandemic. They had fought and felt like they lost; they were done.

Discouragement? Now this I was trained for. We chaplains are trained to show up with peace amidst chaos and hope amidst despair. We are always good for a vent session, and you can count on us to be there with cookies when a patient case is just too sad. Chaplains are used to encouraging our peers on distressing cases such as the baby in the ICU receiving aggressive and painful treatments with little chance of a meaningful recovery. We provide ethical counsel and talk about moral distress in patient cases all the time; it is part of the job, and more than a few chaplains serve on their hospital ethics committees.

So, as I put my hand up as the new chair of the hospital's Green Team, I found people began approaching me with a different kind of moral distress: their discouragement, despair, and rage about the massive amounts of waste they were responsible for throwing out each day. They were feeling powerless over the ethical dissonance between their oath to "do no harm" and the trash piles they contributed to each shift. Many of these colleagues were eco-warriors at home, the kind of people who would unravel an old sweater to knit something new with the yarn. Yet at work, they were merely grumbling participants in a vast stream of waste. The lack of recycling was just the start of it. I received passionate complaints about just about every area of our hospital campus:

- Pharmacy is printing too many extra labels!
- Single-sided printing is default rather than double-sided printing!
- Recycling bins are being emptied into trash!
- Inhalers used in the Emergency Room are discarded after one or two uses, because of technicalities that disallow them from being taken home!
- The orange tree in courtyard drops fruit to rot on the ground!
- Staff members wear gloves more than necessary!
- Disposable gowns are used when reusable gowns are available!
- The lobby has no water bottle filling station!
- Baby bottles are not washed and reused!
- Cigarette butts litter our (smoke-free) campus!
- The magnolia tree is going to be cut down!!!!

I could have thrown up my hands and said, "not my problem." I could have called these insignificant distractions compared to the magnitude of the climate crisis. I nearly did, with the cigarette butts. But in each case, I received the complaint, affirmed my colleague's moral distress, and offered a connection to another person I knew who cared about it.

Chaplains are uniquely positioned to connect people

to one another across disciplines; as usually there are very few of us, we must make our friends everywhere we can. And so, the Green Team started a litter pickup program at lunchtime. Social workers, administrative assistants, and doctors alike would meet in front of the hospital with gloves and bags, and we would pick cigarette butts off the sidewalk for half an hour before returning to our desks. While doing this, we made friends and grumbled together about the other issues of waste. By chatting, we would make connections. The connections contributed just enough grit to start breaking apart the heavy glue of hopelessness.

Measurable progress has been spotty. Some of the fake recycling bins were replaced with true recycling bins, and we requested a waste audit. We had meetings about the inhalers and got nowhere but understood the shape of the problem a little better. We envisioned a fruit-picker pole for the orange tree which took only two months of red tape to be approved and purchased. The water bottle station was installed 18 months later. The baby bottles are still being trashed. Our magnolia

Trying to achieve systemic change may lead us through powerlessness, futility and rounds of failure, but it has the possibility of achieving positive change that is orders of magnitude more significant for the climate. That is why we need chaplains on the Green Team.

tree was cut down, all its 162-year-old majesty destined for the chipper. We did not stop the destruction, but we did hold a ceremony of farewell and lament. We brought clippers and took cuttings and briefly entertained the fierce hope that our cuttings would become the next generation of magnolia trees. My cuttings died a week later, but I would not have traded that moment of hope for anything. Morale is a moral issue.

Those of us who have special care for the environment are often tempted to circle the wagons tightly. We focus on what we can control: our diet, our car, our thermostat. This has the comforting factor of being rather achievable, and we can have the pleasure of watching our actions align with our principles and priorities. Trying to achieve systemic change may lead us through powerlessness, futility and rounds of

failure, but it has the possibility of achieving positive change that is orders of magnitude more significant for the climate. That is why we need chaplains on the Green Team. We need those who have professional experience in navigating waves of encouragement and discouragement to apply this to the work of system change.

We are trained to ask the question, “What can I, as an individual, do for the climate?” But perhaps the wiser question is to ask, “What can I, as a member of my workplace or other local system, do for the climate?” Work is a significant location of power. We spend much of our day there. Many of our trusted relationships are there. We may be more powerful than we think. There is room for everyone to partici-

pate in collective work, whether you know anything about anesthetic gases or not. In the wise words of Bill McKibben, “The most important thing an individual can do is be less of an individual.”⁴ ■

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Note: Footnotes can be found in the digital copy at www.christianethicstoday.com

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To Understand the Moral Universe

---Excerpted from Remarks of Barrack Obama as delivered on Thursday, June 18, at the Opening of the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago, Illinois

“...while going through the exhibits, I’d also ask you, listen to the voices of people around the world who have been inspired by American ideas...

...And on the road, you’ll read words from some of America’s greatest leaders, including a quote that inspired that arch that you see right there at the south end of the plaza by Theodore Parker. *“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”*

It’s a quote that was often invoked by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but it originally comes from a Boston minister’s sermon more than 170 years ago. And at the time, the abolitionist cause seemed lost, the compromise of 1850 had made harboring fugitive slaves a crime under federal law, even in those states that had abolished slavery.

And in a case that garnered national attention, a young fugitive in Boston had been seized and tried and marched to the wharf by hundreds of armed officers, where he was summarily put on a ship bound for the south, where he would remain in shackles and chains.

It was a moment of profound uncertainty and despair, a moment the minister called darker than any New England had witnessed.

“We do not see,” Reverend Theodore Parker observed, “that justice is always done on earth. Many a knave is rich, sleek, and honored, while the just man is poor, hated, and in torment. I do not pretend,” the preacher said, “to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience, but from what I see, I am sure it bends towards justice.”

The good Reverend was under no illusions about the perils and obstacles facing the abolitionist cause. His words offered no easy answers, no comforting assurances that he or his congregation would live to see the progress they so desperately sought.

Rather, his was a declaration of faith, a defiant call not to abandon hope or give way to fear, but to stay true to our better selves and true to one another, and to keep fighting to fulfill the promise of this nation, even in the face of cruelty and bitter disappointment, even in the face of impossible odds.”

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—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

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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.

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- Address readers at both intellectual and emotional levels
- Honor the insight of Baptists and others that the best way to provide all citizens in a diverse society with maximal religious liberty is to maintain a separation of church and state
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