

Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics Volume 31, Number 3 Aggregate Issue 121 Summer 2021

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My Grandmother Was A Preacher

By Patrick R. Anderson

The craziness in the church seems never to end. I thought the inanities underpinning certain “doctrines” would have dried up and blown away by now. Controversies which should have been long since settled seem to erupt over and over again, like zombies brought back to life.

The Roman Catholic Church, perhaps the most tradition-bound bastion of Christianity, still forbids women from serving in priestly roles. The Southern Baptist Convention, another tradition-bound hierarchical church system, follows suit.

In 1997, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, promulgated by John Paul II, stated that the church is bound by Jesus’ choice of apostles. The 12 disciples were all men, after all. Therefore, it stands to reason that “the church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason, the ordination of women is not possible.”

Not to be outdone, in the year 2000, Southern Baptists adopted a revised Baptist Faith and Message Statement that decreed, among other inanities, that, “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

Previously, they had laid the charge that because Eve had been the first to sin in the Garden of Eden, women were excluded from pastoral ordination. Catholics found a mandate in the choice of first disciples by Jesus; Southern Baptists found the mandate in creation stories and the writings of Paul.

Now, in 2021, the same two organizations are focused on the gender of pastors and priests, and oblivious to matters of real concern.

My grandmother was a preacher—after she was saved, that is, at the age of 39. Prior to that, among other dubious endeavors, she ran roadhouses, brothels, “hideouts” in the Florida swamps for runaway criminals and deadbeat dads, and smuggled rum from Cuba into Tampa Bay and West Palm Beach.

It was in that environment that she raised her son, her only child, my father. She never married, never worked for any man, and was a strong independent woman. He too was saved shortly after she was when he was 19. Both grandmother and daddy were preaching within months of their conversions, finding audiences on street corners, WPA work camps, jails, brush

arbors, and Heming Park in downtown Jacksonville, Florida. Their enthusiasm could not be contained.

After he was “better trained” by local preachers in Jacksonville (men who later founded Luther Rice Seminary), Daddy objected to his mother’s preaching, saying the Bible forbade such.

I remember their arguments about that. I can see Daddy standing in our hall where the telephone sat on a small table, next to the kitchen. It was easy to hear her talking loudly into her phone and, of course, my daddy was always easy to hear. I remember his leaning against the wall, angrily saying, “Mother, it’s just not right! The Bible says only men can preach!” Grandmother, just as loudly, said, “You’re wrong! My calling does not come from you and I don’t need your

I remember his leaning against the wall, angrily saying, “Mother, it’s just not right! The Bible says only men can preach!” Grandmother, just as loudly, said, “You’re wrong! My calling does not come from you and I don’t need your permission. My calling comes from God!” When she persisted in preaching wherever she could, Daddy’s friends joked and ridiculed the both of them, saying, “God called him to preach, but she answered!”

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When the Baptist church leaders in Jacksonville refused to allow her to preach in churches, she loaded her car and went to Harlan County in Kentucky, having heard that preachers up there were scarce. She preached to coal miners and mountaineers in areas too far from towns and too hostile to outsiders for the

numerous timid men preachers to risk it.

I remember hearing stories years afterward of her having modified an abandoned chicken house into a church building and preaching in regular services. She baptized men, women and children in a local stream.

Then, somehow she heard of people in the bayous of Plaquemine Parish in Louisiana who lacked proper medical care and who the preacher-men had decided were too isolated and too troublesome to preach to. So, she took her message and some medicines in a small pirogue into the tributaries of Cajun Country and ministered to both bodies and souls.

Then, when I was a small boy, she returned to Jacksonville. In failing health, she found a hospitable congregation in the Church of the Nazarene, and it was there she preached until she was overcome with cancer and died in 1959 at the age of 60.

I do not remember arguments about the impropriety of a woman presiding over the ordinances of baptism and the “Lord’s Supper,” but that too must have been a bone of contention for my father and his preacher friends. The very idea!

I wish I could talk with her today about this zombie issue. I could not participate in the discussions (arguments!) between my grandmother and my dad at the time as I was too young. I am sure she pointed out the various Scriptures alluding to women preachers. They have settled the issue I imagine in the Land Beyond, now that they are reunited there; but I would love to hear them on this issue.

Catholic prelates and their equals in Southern Baptist life proclaim inanities such as, “We are all preachers, but the role of senior pastor is for men only.” Senior pastor? The title was unknown in my grandmother’s day and will be found nowhere in Scripture. Pastors were called preachers in my grandmother’s day. The parsing of terms which places new wrinkles on suppressing women called by God would be lost on her. But one thing is for sure: she would not be intimidated by them.

In a salient example, once in a Southern Baptist church in a place far away, after the sermon and during the singularly Baptist invitation time, an increasingly restless congregation stood singing innumerable verses of *Just as I Am* while the preacher-man stood on the main floor in front of the pulpit, urging congregants to respond to God’s call. He appeared to be in earnest conversation with a young woman who had walked the aisle. She whispered in his ear that she was responding to the call of God in her life to preach. The perplexed preacher-man replied to her offer of surrender to that call by saying, “Surely you must be mistaken. You must feel God calling you to be a

preacher’s wife!”

My grandmother was strong enough in her mature body and young faith to withstand such intrusions between the Holy Spirit and free persons. My wife, my daughter and my granddaughters, if feeling the call to preach, would be strong enough as well. And, I pray that if God should call any one of them to preach that she would be strong like my grandmother and say to any self-absorbed preacher man standing in her way, “My calling does not come from you and is not dependent on your permission. My call comes from God and I can do no other!”

The women in my life can be anything they want to be: writer, scientist, doctor, lawyer, judge, astronaut, senator, CEO, police chief, plumber, fighter pilot, diplomat—you name it. Any of them can do whatever her inclinations and abilities permit. Who among us would tell her, “No, young woman. Your gender prohibits that aspiration.” But if God Almighty calls her to serve as a preacher (And what a gifted preacher any of them could become!), she would first have to hear

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objections from men in Southern Baptist or Catholic life who would seek to dissuade her, to convince her that she was not qualified for God to give her such a calling. What arrogance to dispute God’s call!

What foolishness! The world is literally on fire and Catholic bishops and Southern Baptist preacher-men are declaring whom God can use and whom God cannot use.

Sometimes, I imagine a newly-deceased gender-limiting preacher reaching the portals of heaven and being asked by the Savior, “What have you done for me while you were on earth?” I imagine that preacher-man thrusting out his chest and replying proudly with a wink and a nod, “I kept the women from preaching, Lord!” The preacher-man would expect to be congratulated, patted on the back and told, “Well done! Come on in! I’m proud of you, Son!”

That’s what he would expect. But somewhere along the streets of glory he will meet a preacher-woman named Betty Anderson. She will help him understand the error of his ways. ■

God Is an Amateur and Mending the Heart: Reading Claypool #5

By Walter B. Shurden

John R. Claypool, *God Is an Amateur* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Publications, 1994, 87pp.)
John R. Claypool, *Mending the Heart* (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999, 68pp.)

One of the foremost religious radio broadcasts in America began in 1945. A committee called the Southern Religious Radio Conference, consisting of Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Southern Baptists, launched “The Protestant Hour.”

Though known as “The Protestant Hour,” the program was actually only 30 minutes in length. At its peak, more than 600 radio stations in America carried the program. In the 1990s, it morphed into the present “Day One” radio broadcast, sponsored by six mainline denominations, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship among them.

True to a central theme of Protestantism, “The Protestant Hour” highlighted the preached Word. A sermon by a great preacher was the central part of the program. The most celebrated Protestant preachers from America and elsewhere appeared on the program to preach their distinctive understandings of the gospel.

In the early 70s, when I lived in beautiful east Tennessee, I was driving one Sunday morning to a preaching engagement in Oak Ridge, TN. On my radio, I happened upon “The Protestant Hour,” and I heard for the first time the golden voice of Dr. Ernest T. Campbell, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. I had been reading and admiring Campbell for years before I heard him that day on “The Protestant Hour.”

Twenty years previously, in the mid-1950s, John Claypool, then a young Baptist preacher, drove along one Sunday morning “moving the dial from station to station” until he, too, finally heard “the sound of a cultivated voice.” “The longer this one spoke, the more impressed I became,” he wrote.

At the conclusion of the broadcast, the program host identified the preacher as the famous Samuel Shoemaker of Pittsburgh. Claypool reflected, “From that day forward, I listened to it regularly wherever I went and over the years heard many of the great pulpit giants of both this country and Great Britain.”

In the spring of 1988, John Claypool received a surprising call, inviting him to be the preacher on “The Protestant Hour” for several of the Sundays that Fall. “It was one of those things,” he said, “that frankly I had never even dreamed of doing, which made the opportunity that much more gracious.”

In 1994, Forward Movement Publications published a little 87-page book by Claypool entitled *God Is an Amateur*. The book contained the sermons adapted from those Claypool preached on the famous radio program. Of the 12 sermons in the short book, Claypool made the following observation: “They do not repre-

The title of the book is taken from the lead sermon, “Amateurism, God and Ourselves.” It is vintage Claypool as he returns in this sermon to the first chapter of Genesis, as he had so often, to talk theologically about who God is and who we are.

sent all the Christian vision by any means, but certain important facts of it that have nurtured and inspired me and hopefully will do the same for you.”

And it is true that these 12 chapters constitute an apt beginning point for initiation into the thought of John Claypool. As Claypool himself said, you will find several of the recurring themes in this small volume that nourished the soul of the gentle preacher.

He simply could not, for example, keep from saying that “Life is Gift.” He said it often. He said it in many ways. He said it from many biblical texts. Out of the 12 sermons he preached on “The Protestant Hour” and contained in *God Is An Amateur*, I counted eight of them that had a direct connection to this inspired and inspiring refrain that “Life is Gift.”

The title of the book is taken from the lead sermon, “Amateurism, God and Ourselves.” It is vintage Claypool as he returns in this sermon to the first chapter of Genesis, as he had so often, to talk theologically

about who God is and who we are.

He toyed with the word “amateur,” pointing out that it originally came from a Latin root, “amore,” that means “to love.” An “amateur,” Claypool insisted, had nothing to do with incompetence or lack of professionalism. Rather, it originally meant someone who did something for the sheer love of doing it. And “this concept of an amateur---one who does what he or she does for the love of it is very close to the heart of things as they are interpreted by the Biblical writers.”

An amateur! That’s who God is—one who acts in creation for the sheer love of sharing aliveness and existence. The original meaning of “amateur” in relation to God “helps us to see that everything that exists in our world goes back to a generosity that acted as it did for the sheer joy of it.” And an amateur! That’s what God wants of each of us, to choose freely, to live creatively, and to experience the delight of generosity.

Claypool was certainly no novice when it came to interpreting how to handle life’s adversities. With a realistic view of human existence, he insisted that life would work us over, rough us up, and knock us down. But, he said, we also have freedom to choose how to respond to life’s hurts. You can hear these refrains in the titles of these sermons: “And Yet,” “Love and Creativity,” “Choose Your Pain,” and a marvelous Thanksgiving sermon on “Gratitude and Ambiguity.” I repeat: *God Is an Amateur* is a good little book for first wading into “Claypoolology.”

At times, Claypool became a keen and shrewd theologian in the pulpit. He met head-on some of the thorniest issues confronting the human mind. At other times, he was a moral leader, chopping his way through the wilderness of ethical decision-making and guiding his listener on the path where goodness lay. Most of the time, however, Claypool stood behind the pulpit as a pastoral counselor, responding gently and tenderly to issues crushing the human spirit. You will find him as pastoral counselor in every one of his published books, but none more explicitly and thoroughly than in his little book, *Mending the Heart*.

Simply view the table of contents of *Mending the Heart* and you will sense the pastoral counselor at work. You will also understand why one could not help but read on.

- Chapter One: The Wound of Grievance: When Other People Hurt Us
- Chapter Two: The Wound of Guilt: When We Have Hurt Others
- Chapter Three: The Wound of Grief: When We Are Hurt by Loss

Do you see now, by looking at these chapter titles, why people flocked to hear Claypool and why so many hundreds subscribed to read his sermons? Is there anyone anywhere in the whole wide world who has not been hurt by someone else? Is there anyone anywhere in the whole wide world who has not hurt someone else? And is there anyone anywhere in the whole wide world who has not been hurt by losing someone or some thing?

John Claypool wrote two critically important autobiographical sentences in the preface to *Mending the Heart*. “I was very young when I sensed I was being called to devote my life to staying close to God and to human beings, and to make the goal of my life bringing God and human beings closer together. This has been the shape of my calling for over 50 years, and the realities of grievance, guilt and grief have again and again been the focus of my pastoral concerns.

“The shape of my calling for over 50 years,” he said, “was reconciling the human to the Divine in the face of grievance, guilt, and grief.”

Claypool was certainly no novice when it came to interpreting how to handle life’s adversities. With a realistic view of human existence, he insisted that life would work us over, rough us up, and knock us down.

He focused upon universal issues of the human heart. One could never accuse him of preaching on subjects unrelated to the human struggle.

When John Claypool became the priest at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, AL, he and Dr. Fisher Humphreys, professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, became close friends. Teaching a doctorate of ministry seminar each year, Dr. Humphreys invited outside speakers to his class, Claypool among them.

Said Humphreys, “By far the most popular days in the seminar were the days when John Claypool spoke, which he did every year. He always did exactly the same thing. Using no notes, he talked about guilt, grief, and grievance (forgiveness).”

Fisher Humphreys went on to say, “I have extensive notes on his lectures, and they are almost exactly the same from one year to the next.”

Humphreys, one of Baptists’ best contemporary theo-

logians, offered an assessment of Claypool's treatment of the three subjects in *Mending the Heart*. "I think that what he said on all three subjects is true and important and brilliant and, much as I love some of the other books, this is my favorite."

Humphreys noted that *Mending the Heart* came near the end of Claypool's tenure as an active parish minister. "It shows that so far from his powers having diminished, they seem to have become stronger with the passing of the years." And then, by way of making a statement with a question, Fisher Humphreys said, "It's lovely when a great man is also a good man, isn't it?"

Mending the Heart, like most of Claypool's books,

serves many purposes. I once knew a church with the inspiring slogan of "Helping People Make It Through the Week." This book could do that for many people wounded by life. But these three chapters also provide challenging meditations for individual or group reflection. And the little book would be a grace gift for anyone who has lived long enough to have a sharp grievance, some destructive guilt, or some heavy grief in life. ■

Walter Shurden is Minister-at-Large at Mercer University, living with his wife, Kay, in Macon Georgia.



"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

The Fight for the Soul of America

By Lewis Brogdon

During his presidential campaign, Joseph Biden often spoke of the election in terms of a fight for the soul of America. During the Democratic National Convention, Biden said “This campaign isn’t just about winning votes. It’s about winning the heart and, yes, the soul of America.”

It was striking to hear a presidential candidate talk in such ways about an election. It was reminiscent of past presidents such as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy who understood the broader spiritual significance of their presidencies. These leaders understood that seminal moments require more than political leadership, more than politics as usual. They require moral leadership, something he is attempting to provide.

In an October New York Times article, Elizabeth Dias noted, “From the start, his campaign message has been one of broader morality, versus specific policy or ideology,” also quoting presidential historian Jon Meacham who said, “When Mr. Biden says this is a battle for the soul of the nation, he is not using it religiously but as a synonym for character.”

I agreed with him and that was one of the many reasons I cast my vote for Biden-Harris last November. Four more years of a Donald Trump presidency would have been disastrous for the country. **However, with his defeat, the fight for the soul of America is far from over. The truth is, America was losing its soul years before Donald Trump became president.** He only exploited divisions unleashed by an economy that did not work for everyone and the underbelly of racism set off by the continual browning of America and eight years of an African American in the white house.

Had America done important soul-work from 2000-2016, Donald Trump may not have ever been president and America would be a different country than it is now. No doubt America is in crisis, but it cannot all be blamed on Trump. The problems run deeper. Biden’s insistence that we are in a fight for the soul of America sought to draw attention to America’s moral character and implicitly suggested a very real possibility that America was in danger of losing its soul.

Losing Your Soul

The language of losing one’s soul comes from the Bible. In fact, Jesus was the one to talk about this in

gospels such as Mark and Luke where he asked, “*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?*” (KJV, Mark 8:36). I grew up in church hearing this verse quoted and being told that it meant going to hell. What is interesting in the passage is that Jesus is not actually talking about dying and going to hell. He is talking about how we live. Losing your soul happens in life. In both Mark and Luke, this warning is given while Jesus issued one of his calls to discipleship, a call that requires self-denial and cross-bearing, which means sacrificial service and following his way.

His call to discipleship is a life that ultimately seeks to honor God and help others—not oneself. Denying

You see, Jesus’ warning here actually has deeper implications than the fear of hell. People can lose their souls here and now by choosing the easy and selfish path, choosing to be less than their best selves.

this call and life path to “save” one’s life - think have it their way- will prove disastrous. Such a one will gain “the world” but ultimately lose the most important thing, themselves. More importantly, both the call and the warning were given to all who sought to follow him. In other words, Jesus is not thinking in individualistic terms but of the world, as his work is universal in scope.

I like to think of the soul as who we are at our core and the place where we struggle to be the best of ourselves. This suggests that losing your soul means losing touch with who you are ultimately meant to be and losing the struggle to be your best self. You see, Jesus’ warning here actually has deeper implications than the fear of hell. People can lose their souls here and now by choosing the easy and selfish path, choosing to be less than their best selves.

I think this principle has communal and even national implications because we live in communities and

are affected by the actions of others. We have all seen people lost to anger, resentment or hate who unleash pain and suffering onto those around them. Sadly, we are seeing it entirely too much these days and with an intensity and fervor that brings this language to mind. Darker parts of America's soul are being exposed and we are losing the struggle to be our best selves as a nation. Joe Biden saw this back in 2017 with the tragic events surrounding the Charlottesville "unite the right" rally and drew on this language to interpret the moment in which we find ourselves. Republican Senator Ben Sasse saw it in 2018 and wrote the book *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal*. America was in a fight for its soul, for its best self, as its worst parts continue to assert themselves in our national life.

Some may retort, "When did America ever have a soul?" This is a reasonable question, given our troubling history of slavery and genocide. Things today seem like the inevitable result of a path taken years ago. But if we go back to the text in Mark, the question of whether America ever had a soul is wrong. Losing your soul is choosing a lesser path and losing the struggle to be your best self.

When understood in this manner, America has always struggled with its soul. Movements in history like abolitionism, women's suffrage, civil rights and the Me Too and Black Lives movements of today are evidence of a nation that is imperfect, but struggling to be better.

But today, we are losing ground in the struggle and there is an embrace of the worst of ourselves that has gained a foothold in this nation.

The Soul of America Is in Trouble

America is in crisis. We have seen a lot in 2020 and 2021 – a global pandemic, record unemployment, protests over police brutality, riots in multiple cities, and the attack on the capitol building by U.S. citizens at the beckoning of the outgoing president. America is being exposed in troubling ways laid out in the graphic below.

When we peel back the layers and look more closely, we see a more troubling picture of the nature of the American crisis. There is a stubborn refusal to right the wrongs of the past which are present around issues of race, political dysfunction in Washington that is more beholden to corporate interests than the people, and a hyper-partisan "tribalistic" two-party system that is tearing the country apart.

There are also gross economic inequities and poverty affecting millions of lives. There is persistent violence at every level of human and social interaction, from domestic violence and rape to mass shootings. In the face of such big and complex social problems, the empty quest for materialism and pleasure seeks to fill or give meaning to the rampant nihilism we have unleashed on ourselves and each other. All of this is happening amidst devastating loss of life.

For over a year, major news networks tracked the number of Americans contracting and dying from coronavirus. The numbers are staggering. Over

Daily, we witness the spectacles of rampant cynicism, violence, discord, neglect for vulnerable members of society, profound moral confusion and a kind of irrationality that is utterly baffling, like those who believe the pandemic was some hoax or those latching on to conspiracy theories.

561,000 Americans have died from coronavirus – more than the deaths from both WW1 and WW2.

Daily, we witness the spectacles of rampant cynicism, violence, discord, neglect for vulnerable members of society, profound moral confusion and a kind of irrationality that is utterly baffling, like those who

Global Pandemic "Covid-19"	America 2021-2021				
	An Era of Great Social Upheaval & Deep Social Rifts				
	Political system w/ dysfunction & gridlock	Entrenched Racism & Xenophobia	Weakening Infrastructure	Gross Economic Disparities & Mass Poverty	Collapse of Meaning & Declining Influence of Religion

believe the pandemic was some hoax or those latching on to conspiracy theories.

Others see it too. In the *Atlantic* article “A Nation Coming Apart,” Jeffrey Goldberg worries that the ties that bind us are fraying at an alarming speed and that we are becoming contemptuous of each other in ways that are both dire and possibly irreversible.

Dan Zak’s *Washington Post* article, “The Collapse of American Exceptionalism,” quotes Elizabeth Tandy Schermer, an associate professor of history at Loyola University Chicago, who said we “can no longer pretend that ‘the American century’ isn’t over. She views “the years since 1968 as a cycle of recessions and widening inequality, debt and disenfranchisement that is only now becoming apparent to broader America - white America, moneyed America - because the pandemic and social media have made it impossible to ignore. Institutions have been deteriorating and failing us for generations, she says, but we rigged work arounds with our own social networks and mutual-aid groups. We made do. Then the pandemic “scattered us, isolated us, exposed us for what we really are.”

These are samples of a robust national conversation that includes other articles such as Joel Kotkin “America’s Drift toward Feudalism” and the controversial Rolling Stone article titled “The Unraveling of America” about a country losing its soul. In a sense, the pandemic both exposed and exacerbated weak points in our systems and citizenry that will take years to address.

As a final point, there is the problem of what passes as leadership today in America. We have too many political and community leaders who cannot see “the forest for the trees” meaning they are so preoccupied with the individual parts - singular social issue, social group or partisan loyalty - that they neglect the whole - the health and well-being of the nation. We have powerful leaders whose thinking and actions hurt the country, but benefit their groups, which they believe is acceptable.

That is only part of the problems we face. Our preoccupation on parts and our blindness to the whole is why we cannot see the root of the growth of social dysfunction that is stifling our nation. I want to draw our attention to what I believe the core to be because I suspect, this broader crisis is a second and equally important reason Biden invoked the language of America in a fight for its soul.

The Heart of Our National Crisis

While attention needs to be given to the political system, the weakening and ineffective infrastructure, and poverty, they do not get at the heart of our crisis. Our

first core problem is that we have placed hatred at the center of society. Hate is the undercurrent and common thread animating the American crisis. It guides how we think about and interact with others. (Remember the Ben Sasse book, *Them*.)

For example, there is a form of hate that I call “othering” that manifests itself in both the resurgence of the old white-black racism and neo-racism directed against other people of color and immigrant communities. “Othering” categories are used by non-white people to justify indifference, mistreatment and violence. Othering extends beyond racism and xenophobia. Its social currency also allows us to use partisan and class labels as excuses to mask indifference, exclusion and discrimination. In other words, we all use othering to justify ill treatment of each other in both our personal relationships and in the policies we support.

Yoni Appelbaum’s article “How America Ends” in *The Atlantic* gives a compelling example of what I would call “partisan othering.”

Recent research by political scientists at

Our first core problem is that we have placed hatred at the center of society.

Vanderbilt University and other institutions have found both Republicans and Democrats distressingly willing to dehumanize members of the opposite party. “Partisans are willing to explicitly state that members of the opposing party are like animals in that they lack essential human traits,” the researchers found... This is a dangerous line to cross. As the researchers write, “Dehumanization may loosen the moral restraints that would normally prevent us from harming another human being” (December 2019, 46).

These researchers are correct. The way we think and talk about people in the opposite party is dangerous. Hate has created a crisis in public morality indicative of a nation’s losing its soul. We cannot fix our crumbling infrastructure, or bridge the partisan divide, or correct systemic racism, or address poverty until we come to grips with our hate.

Why do I believe that we have centralized hate in society? First, as a general principle, people are not going to admit they hate other people or are thinking and acting in hateful ways. This does not, however, mean such a claim is true. Actions always speak louder than words. A person’s, or group’s actions can contradict the claim of being without hate or in not partici-

pating in group hate toward others.

Second, what often happens is that hate disguises itself or is called something else. This then allows people to participate in hate without feeling they have compromised a belief system of some kind. This is how hate can be both pervasive and widespread in a country with deep religious roots. This is exactly what is happening all over this country.

Here I turn to one of the most influential books in African American history. Howard Thurman's classic *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1953) shows how hatred can serve a social function, but ultimately is destructive. In the chapter exploring hate, he speaks of a "socially-acceptable" form of hate employed during times of war.

He witnessed hatred becoming acceptable and respectable during times of war as a country mobilizes support to destroy an enemy. Thurman says that it is very simple. In times of war, "hatred could be brought out into the open, given a formal dignity and a place of respectability." Instead of hate, we may call it patriotism, providing moral cover for a nation or nations to peddle hateful speech and justifying political and militaristic reasons others must be killed. After all, they are the enemy.

Thurman knew that such cover was important in a nation that claims to be Christian because hate is a sin. He adds, "Hatred is something of which to be ashamed unless it provides for us a form of validation and prestige. If either is provided, then the immoral or amoral character of hatred is transformed into positive violence" (Thurman, 75). It is the label "enemy" that provides the validation that fuels hostile thoughts and feelings. Then, in some cases, these thoughts and feelings lead to legitimate acts of violence, even killing. Again, we may call it patriotism but there is no escaping the web of hate.

Thurman also witnessed hatred being used in group relations and spoke about the dangers of African Americans embracing hate in the fight against racism. While his example focused on relations between black and white people, his analysis applies more broadly to all groups and specifically the belief that any group's hatred is actually righteous. He found that hatred begins where there is "contact without fellowship."

In other words, we can be around others but not associate with them or know them. While hatred begins where there is little contact, it is sustained by "bottled up resentment that is used to give people a basis for self-realization" and insists that the basis creates "the illusion of righteousness" (Thurman 82). This is why we hear some African Americans say things like "I hate all police officers." To them, "it's all right

to hate the police because they are killing us."

Or, if a group is being 'othered' by those in power, it is a powerful defense mechanism for that group to hate those marginalizing them. In such a situation, hatred can feel necessary to a sense of self-worth.

There are two points I want to make here about Thurman's analysis of hate. The first is the importance of giving attention to social and political causes we rally behind that do nothing more than provide moral cover for us to objectify, dehumanize and hate other people. This cover, no matter how sophisticated and important we make it, illustrates how reasonably good people can participate in hate. Whether it is selective benevolence where kindness is reserved for those in his or her group or selective malevolence for those outside his or her group, it is easy to be snared in hate's web and guilty of what may be Thurman's most profound point when he says hate "makes [it] possible for an individual to be life-affirming and life-negating at one and the same time" (Thurman 85 or 86).

This sounds like a lot of Americans today – life-

Thurman found that hatred begins where there is "contact without fellowship."

affirming and life-negating, indicative of a country losing its soul.

My second point is a warning. Nothing positive, constructive or creative comes from hate. For example, look at the condition of our infrastructure or how we responded to the pandemic. Discord cripples our vision and will to respond effectively to social challenges we face.

Thurman's conclusion about hate is threefold. First, he says that Jesus rejected hate. And so it is ironic that hate has become so acceptable in a country claiming to be Christian and following the teachings of Jesus. The other two things he said are that hate destroys the core life of the hater and dries up the springs of creative thought. By placing it at the center of who we choose to be in this moment and our interactions with others, we are choosing a path with a destructive end because we lack creativity and the collective will needed to address the complex problems we face today. Our energy will be consumed fighting one another, which is why Jesus wisely said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Mark 3:25).

The second core problem at the heart of the American crisis is religious. Many Christian churches,

organizations and leaders are morally bankrupt and unable to bring the great teachings and ideas of religion to bear on our national life. What makes this crisis so acute is that our churches buttress so many families and educational institutions. When churches cannot provide moral support to the nation, it compounds the nature of the crisis we are in and leaves us lost. Faith communities of all kinds play a vital role in society that goes beyond matters of personal piety, teaching and worship for its adherents. They should contribute to the broader good of society. Churches should draw on teachings in Scripture to remind the country that God is the creator of all humanity and not just Americans or people of one race; that God loves justice and mercy, calling us to live together in peace and to love our neighbor. We must keep these ideas before the state at all times. In this respect, many Christian churches are failing.

The Church in America has been here before during the centuries of African slavery and the Jim Crow era. In the previous era, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was deeply troubled by the apathy and mixed witness of Christianity in a pivotal moment in history. In response to a statement eight clergymen issued in the newspaper, criticizing Dr. King's Birmingham campaign, he expressed disappointment in the Church, something he would often do as the movement continued throughout the sixties.

"I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the Church...all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows...In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church" (Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963).

I too am disappointed and weep over the shameful condition of many of our churches. Sadly, too many churches are silent in the face of widespread oppression and suffering. Too many sanction these activities and are almost hopelessly divided in moments when moral clarity is desperately needed.

Yes, we have been here before and we are certainly here again. For example, some churches and leaders are so tangled and mangled up into partisan politics that they have lost a broader perspective of the nation as a whole and the role they must play in guiding it.

Not only did King express disappointment in the church, he also warned churches today about its relationship to the state in a sermon called, *A Knock at Midnight*, written and delivered in 1963.

"The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide

and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will.

There are too many churches and leaders who are nothing more than tools and blind worshipers of the state. Today, there are too many churches that are nothing more than Democratic and or Republican social clubs. This is where we are today – churches with little moral and spiritual authority to guide a state that has lost its way. In its wake, there is profound moral confusion that is allowing our political and community leaders to continue to act in such a reckless and irresponsible manner.

This crisis of religion is twofold: Churches have increasingly become the puppet of the state and not its conscience and we have lost sight of our own imper-

"Many Christian churches, organizations and leaders are morally bankrupt and unable to bring the great teachings and ideas of religion to bear on our national life."

fections and blindness as we work in the public square.

There are two gifts in the Christian tradition: the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist that should ground us in the realization that we are ALWAYS imperfect. We strive to speak and give witness to truth, but we never do so perfectly. In fact, our best thoughts and actions are always tinged with self-interest and motives which are less than good.

This means that our groups, organizations, philosophies, churches and even our criticisms of other groups are ALL imperfect. This realization should inspire humility and grace in the work we do in the world including taking a stand against injustice and speaking truth to power. Tasks like speaking truth to power must be grounded in the realization of our tendency to see things our way and sometimes to claim arrogantly that our way and God's way are the exactly the same. The convicting and constraining work of the Spirit and the Eucharistic call to self-examination in relation to

others, should ward off the pride and arrogance we see commonplace today.

Instead, too many Christian leaders are convinced that they are right about everything and that the greatest threat to the nation is always somebody else - “it’s them.” always them. This is why we are choking on our own and each other’s arrogance. This obsession with being right and proving to others how wrong they are is blinding us to the ways, large and small, that we are participating in the dysfunction that is tearing this nation apart.

Religious groups and leaders must not only cut the puppet strings and find their pastoral and prophetic voices in a nation losing its soul, they must also enter a season of self-reflection and self-examination, and not “other” examination. (Remember Matthew 7:3-5.) This season can open a door to a movement of repentance and healing that America desperately needs.

A Movement that Heals the Soul of America

Both politics and public policy are vital for the future of America; but politics cannot fix a nation with a broken soul. We can start by going back to Jesus’ call to discipleship that consists of denying self, self-sacrifice and following him. This path may seem like losing in life, but the irony is that it is the path to save life.

This call, when applied to our social life, means living and working for causes that are bigger than we are and that benefit others. This path, I believe, can save America’s soul. Hate will only worsen our social predicament and hasten the complete loss of our nation’s soul unless we reimagine our public life together. The hard soul work the nation requires is daunting. Moral leadership will be an absolute necessity. Yes, we need leaders with education, skill and experience. We also need leaders to have the right kind of spirit and a mind that understands the moral nature of the moment we are in. The challenges before us and the work required to build a nation where we all can thrive require a movement of heart and spirit.

Fortunately for us, we do not have to start from scratch. We have past leaders whose work can give meaning to the moment we are in. Dr. King is one of those leaders. I believe that if America had listened to him in the late sixties, we would not be where we are today in 2020 and 2021.

It is time to do some listening. Though widely known as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement and the champion of nonviolent direct action, his ideas on hate and the national character are not given enough attention. For some reason, our leaders stopped talking about the importance of a nation’s character, which was a point to which King constantly brought

attention. **If Dr. King could speak to America in 2021, I believe he would say that America needs a movement that repudiates hatred and must work to address its national character.** These two things can set us on a path to healing and the recovery of our national soul.

In one of his famous sermons based on Matthew 5:43-45, Dr. King opened with words that ring eerily true of our time:

“My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities which surrendered to hatred and violence”
(Strength to Love 1963).

He asks both how and why we should love our enemies. His answers were simple yet profound. We love our enemies by developing and maintaining the capacity to forgive, by recognizing that the evil deed of the enemy neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he (or she) is; and by not seeking to

If Dr. King could speak to America in 2021, I believe he would say that America needs a movement that repudiates hatred and must work to address its national character.

defeat or humiliate the enemy, but to win his friendship and understanding. Dr. King is talking not about an easy sentimentality, but about a moral strength that holds social chaos and violence at bay. This kind of love is the kind of fuel we need for a national anti-hate movement.

As a nation, we do not talk much about forgiveness. We also like to make a point of disagreement or a thing we do not like about others the “be all end all” of who they are as a person. Social media is littered with examples of the ways we choose to defeat and humiliate each other over social, economic, political and many other issues. This is why wreckage abounds in 2020 and 2021.

America needs a movement that repudiates this undercurrent of hate. Please do not confuse this as a “we should all just come together” plea. Such calls often dismiss issues of injustice and profound human suffering. I am not calling for a dismissal of important differences and issues. I am, however, calling for us to be honest about the undercurrent of indifference and

disgust fueling how we choose to address our differences. We must stop hating each other. We do not have to agree. Dissent and ideological variance are healthy for a democracy, but the thread of hate must be confronted and overcome.

Dr. King drew on the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament tradition because one of the biggest and most difficult ideas is the rule of neighbor love taught in places like Luke 10, 1 Corinthians 13 and 1 John 3. King understood that one cannot claim to follow Jesus while minimizing the moral weight of what Jesus said about love.

When I read the New Testament, I am challenged by a radical gospel that calls for us to love God and neighbor with the understanding that our neighbor is anyone and everyone. God's vision is expansive and universal in scope and yet, in America, a nation that claims to be Christian, we traffic daily in hateful speech and actions, things that contradict the rule of neighbor love and an incredibly challenging exhortation such as Titus 3:2 that says, "to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always gentle toward everyone."

Sadly, our churches provide moral cover for people by condoning, either by its silence or support, this shameful behavior that has now grown out of control. Our ignorance of Jesus and King's revolutionary ideas is why we do not see the undercurrent of hate eating away at our national soul. It is also why we continue to see people tearing at each other and our nation in the name of "good." I think it is time we revisit these writings and ideas so we can reimagine our civic life before it is too late.

Along with a movement that repudiates hatred, we must have leaders like President Biden and others who call on us to address our national character. King said,:

"Our hope for creative living in this world house that we have inherited lies in our ability to reestablish the moral ends of our lives in personal character and social justice. Without this spiritual and moral reawakening we shall destroy ourselves in the misuse of our own instruments" (*Where Do We Go From Here*, 181, 83).

It was true in 1967-68 and true today. America has to reestablish its moral character. It begins with the sober reminder that we are in this together. As divided as we are, we are citizens of one nation. This simple idea has been completely lost by so many in this moment, including our political and religious leaders. It continues by allowing us to let our wealth and technological sophistication delude ourselves into thinking we are not in crisis.

King saw this about America when he mentioned

the need "to bridge the gulf between our scientific progress and our moral progress." Development and growth in a nation have both social and moral dimensions. Too often, our focus is on the social. King knew this which was why he said that America must bridge the great gulf between science and technology on one hand and public morality on the other.

A nation must attend to its moral character, something which is very much a part of the work before us in 2021.

This is one of the powerful ideas Dr. King left us. He taught us to think of morality in terms of the kind of nation we have been and the kind of nation we can be. While often morality is thought of in personal terms, greater attention is needed on the character of this nation. This is different from making a singular moral issue the be-all end-all of a nation, but casts a broader gaze that encompasses the whole of who we are and the places where improvement and growth are needed.

In the spirit of Dr. King, I am calling on all citizens to have honest conversations about the character of

When I read the New Testament, I am challenged by a radical gospel that calls for us to love God and neighbor with the understanding that our neighbor is anyone and everyone.

this nation—conversations which I hope lead to a movement of some kind. This movement will be a moral, not a religious, one in which all citizens have a part to play. We must find ways, in spite of our many differences, to inspire the best in each other, not the worst. We must broaden our struggle beyond the narrow confines of sectarianism by whatever name we call it. America is bigger than any one group and big enough for us all to live in peace. We must find a way to struggle to be better together than we are right now. This is the call I am issuing.

How will I deliver this message to the nation? As director of the Institute for Black Church Studies, a nationally based educational and advocacy center in Louisville, Kentucky, I am going to lead and facilitate conversations on our national character called, "The conversation every American needs to have in 2021" in cities and towns with leaders using this article. I hope these conversations will be the beginning of meaningful change.

I am humbly asking Governor Andy Beshear of

Kentucky to issue a call for citizens to grapple with the character of our state. I also humbly ask our president, Joe Biden, to issue a call to restore the soul and character of the nation during a future state of the union address that is followed by a series of townhall meetings carried by major news networks and a new round of public service announcements where political, religious and educational leaders teach principles of compassion, understanding and humility, including modeling how to ask for and forgive wrongs.

I hope leaders will write op-ed pieces and that organizations will hold local panels exploring how we can improve our national character. I hope pastors will

devote a special sermon series on this topic and sponsor bible studies that explore the teachings of Scripture and their bearing on our national character.

It is simple things such as this that can infuse heart into our civic discourse, encourage understanding and compassion, and reduce discord and violence. Together, we can save the soul of America before it is too late. ■

Lewis Brogdon (Ph.D.) is the Director of the Institute for Black Church Studies and research professor at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky in Louisville Kentucky.



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Concerning the Meaning of the Incarnation

John 1:1-18, The Second Sunday of Christmastide

By Chuck Poole

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

With those words, this morning's gospel lesson takes up the great mystery of the incarnation: the God no one has ever seen, embodied in the life of Jesus; the God who created the universe, roughly 13 billion years ago, fleshed out, for about 30 years, in a single, local, physical human life—the life of Jesus.

Across the Christian centuries, what that might mean has been one of Christianity's most important questions, spawning church councils and official creeds in the fourth and fifth centuries, and inspiring one particularly important, and influential, book in the 11th century, by a theologian named Anselm of Canterbury, who, in a book called *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why Did God Become Human?) gave the Church an understanding of the incarnation which has shaped the Church from then to now.

Anselm's basic idea went something like this: Jesus was born to be the sacrifice God gave to God's self to satisfy God's requirement for a perfect human sacrifice, so that God would then be free to forgive sinful humans without compromising God's holiness; a way of explaining the incarnation which, a thousand years ago, took root in the church and, a thousand years later, continues to dominate popular Christianity; a way of explaining the incarnation which is often summed up in the simple saying, "Jesus was born to die."

All of which may be true. There is, after all, some Bible to support Anselm's explanation of the incarnation, and it is believed by many dear and devout souls to be the truth concerning the coming of Christ we celebrate during this sacred season of Christmastide.

But, for other Christians, myself among them, it is a way of thinking about the incarnation which raises more questions than it answers.

Indeed, while I cannot speak for you, but as for me, **I wonder if it might be more true to the Spirit of God to say that the incarnation is primarily not about a problem—our alienation from God, and how to fix it (a human sacrifice to God)—but about a life and how to live it, and about a love, and how to give it.**

It is Jesus, embodying the grace and truth of God in a way which gave us our best look at who God is, how God acts and what God wants for us and from us. God, coming into the world in Jesus, not because God's hands were tied by a sacrificial system of God's own creation which kept God from forgiving and welcoming sinners until God could give God's self the sacrifice God required; but, perhaps, because God is relentlessly determined to be with us, in the best and worst of life; no mess so big, sin so bad, or humiliation so embarrassing that God won't join us in the absolute hardest and worst of it. The signs of which are that Jesus, the ultimate incarnation of God, was born poor and vulnerable in a barn, and that Jesus, the ultimate incarnation of God, died naked and humiliated on a cross.

And, between Jesus' birth in a barn and Jesus' death on a cross, Jesus could always be found keeping company with those who were on the hard margins and despised edges of life, which, since Jesus was the ultimate incarnation of God, must be a sign of the boundless embrace and expansive empathy of God. Jesus, sitting down with and standing up for the outsiders often enough that it made the insiders fearful enough that they decided to silence Jesus; which, according to the four gospels, is what got Jesus killed. The body of our Lord broken for us all, the blood of our Lord poured out for us all; Jesus, dying as he lived; arms out as wide as the world.

But though the incarnation of God was killed, the incarnation of God did not stay dead, because that one life was the one life that cannot be and, ultimately, will not be defeated, not even by death.

Which is why I believe that the most true thing we can say about the incarnation of God in Jesus, is that Jesus was born to live—with us, in us, for us, and through us; the embodiment of God's goodness and love, born again, in Bethlehem every Christmas and in us every day.

Amen. ■

This sermon, preached January 3, 2021 at Northminster Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi was recommended by preaching connoisseur, Buddy Shurden, and is reprinted here with permission of the preacher, the pastor of Northminster, Chuck Poole.

Christian Attitudes Surrounding Abortion Have a More Nuanced History Than Current Events Suggest

By Luis Josué Salés

Opponents and supporters of legal abortion in the U.S. will be watching when the Supreme Court hears *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* during its upcoming term. In this lawsuit, a Mississippi women's health center has challenged the constitutionality of a 2018 state law banning abortions after the first 15 weeks of pregnancy. In the Supreme Court's hands, the case has the potential to affect provisions of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark decision that legalized abortion in the U.S., and further limit women's access to abortion in many states.

Such challenges to abortion in the United States are often fueled by the belief of many Christians that abortion and Christianity are incompatible. For example, the catechism of the Catholic Church, an authoritative guide to the beliefs and practices of Roman Catholic Christians, states: "Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable."

However, this statement tells only one part of the story. It is true that Christian leaders, virtually all male, have largely condemned abortion. Nonetheless, as a scholar of premodern Christianities, I am also aware of the messier realities that this statement conceals.

Celebrating women's celibacy

The earliest Christian writings – the letters of the Apostle Paul – discouraged marriage and reproduction. Later Christian texts supported these teachings. In a second-century text known as the Acts of Paul and Thekla, a Christian author in Asia Minor praised Thekla for rejecting her suitors and avoiding marriage in favor of spreading Christian teachings instead.

In the third century, Thekla's story inspired a Roman noblewoman called Eugenia. According to the Christian text titled the *Acts and Martyrdom of Eugenia*, Eugenia rejected marriage and led a male monastery for a time. Afterward, she discouraged Alexandrian women from having children, but this advice angered their husbands. These men convinced the emperor Gallienus that Eugenia's teachings about women's reproductive choice endangered Rome's

military power by reducing the "supply" of future soldiers. Eugenia was executed in 258 A.D.

Even as the Roman Empire became increasingly Christian, women still received praise for avoiding marriage. For example, the bishop Gregorios of Nyssa, an ancient city near Harmandalı, Turkey, wrote the beautiful text *Life of Makrina* to celebrate his beloved sister and teacher, who died in 379 A.D. In this text, Gregorios admires Makrina for wittily rejecting suitors by claiming that she owed faithfulness to her dead fiancé.

To sum up, while early Christian texts did not exact-

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ly encourage women to explore sexual experiences, neither did they encourage marriage, reproduction and family life.

Choices beyond celibacy

Premodern Christian women had options beside celibacy as well, although the state, the church and mediocre medicine limited their reproductive choices.

In 211 A.D., the Roman emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla made abortion illegal. Tellingly, though, Roman laws surrounding abortion were centrally concerned with the father's right to an heir, not with women or fetuses in their own right. Later Roman Christian legislators left that largely unchanged.

Conversely, Christian bishops sometimes condemned the injustice of laws regulating sex and reproduction. For example, the bishop Gregorios of Nazianzos, who died in 390 A.D., accused legisla-

tors of self-serving hypocrisy for being lenient on men and tough on women. Similarly, the bishop of Constantinople, Ioannes Chrysostomos, who died in 407 A.D., blamed men for putting women in difficult situations that led to abortions.

Christian leaders often gathered at meetings called “synods” to discuss religious beliefs and practices. Two of the most important synods concerning abortion were held in Ankyra – currently Ankara, Turkey – in 314 A.D. and in Chalkedon – today’s Kadiköy, Turkey – in 451 A.D. Notably, these two synods drastically reduced the penalties for abortion relative to earlier centuries.

But over time, these legal and religious opinions did not seem appreciably to affect women’s reproductive choices. Rather, pregnancy prevention and termination methods thrived in premodern Christian societies, especially in the medieval Roman Empire. For example, the historian Prokopios of Kaisareia claims that the Roman Empress Theodora nearly perfected contraception and abortion during her time as a sex worker, and yet this charge had no impact on Theodora’s canonization as a saint.

Some evidence even indicates that premodern Christians actively developed reproductive options for women. For instance, Christian physicians, like Aetios of Amida in the sixth century and Paulos of Aigina in the seventh, provided detailed instructions for performing abortions and making contraceptives. Their texts deliberately changed and improved on the medical work of Soranos of Ephesos, who lived in the second century. Many manuscripts contain their work, which indicates these texts circulated openly.

Further Christian texts about holy figures suggest complex Christian perspectives on the acceptable termination of fetal development – and even newborn lives. Consider a sixth-century text, the *Egyptian Life of Dorotheos*. In this account, the sister of Dorotheos, an Egyptian hermit from Thebes, becomes pregnant while possessed by a demon. But when Dorotheos successfully prays for his sister to miscarry, the text treats the unusual termination of the pregnancy as a miracle, not a moral outrage.

Around 1,100 years later, a similar event happens in the Ethiopian Life of Walatta Petros. According to this text, Walatta Petros, a noblewoman later canonized as a saint, married a general and became pregnant three times. However, every time she conceived, she prayed for her fetus to die promptly if it would “not please God in life.” The narrator tells us that all three of her children died days after birth, since “God heard her prayer.”

Certainly, Christians have a history of opposing methods for preventing and terminating pregnancies. But these premodern texts, spanning some 1,500 years, indicate that Christians also have a history of providing these services, and making them safer for women.

This tense and inconclusive relationship to abortion may be poorly known – or perhaps overlooked for political convenience. But that does not change the fact, as I see it, that Christians who support women’s reproductive rights are also following the historical precedent of their religious tradition. ■

But over time, these legal and religious opinions did not seem appreciably to affect women’s reproductive choices. Rather, pregnancy prevention and termination methods thrived in premodern Christian societies, especially in the medieval Roman Empire.

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Post-Pandemic Reflections on Psalm 18 by a Vulnerable and Grateful Survivor

By Marion D. Aldridge

*L*ike many others, I found myself more anxious during the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020-21 than I had ever been. Period. Full stop. Ever!

Worry and fear are not my natural habitat. I'm in my eighth decade and statistics indicate, with regard to this disease, the elderly have been and are the most vulnerable, at-risk population.

Like many others, during the pandemic, I found myself more dependent on a direct relationship with God than one mediated by corporate worship, church attendance, group Bible study, and fellowship with other Christians. People were in isolation and on their own.

Like many others, I needed to step up my social media and technology skills for communication and relationships. I confess that, other than Facebook, I failed.

Like many others, I was inconvenienced during the novel virus crisis. My wife and I were unable to see one of our daughters for a year-and-a-half. As a young woman, she had her own reasons to self-quarantine. My wife and I had to give up date nights. Football season was canceled, or, at least, considerably modified. We tried out a new hobby or two, such as completing thousand-piece puzzles, but that new pastime failed.

But at no point during the pivotal 15 months did I feel it appropriate to pray the familiar words from the 22nd Psalm: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Like many others, I was a frustrated pastor. I could not visit sick church members in the hospital or their homes. My comfort zone as an experienced pastor disappeared. I was as clueless about how to function in this environment as a first-year seminarian. *Like many others*, I had friends get sick with the virus, and a few to die after contracting it. *Like many others*, I was often angry at the inept political response to a grave national and international crisis. I was also angry that the decision to wear a mask or get vaccinated had, for many, become dependent on which politician and television network one trusted. I hated that.

Like many others, I bought a new Bible and began reading it cover-to-cover. The Bible, I am reminded, is a *living* word. Someone called it a shape-shifter. It reads differently depend-

ing on life circumstances. It reads differently when nations and individuals are in the middle of a war rather than "at ease in Zion." It reads differently when you are a 30-year old with an irritating employer than when you are a 60-year old with an irritating employee. The Holy Scriptures seem to bend and flex to meet the circumstances of the person needing a word from God.

While systematically re-reading through the Psalms, my first, second and third thoughts were that Psalm 18 might be irrelevant to me.

According to the introductory rubric, David wrote this poem when he was an ambitious and success-

The Holy Scriptures seem to bend and flex to meet the circumstances of the person needing a word from God.

ful young warrior before he was king. We read that he "sang to the Lord the words of this song when the Lord delivered him from the hands of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." First and Second Samuel depict the constant state of conflict in which the Israelites were engaged—with their external enemies (e.g., the Philistines) and then with each other: Saul vs. David. David vs. Absalom. Bloody international belligerence. Deadly family fights. Enemies everywhere.

As I read Psalm 18 (which can also be found in Second Samuel 22), I appreciated the theme that had spoken to me in the past—the blunt request that God protect us from our enemies. I have had enemies. I have been saved from my enemies.

Throughout my life, I have held responsible positions. I was often the point person for controversial decisions in my congregation and in my denomination. Not everybody liked me, or my opinions, or my style. Bible texts such as Psalm 140 described my inner turmoil:

Rescue me from evildoers...who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day...
Keep me safe...protect me.

While nobody ever threatened to kill me, my employment was often at risk. I took unpopular stands on topics ranging from racism to national idolatry. I have been in the ministry for over 50 years and have been called to exercise the role not only of pastor, but also of prophet. You don't have to read the Bible closely to know prophets were almost always in trouble. There is a story in First Kings where King Ahab of Israel complained, after 400 so-called prophets told him what he wanted to hear, but not the truth,

There is still one prophet through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah (not to be confused with Micah).

That felt like the reputation I had among certain members of the congregations I pastored and within my denomination. I challenged their traditions and the beliefs of families and the bad habits of Southern culture. Of course, it is also certain that sometimes I was just a jerk. I will not claim I was always easy to like. Early in my ministry, someone told me there is a huge difference in being disliked for having an offensive personality and in being persecuted for righteousness' sake. I have tried to temper my beliefs with kindness, compassion, and empathy.

One of my favorite quotations is from William Sloane Coffin who said: "Jesus told us to love our enemies, not to avoid having them." As a lifelong people pleaser, as someone who liked to be liked, this was a difficult posture for me to find myself in for much of my life. I was elected senior class president in high school and student body vice-president in college, which must say something about being well-liked or admired, at least by some. Eventually, however, I realized following Jesus would put me outside of popular culture looking in.

But that was then and this is now, right? I'm semi-retired and not actively engaged in any power struggles at home, at work or at church. Long past the prime of life, I am blessed to have no family squabbles, no workplace hassles, and no hostilities with neighbors. What could this text about David and his enemies have to do with me?

Enemies come in all shapes and sizes.

"The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me" (Psalm 18: 5). For the past year and a half, that has been truer than ever before in my life. While my wife and I took the quarantine seriously, and mostly stayed home, wearing masks when we needed to go out, not everyone in South Carolina was vigilant. The coronavirus was killing people, thousands each day. Worse, some people were in open

rebellion against the various health mandates and laughed them off. One pastor friend of a more "let's-just-trust-the-Holy-Spirit" Pentecostal persuasion than I, wrote on Facebook that God would protect him and, if it were his time to die, so be it. He assured his family and congregation he was prepared to die. Well, he died—from coronavirus, Covid 19.

If it's my time to die, whatever that means, I believe I'm ready. I've lived a long good life and, when I die, my religion and my gut say I'll be okay. But I sure didn't want to die needlessly and carelessly from coronavirus, struggling for breath in an Intensive Care Unit, separated from my family, consuming hundreds of thousands of dollars of medical resources, endangering the lives of doctors, nurses, hospital aides and orderlies who did *not* think it was their time to die. Do I really have no enemies? Does Psalm 18 no longer have relevance for me?

I think coronavirus qualifies as an adversary. David prays for the Lord to hear his voice, to part the heavens and come down and fight on his behalf. Why should I

"The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanliness of my hands in his sight."

not lift up this prayer? After I have done everything I can do to protect myself, I am ultimately dependent on God. Verses 16-18 read:

He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes who were too strong for me...The Lord was my support.

I do not understand why some good people die too soon, and some rascals live long and prosper; but I intend to keep praying, trusting God, and thanking God.

There were those who ignored the easy protections—hand washing, social distancing, mask wearing, and receiving life-saving vaccines. I think it's somewhat humorous that Psalm 18:24 actually mentions hand washing!

"The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanliness of my hands in his sight."

I'm more than a bit uncomfortable, as a sinful human being, claiming righteousness; but would I prefer to be wrong? Science tells us that wearing a mask is a

splendid idea. That's why surgeons and other medical personnel do it. I'll side with science instead of strange Internet conspiracy theories.

During the pandemic, I maintained my habit of walking about two-and-a-half miles daily. Believe it or not, that, too, is in Psalm 18. David, in verse 36, wrote, "You provide a broad path for my feet, so that my ankles do not give way." Hiking was something I could do that was safe, healthy and required no human interaction.

As for David's enemies, "They cried for help but there was no one to save them." We can never get accurate statistics on who has been victimized by Coronavirus. The elderly couldn't help getting old; but otherwise, I feel sure the science-less, mask-less and vaccine-less individuals were and are most at risk.

Psalm 90 suggests that "threescore years and ten" is a reasonable length for a life, and a marker I've achieved,

for which I thank God. My two best friends died at age 60 and 63. The humbling reality for this chapter of my life is that I have survived this pandemic, so far. I

know I will die one day—of something: a novel virus, a cancer, a car wreck, a heart attack. I'll face that nemesis when I need to, but death is not the enemy. St. Paul exclaims, "O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?"

The psalmist, David, reminds me over and over that God is still God, through life's up and downs. I believe that God is on the path of life with me, from start to finish, and I pray, along with David, for God's constant protection. ■

Marion Aldridge is a retired pastor and coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina. He is a writer and lives in Columbia SC with his wife, Sally.

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Thank you for a very thought-provoking publication and online presence...Susan Clark

World Hunger Surged in 2020, With 1 in 10 People on Earth Undernourished

By Jessica Eise

Nearly 10 percent of everyone on Earth – an estimated 768 million of us – were undernourished in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted economies, job markets and supply chains and inflated food prices. According to the latest edition of an annual food security report from the United Nations, the total sharply increased by an additional 118 million people from 2019, when 8.4 percent of the world's population was undernourished.

People who are undernourished are chronically hungry, meaning they don't have enough to eat for a normal, healthy and active life for a period of at least a year. This condition is particularly severe for children, with repercussions that can become permanent.

Undernourishment was the most prevalent and grew the fastest in low-income nations, such as Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi. Very few people in wealthier places like Germany, Canada and Australia meet the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's criteria for undernourishment.

Many years of progress in reducing this problem around the globe had already faltered, starting in 2014. Unfortunately, in addition to lingering economic problems caused by the coronavirus pandemic, famine now looms in many places. As a result, prospects for a full economic rebound in the world's poorest countries remained weak as of the summer of 2021.

More food insecurity

Even more people are experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity, meaning that they do not consistently have access to the food they need every day.

More than 30 percent of the world's population faced that situation in 2020, up from 26.6 percent in 2019, the U.N. found.

People who experience hunger for several years as children are more likely to die before reaching maturity. Those who survive may face many health and cognitive disadvantages that continue throughout their lives.

That's because when children get inadequate nutrition, they may be described as "stunted," meaning their brains and bodies do not grow to their full potential. Stunting can affect someone's ability to pay attention,

multitask and regulate their mood. Reducing the prevalence of hunger around the world among children is an especially urgent priority because, unfortunately, the possibility of recovering from nutritional deficits decreases over time.

Hunger has many causes, including conflict, poverty and climate change.

The International Labor Organization estimates that workers around the world lost the equivalent of roughly 255 million full-time jobs in 2020, making the economic impact of the pandemic much greater than

Without adequate measures to decrease the pace of climate change and adapt to the damage already done, I fear that it could grow even harder to sharply reduce the number of people who don't get enough to eat.

the shocks caused by the 2009 financial crisis.

Yet, because hunger was increasing before 2020, simply ending the coronavirus pandemic isn't likely to reverse this trend.

Conflict and poverty continue to afflict nations across the globe, particularly in Africa and Asia.

What's more, as the effects of climate change increase, crops that are sensitive to heat and extreme weather events will surely take a hit. Without adequate measures to decrease the pace of climate change and adapt to the damage already done, I fear that it could grow even harder to sharply reduce the number of people who don't get enough to eat. ■

Jessica Eise is assistant professor of Social and Environmental Challenges, The University of Texas at San Antonio. This essay first appeared in *The Conversation* on July 14, 2021 and is used here with permission of the author.

Why the Wall Pushes Back: Reading *Stony the Road*

By Jim Shoopman

In the years before the covid dispersal, I participated in a weekly, early morning Christian accountability group. We talked about things that people were too polite to bring up at worship or Sunday school. One early Monday morning, while protest-events related to the shooting of another young unarmed Black man were taking place, a member of our group expressed frustration and bewilderment with all the protests. “It’s like, the Black people don’t want to be equal – that’s not what they want. They want to be in charge! They want to be more than equal!”

As the one “preacher” in the group, tasked with bringing the devotional each time we met, I tried to respond with an insight I’d shared when teaching on the ethics of race relations. Because the university where I teach is full of aspiring engineers and pilots, I had applied a simple physics metaphor. To make any wall stand against a push, from a physics perspective, the wall must “push back.” This might not make intuitive sense, because the pushback of any wall is not visible, it is built into what we call the “reinforcements.” To better illustrate, imagine that I push against you. You will fall down unless you are quite literally pushing back against the force I exert. In the same way, although it does not look like it, a wall cannot stand up straight unless it is actually pushing back against the forces leaning against it.

The same has to be true in order to achieve any social or legal equality for most minority groups. In order for Blacks, Latinos, or Asians to overcome the forces pushing against them by the white majority, they have to continually be pushing back. Otherwise, they will fall to the ground like an unbraced wall. The Holocaust metaphor is far from exact, because what goes on in America is not the same thing, but the Jews of World War II Europe had too little reinforcement for their wall; it utterly fell, destroying two-thirds of European Judaism. I tried to explain to my friends that pushback was a necessary tool of survival. They sat silently. I have no idea whether it made any difference.

Pastors and lay leaders of Christian congregations outside the fundamentalist sphere struggle with how to address this wave of white backlash against an aggressive drive for racial equality in law enforcement and other areas of American life. Many moderate and non-fundamentalist congregations are “mixed breeds” socially and politically. Whereas fundamental-

ist congregations have ideologically “purified” their congregations against both theological and political liberalism, moderate and liberal congregations tend to tolerate a wide range of opinions. Because we do not qualify our understanding of Christianity with any sort of political litmus test, our congregations are rich with a variety of views and because we have made a virtue of avoiding partisan politics from the pulpit, we are afraid that if we bring issues of racism up in worship or bible study, we will be accused of “preaching politics instead of the gospel.”

People with racial fears are quite sensitive about being labeled “racist,” so pastors are reasonably worried what the reaction might be, should the congregation be faced with a challenging look at white privilege.

An anti-racist takes active, concrete steps to oppose racism wherever it may be found. This sounds exciting, ethically compelling, biblically prophetic, and a possible invitation to career suicide for the white minister.

They might quickly be accused of teaching “Critical Race Theory.”

In the meantime, pressure from the left contends it is *not* enough to simply avoid racism. The truly prophetic virtue is to be “anti-racist.” This term generally describes taking active, concrete steps to oppose racism. To connect this with the metaphor above, about the wall pushing back, one is more specifically anti-racist when one helps reinforce the wall against racism by pushing back. An anti-racist takes active, concrete steps to oppose racism wherever it may be found. This sounds exciting, ethically compelling, biblically prophetic, and a possible invitation to career suicide for the white minister. It is disturbing and painful to imagine bringing up racial justice to a congregation just struggling to rebuild from the covid year, especially a congregation that has almost no direct contact with Black people – churches with only one or two African-American members, if any.

How would a biblically prophetic preacher begin? Unfortunately, this article will not provide any series of concrete steps. I am only a professor and no longer have to think like a practical parish pastor, whose decisions on such matters must surely be gut-wrenching right now. As an educator, not surprisingly, my recommendation is to start by educating. Our pastors should take some time to really understand how things got to this place in this country. Most of us have a vague, general idea that racial prejudice exists all over the world but with special vehemence here in the United States. The slaves were freed by Lincoln during the Civil War. Congress better ensured the vote along with some social welfare assistance in 1964 and we elected a Black president in 2008 and yet somehow deep-seated racial prejudice still seems to impact our society. George Floyd is murdered by a police officer, Black citizens are reported to the authorities regularly for such offenses as bird watching, setting up a lemonade stand, or lounging at a pool in some white enclave. While racial prejudice does exist in other nations, it doesn't exist to this level or degree in most other cultures. Church leaders could begin by learning how it got this way.

An American pastor could begin by reading the 2019 book, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow*, by Harvard Scholar and African American studies specialist Henry Louis Gates. The title is taken from a line in "the Negro National Anthem" entitled *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. There are other excellent books on American racism, but as a single accessible volume by a distinguished scholar, full of revelatory color plate pictures that show the story as well as Gates can tell it, this book is one excellent place to start.

Professor Gates is a familiar figure to many readers, having made news in 2009 when he accidentally locked himself out of his own home in Cambridge, Massachusetts and, being Black, was briefly arrested for breaking and entering. President Obama, ever the professor himself, tried to turn the whole misunderstanding into an educational opportunity by hosting a "beer summit" at the White House between Gates and the white officer who had arrested him, with Obama and Vice President Biden serving as intermediaries. The matter quickly blew over and since that time Gates has become well-known as the host of a PBS Television program that traces the ancestral roots of famous persons. He has a much more substantial academic reputation as a research professor at Harvard as the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research. His primary academic focus has

been African American literature, but his work frequently overlaps into historical study. He has written 22 books (three of those co-authored), edited 12 others, and has credits related to 17 documentary films. Suffice to say, he is a serious authority in his field.

The book I recommend and review here grew out of Gates' 2019 PBS documentary, *Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*. The documentary is available on the PBS streaming platform and on DVD. Even as a two-part presentation, totaling four hours, it is not as extensive as the book, but it makes a serviceable accompaniment or lesser substitute for *Stony the Road*. The book itself covers more ground in more detail and has the "bookish" virtue of allowing a reader time to stop, meditate, google a subject, underline, highlight, and review. There are at least 65 pages of color prints that alone are worth the price of the book. This book provides a rare and remarkable educational tool.

Gates follows a useful chronological historical format, but often becomes analytical or meditative at points. These may be fascinating digressions for

According to one of Gates' sources, "One Northerner, covering an 1868 election in Alabama, wrote that African Americans 'in defiance of fatigue, hardship, hunger and threats of employers, with tattered clothes and without shoes, stood in line to vote ...'" (24).

the academic, but not always so much for the time-constrained pastor who is just trying to understand his world. These digressions are meaningful but consider this a forewarning that Gates is a chatty academic tour guide who may take you on an occasional detour; but your patience will be rewarded.

The book explains how Reconstruction was a serious attempt on the part of the Federal government to rebuild the states of the southern rebellion, to create a more equitable society in which freed Black slaves could be educated, employed and allowed some part in democratic self-determination, through voting and holding political office. In the early years after the Civil War, former slaves were enthusiastic about political opportunity. According to one of Gates' sources, "One Northerner, covering an 1868 election in Alabama, wrote that African Americans 'in defiance of fatigue, hardship, hunger and threats of employers,

with tattered clothes and without shoes, stood in line to vote ..." (24). In the early years of Reconstruction, they elected numerous Black congressmen, governors and other political leaders. Former slaves were given education, jobs and political opportunities that had been exclusively privileges of white citizens, so it was no surprise that defeated Southern whites, both wealthy and poor, felt these privileges had been stolen from them and given to their former African-American property. It had been impossible to hold a race of people in slavery and have respect for them on any level. A sense of rage bubbled over in countless ways to avenge these losses of white privilege to a body of people they had always held in contempt. A large part of the remainder of Gate's book recounts the overwhelmingly powerful effort from every part of American institutional life to reinforce the belief that African Americans were unworthy of the privileges of American citizenship.

Southerners eagerly sought to rehabilitate Southern identity, reframing the cause of the Civil War as a States Rights matter rather than slavery, memorializing their southern heroes as gracious officers and gentlemen in a glorious "lost cause." (The current struggle with taking down Confederate monuments and changing fort names is a long-belated response to that effort at "rebranding" the Confederate identity as a noble struggle for freedom rather treasonous and racist.) For many old Confederates, their most immediate and essential mission was to wrestle back white supremacy of the ballot and political power. The struggle against Black political and social equality often turned violent. One source relates that "at least ten percent of the black members of constitutional conventions in the South in 1867-68 became victims [of Klan violence], including seven who were murdered" (26). Gates quotes one Missouri newspaper editor of the time: "No simian-souled, sooty-skinned, kink-curled, blubber-lipped, prehensile-heeled, Ethiopian gorilla shall pollute the ballot box with his leprous vote" (28).

Gates documents in his second chapter a more foundational effort to reframe racism as either religiously or scientifically justified. Conservative Christians who rejected the newly developing theory of evolution were taught to see the Black man as an entirely separate creation (hence not truly human) (65), or as a result of Noah's "curse on Ham" the disrespectful son, whose descendants were condemned to eternal servitude (57). At the same time, the concepts of eugenics, a concept later vilified when championed by Nazis, got off to a roaring start in the United States. Long before the Civil War there had developed a popular pseudo-science called "craniology" and "phrenology," suggesting that intellectual and ethical development could be predicted

from the size and shape of the skull, White European skulls being the high standard. This "science," little noted in the 1830s and 40s "caught fire in the United States during the middle part of the 19th century" (60), in reaction to Reconstruction.

While the common man might not have read works of theology or science where these theories were expounded, they constantly heard their trusted preachers and learned public lecturers expansively boasting "the bible clearly teaches," or "the assured results of the most careful scientific research clearly demonstrate" that the African and his descendants were intellectually and morally incapable of governing themselves, much less anybody else. From there, it was not hard to justify a lower place in economic-political development through the arguments of "Social Darwinism," a popular and not very accurate adaptation of Darwinism, applied to the Industrial Revolution, which suggested that only the strongest in a given setting survive and thrive. This misuse of Darwin helped to justify the place of all the poor, during the Gilded

For many old Confederates, their most immediate and essential mission was to wrestle back white supremacy of the ballot and political power.

Age, and most especially justified the view that White Europeans were superior to everybody else. The importance of all this, of course, was that it provided a foundation of assumptions from which one could argue in an endless loop for the natural inferiority of the African – by God's will or evolutionary development, whichever a given audience preferred. From either perspective it was easy to argue, "they have no rights that man dare respect – not even the right to live" (75).

While such dangerously hostile attitudes were preached in the church and the academy, condescending whites bemoaned "the negro problem." While the "Jewish problem" of Europe was approached with aggressive hostility by the Nazis, in America it was often approached with a paternalistic view to keeping African-Americans dependent, while all the time assuming, based on either the Bible or science, that they were incapable of caring for themselves. In support of all this theory, both hostile and paternalistic, White authors wrote novels, songs, short stories and minstrel shows geared to represent Blacks as ridiculous, comic or dangerous, but never capable. Gates

lingers over long-popular media figures like “Uncle Remus,” first written in 1881 as an ex-slave who chose to return to the good old plantation. Gates also writes much about America’s first full length motion picture, *Birth of a Nation*, screened at the White House by Woodrow Wilson in 1915. The film established a powerful image of Reconstruction Era black legislators as slovenly, barbaric opportunists, and Poor Black men as naturally predisposed rapists, deserving of the many lynchings perpetrated in the southern states. The movie glorified the birth of the Ku Klux Klan as a necessary extra-legal corrective, needed to protect innocent white women from animalistic Black men prone to rape and murder. Popular images of the Black were, like popular European images of the Jew, rife with contradiction. They were lazy and docile but only good for the hardest work, stupid and foolish yet clever and cagey, dirty and slovenly and yet the very people you wanted to keep your house clean and care for your children.

At this point it is useful to forewarn the casual reader that the chapter just described is heavily documented with names and works that become challenging to keep straight. While this book is written for the broader public, Dr. Gates writes with the habits of a faithful academic and as a matter of integrity, it is important to him to document his sources thoroughly, so many readers might join this reviewer in having a notebook close-by to keep the players straight. Even so, the effort is worth its price in patience and the third chapter remarkably informative.

Gates’ third chapter, “Framing Blackness: Sambo Art and the Visual Rhetoric of White Supremacy” pulls the curtain back on a nearly universal tendency, in that time, to represent the physical image of the Black American as alien and subhuman, what Gates calls “an avalanche of imagery” (128). Gates quotes one source to explain, “Show people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (133), so that “when a white person confronted an actual Black human being, [the African American] was ‘an already read text’” (132). The color plates following the chapter tell the story. Scores of companies, selling every kind of common household product, used grotesque, cartoonish images of Black folk in ridiculous poses, often exaggerated facial and bodily features and demeaning captions, so culturally common that virtually every American consumer had seen them a multitude of times. The most shockingly demeaning were the numerous images of Black infants and men captioned as “alligator bait” (164-165). Gates notes that, “Between 1889 and 1918 … more than three thousand lynchings took place precisely as these racist images of Black people increased in popularity” (134).

Another popular image, often sold in the South, were postcards with photographs of lynchings, often accompanied by poetry.

In “Chapter Four: The New Negro: Redeeming the Race from the Redeemers,” Gates discusses the struggle of Black leadership to overcome this onslaught against the character of African Americans. The White losers of the War Between the States, in their struggle to claw themselves back to power, had inundated audiences all over the world with messages from racist religion, science, politics, novels, music, poetry, advertising, live entertainment and finally motion pictures, to sell the notion that Black people were, just by virtue of racial descent, unworthy of the privileges and powers of American citizenship. In response Black leadership put forward the concept of “the New Negro.”

This final chapter provides excellent history on the Black response to the racism of “the New South.” The chapter is also the most laden with analysis and speculation that some readers may find a distraction. Gates is particularly fascinated and troubled by the many mean-

Scores of companies, selling every kind of common household product, used grotesque, cartoonish images of Black folk in ridiculous poses, often exaggerated facial and bodily features and demeaning captions, so culturally common that virtually every American consumer had seen them a multitude of times.

ings suggested for this term “New Negro.” The phrase is first suggested by early African American leader Booker T. Washington, who proposed that Black people could earn their way into the hearts of their countrymen by surrendering the political and social rights taken from them in the failure of Reconstruction, instead becoming great and good manual laborers, who work harder and better than anyone, finally to be accepted.

Washington’s opponent in this, W. E. B. Dubois, one of the great intellectual leaders of the early 20th century, who insisted the New Negro was nothing more or less than a new generation of African Americans who had outgrown the slave identity, some elevated by education and empowered by a sense of capability. Gates goes on to describe the efforts of Black intel-

lectual Alain Locke, who tried to channel Dubois' early sense of Black-pride into the efforts of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, part of a huge African American effort, often centered in Harlem, New York, but not limited to that locale, to demonstrate that a people capable of great arts were capable of any other contribution to a culture. Coming out of Harlem were poems, novels, painting, sculpture, drama and music – especially the Black spirituals, jazz and the blues, often regarded as the most distinctly American contributions to the arts of the world. As Gates observes, great art could not or did not change the perceptions of racist white people -- but did perhaps change some self-perceptions within the Black community, through which African Americans had found their sense of self, quite apart from what white Americans might think of them. Gates doesn't say so but phrases like "Black pride," "Black is beautiful" and "black lives matter" surely stem from these early African American efforts to overcome their disenfranchisement by insisting on their own capability and human dignity.

Gates' book does not give any clear directions on how white pastors should respond to "critical race theory" or "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations. The book does, however, give us clarity on how we got here, and that is a very important start. It is not enough just to recognize and reject the irrationality of racism. We probably cannot deal with it effectively just by saying, "Well, now you are just being irrational." We start dealing with it more effectively when we point out that American racism begins with a set of assumptions that have been passed down from one generation to another through a very *specific* history. There is a reason why, in America, a much higher percent of Black Americans are imprisoned or killed by police on suspicion that they might be violent. Other nations have racist notions. Only recently, after Prince Harry of England married an African American woman, Harry says there was some anxiety among royalists about what color their baby might be. Even so, Britain has not dealt with quite the vehement disenfranchisement and legalized violence suffered by people of African descent in America, and this stems from an immediate post-Civil War history that continues to impact common American perceptions – an outraged sense that the liberals of the Federal Government have taken rights and privileges that belong only to "true Americans" (white people) and given them to an undeserving alien element (non-white people). As southern novelist William Faulkner famously observed, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (Faulkner, 73). We see this clearly in the vociferous reaction to the results of the latest presi-

dential election.

In words astonishingly reminiscent of current headlines, Gates quotes a 1902 Southern novelist's reaction to the 1868 passage of a post-Civil-War reconstruction constitution for Georgia, passed with African American votes. The outraged Southern spinmeister describes the polling situation this way:

Beginning on the 20th, [in 1868] the election was to continue for three days, a provision that was intended to enable the negroes to vote at as many precincts as they could conveniently reach in eighty-three hours. No safeguard whatever was thrown around the ballot box, and it was the remembrance of this initial and overwhelming combination of fraud and corruption that induced the whites at a later day, to stuff the ballot boxes and suppress the votes of the ignorant (103).

In other words, this "New South" writer justified subsequent white cheating on the grounds that the Black

In other words, this "New South" writer justified subsequent white cheating on the grounds that the Black voters must have cheated first, and therefore it was necessary to meet black guile with white guile. This "past" that Henry Louis Gates instructs us in, is not even past and has obviously still not yet been dealt with. Political leaders espouse exactly the same gibberish one hundred years after Reconstruction.

voters must have cheated first, and therefore it was necessary to meet black guile with white guile. This "past" that Henry Louis Gates instructs us in, is not even past and has obviously still not yet been dealt with. Political leaders espouse exactly the same gibberish 100 years after Reconstruction. If there is a long-term solution, it is hard to see where it comes from if not from the churches that are supposed to be repositories of truth, justice and love. So perhaps the place to start is by learning the truth of our story, which should help us realize why the wall has to push back. ■

Dr. Jim Shoopman is Associate Professor, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

All numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in Gates' book. In-text citations are:

Faulkner, William, *Requiem for a Nun*. New York:

Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 1950.
Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy and the Rise of Jim Crow*. New York: Penguin Press, 2019. References provided as in-text parenthetical page numbers referring to Gates' book.

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Editor's Note: Readers of Christian Ethics Today will recognize Dartmouth professor and Episcopal priest, Randall Balmer, for his contributions to this journal through the years which can readily be found in the archives on our webpage.

Eerdman's Publishing granted Christian Ethics Today permission to publish an excerpt from his upcoming book, as follows:

Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right

By Randall Balmer

(excerpt)

Chapter 1

The Emergence of Progressive Evangelicalism

The alliance between white evangelicals and the far-right precincts of the Republican Party over the past forty-plus years has been so unwavering that most Americans would be forgiven for believing that evangelicalism has always listed to the right of the political spectrum. That, however, is not the case. Over the course of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, evangelicals were engaged in a broad spectrum of social reform efforts, many of them directed toward those on the margins of society.

Aside from the Civil War, the Second Great Awakening was arguably the most consequential event in American history. Coming on the heels of the American Revolution and taking place during the decades straddling the turn of the nineteenth century, the evangelical revivals associated with the Second Awakening convulsed three theaters of the new nation—New England, the Cumberland Valley of Kentucky, and upstate New York—and utterly reshaped religion in America.

The New England phase was relatively placid. The epicenter of the awakening in New England was Yale College, where Timothy Dwight, president of the school and grandson of the redoubtable Jonathan Edwards, succeeded in turning students away from Enlightenment rationalism and toward orthodox Christianity. In 1802, one of those students, Benjamin Silliman, described Yale as a “little temple” where “prayer and praise seem to be the delight of the greater part of the students.” The Connecticut Evangelical Magazine reported another awakening at Yale in 1815, and Nathaniel William Taylor, pastor of the First Congregational Church in New Haven, witnessed a more general revival in both the school and the town in January 1821. As Yale graduates fanned out to congregations across New England, revivals often followed in places from New York to Maine, from Vermont to Rhode Island.

The Cumberland Valley theater was by far the most dramatic. This is the era of the camp meetings, when settlers gathered for a week or ten days of socializing, hymn singing, prayer, and preaching, which started at sunrise and lasted well into the night. Although critics contended that more souls were conceived than converted, contemporaries tell of people being “slain in the Spirit,” which manifested itself in all sorts of “exercises”—barking, jerking uncontrollably, or falling to the ground. As settlers in this frontier area returned to their homes, they organized Baptist congregations and, with the help of circuit riders, Methodist churches, thereby stamping the South with an evangelical, revivalist ethic that persists to this day.

Abetted by the population and economic boom from construction of the Erie Canal, some of the revival energies shifted toward western New York by the late 1820s and early 1830s. The people of Rochester, New York, reported a “powerful revival of religion” as early as April 1827, and the region was so singed by the fires of revival that it became known as the “burned-over district.” The arrival of Charles Grandison Finney in Rochester in 1830 gave the revival a boost. “Mr. Finney is preaching to overflowing houses,” the Baptist Chronicle reported. “Conversions are daily occurring,” including “men of wealth, talents, and influence.” African Americans also responded to revival preaching. Two “respectable African preachers” arrived in town, according to the African Repository & Colonial Journal, and their efforts produced such an evangelical awakening “the like has never been known among the Africans in this place before!”

Finney and other evangelical revivalists in the nineteenth century, however, believed that evangelicalism entailed more than mere conversions. A regenerated individual, in obedience to the teachings of Jesus, bore responsibility for the improvement of society and especially the interests of those most vulnerable. Finney, in fact, understood benevolence toward others as a necessary corollary of faith. “God’s rule requires universal benevolence,” he wrote. “I abhor a faith which has no humanity in it and with it,” he added.

“God loves both piety and humanity.”

The program of social reform unleashed by Finney and other evangelicals early in the nineteenth century stands in marked contrast to the agenda of the Religious Right. For antebellum evangelicals, benevolence took many forms, including education, prison reform, and advocacy for the poor and for the rights of women. Many evangelicals, seeking to obey the commands of Jesus to love their enemies and turn the other cheek, enlisted in efforts to oppose violence and war; I’ve even discovered a reference to an evangelical campaign for gun control. Even though the evangelical obsession with temperance looks presumptuous and paternalistic in hindsight, the temperance movement was a response to the very real depredations and suffering, including spousal and child abuse, caused by excessive alcohol consumption.

While it is true that many Southerners, notably James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney, defended slavery, many evangelicals in the North sought to end the scourge of slavery. Some evangelicals were caught up in nativist sentiments, but a far greater number supported such initiatives as public education, known then as common schools, so that the children of immigrants and those less fortunate could toe the ladder of upward mobility. “Common schools are the glory of our land,” a writer declared in the *Christian Spectator*, “where even the beggar’s child is taught to read, and write, and think, for himself.”

From a remove of a couple of centuries, it’s tempting to retroject twenty-first-century sensibilities onto these evangelical reformers, and in so doing some of their attitudes and approaches come off as paternalistic

and overweening, even colonialist. Nineteenth-century evangelicals didn’t always get it right. But it is also true that the Second Awakening energized an extraordinary mobilization of evangelicals on behalf of those Jesus called “the least of these.” Animated by their desire to bring about the kingdom of God on earth, they sought to alleviate suffering and work toward equality—crudely and imperfectly at times, to be sure, but determinedly. Theirs was not an abstract faith. Antebellum evangelicals understood that, in Finney’s words, “God loves both piety and humanity.” ■

Bad Faith is available for pre-order at Eerdmans.com, Barnes & Noble, Amazon.com, and Christianbook.com.

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Breakfast at the Elite Cafe—November, 1963

By Joe E. Trull, Editor Emeritus

The year was 1963, the 175th year of our nation's life. President John F. Kennedy was completing his first term in office.

Abroad, our country was engaged in a "cold war" with the communist-bloc countries, including Cuba just 90 miles away. Thousands of American soldiers were massed along the 39th parallel that divided North and South Korea, guarding an uneasy truce. The United States was escalating its involvement in the war in Vietnam with 25,000 advisors.

At home, other battles were being waged, many focusing upon basic civil rights for African-Americans. Racial segregation in the public schools was still common, as well as other forms of separation in public places—especially hotels and motels, restaurants, transportation, bathrooms and even water fountains!

Black Americans found voting to be very difficult in many parts of the country. In 1963, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" after the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in that segregated city. Tensions between the races were escalating.

I was living on the field of my student pastorate in southwestern Oklahoma. The year was a unique one for our family, as my brother Don was setting records as an All-American quarterback for the Baylor Bears. He led the nation in passing and total yardage and was runner-up behind Roger Staubach for the Heisman trophy.

I listened to every game with pride. One Saturday in November was designated R.A. (Royal Ambassadors) Day, a special afternoon at Baylor stadium when all the young boys in Baptist churches, along with their sponsors, could attend the game at discount prices and root for the Bears.

At First Baptist Church, Roosevelt (a farming community), we had about 10 young boys in our R.A. group. Our basketball and baseball teams won almost every game, mainly due to two of our group who happened to be black (not a problem in our small rural community).

On Friday afternoon, we left for Waco, riding in a "wheat-harvest" bus one of the men used for his work crews. Inside were enough bunk beds for us all, and the seats were okay. When we stopped for gas in Jacksboro, we heard the first report: "The president

has been shot in Dallas." When his death was soon announced over the networks, I called Don. He was uncertain if the game Saturday would be cancelled; but since we were not too far away, he urged us to come ahead with our 10 R.A. boys.

That evening, as we prepared to bed-down in our harvest bus, Don came by to tell us the game was cancelled. "Tomorrow, after we meet for breakfast at the Elite Cafe, I will take all of you for a tour of the campus, including visiting the bear pits where our mascots live." The trip would not be a total loss, and the boys were enjoying the adventure.

Don called the manager of the cafe, whom he knew well, and told him of his brother's visit and the group of R.A. boys and sponsors who were coming to eat. "Sure, Don," he said, "Bring them by and we will be sure they get a real Texas breakfast they won't forget."

I knew we would be treated royally as in the fall of 1963, my brother was the town hero, leading the Baylor football team (along with several other star players) to nationwide prominence.

As our group walked in the door, we were greeted and led to tables prepared for us. I noticed the waitress seemed startled and a bit nervous about our group. She disappeared, and soon the manager came out. As Don introduced us and the host welcomed us, I noticed his eyes kept moving across our group. He then walked back toward the waitress and mumbled, "Let's serve Don's group." I began to sense something was wrong.

As we departed after the breakfast, the manager came up to me and said, "Your boys were the best-behaved group of young people we have ever had. But Preacher, I need to tell you something else. All these years we have had a policy of not serving colored people. Your colored boys are the first ones we have ever served in this cafe."

He continued, "Don is not only our hero, but a good friend. I promised to serve his brother's group, and we did. And yesterday our president was assassinated." The manager paused, then looked me in the eye and said, "I guess it's time we changed that policy."

As I walked toward the bus, I thanked God for several things: that the boys had followed our instructions to be at their best in the cafe, that we had decided to come on to Waco, even knowing the game might be cancelled, and the sequence of events that led us to eat

breakfast that somber November day in the Elite Cafe.

The cafe is still there, near old 35 on the Circle that winds to I.H. 35 today. It has been refurbished, updated, and the menu is more in keeping with its name. I recently had dinner there with my grandson (a Baylor student now). I never pass the place without thinking of that day.

The events of 1963 and the following years led to civil rights legislation and many social changes; the American dream of “justice and equality for all” was renewed. History books record seminal events in those

years: Rosa Parks’ refusal to sit at the back of the bus; a civil-rights march across a bridge in Selma; the rally in Washington, D.C., highlighted by Martin Luther King’s sermon, “I Have A Dream,” and many more.

But for me it began at breakfast in the Elite Cafe. ■

Joe E. Trull was editor of Christian Ethics Today for 11 years following Foy Valentine's editorship. This essay was first published in the Winter Issue of 2005.

Incoming.....From Our Mailbag:

Thank you for a very thought-provoking publication and online presence... Susan Clark

Thank you, Pat, for putting out a sheet we enjoy and share... Buddy & Kay Shurden

Hi. I really enjoyed the last issue. Keep up the good work! Lanny & Mary Ray

Cancel at once and Refund what is left.

Patrick—The current issue is terrific. Thanks so much. Don Holladay

Dear Dr. Anderson, I have enjoyed reading and being challenged by Christian Ethics Today for many years. It is an excellent publication with inspiring and interesting articles. Your editorial, “Time to Say ‘Good Riddance’ to Bad Theology” eloquently summed up the thoughts I have had for the past four years...I was beginning to think I was the only Christian who thought there was a big disconnect between (those views) and Christianity. To be honest, what you wrote was a breath of fresh air and even a relief to know there were other Christians who could find Trumpism abhorrent and very far from true Christianity. Thank you for your courage to write an editorial that many evangelicals would most likely disagree with. I look forward to reading more issues of Christian Ethics Today...I am a graduate of Baylor University, Southwestern Baptist Seminary, and former marriage and family therapist...I now live in Boerne... Molly C. Little

Dear Friends: Enclosed is a check for a subscription for (a friend of mine). I believe that he will find this as helpful and meaningful as I have over these years...Thank you for your great work in producing this magazine.

Maxfield Bahner

Dear Pat—Thought this would interest you. I hope this gift helps... Bill Moyers

We really enjoy reading Christian Ethics Today...I would like to request that you send a copy to my mother and step-father...Thanks so much, and I look forward to the next issue. Mark & Jennifer Foster

Dear Editor and Staff. Our voices, your voices, the truth is needed now more than ever in this Post Trump era. Hopefully, some will see and embrace it. Yours in Christ. Sarah Logan

Dr. Anderson, I wish to thank you, the Board and writers for continuing to deal with the difficult questions and not just ignore them. My thinking is expanded as a result, ant at times I am pleased to have my views affirmed. Diane Ferguson

*We welcome any feedback, suggestions, criticism, praise...

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A Journal of Christian Ethics

"We need now to recover the prophethood of all believers, matching our zeal for the priesthood of all believers with a passion for the prophethood of all believers."

—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

MISSION

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

PURPOSES

- Maintain an independent prophetic voice for Christian social ethics
 - Interpret and apply Christian experience, biblical truth, theological insights, historical understanding, and current research to contemporary moral issues
 - Support Christian ecumenism by seeking contributors and readers from various denominations and churches
 - Work from the deep, broad center of the Christian church
 - Address readers at the personal and emotional as well as the intellectual level by including in the Journal narratives, poetry, and cartoons as well as essays
 - Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics

Christian Ethics Today was born in the mind and heart of Foy Valentine in 1995. From the beginning the purpose of the Journal has been “to inform, inspire, and unify a lively company of individuals and organizations interested in working for personal morality and public righteousness.”

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

The Christian Ethics Today Foundation is a non-profit organization and operates under the 501 (c) (3) designations from the Internal Revenue Service. Gifts are tax deductible.

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

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